



Ten Land Mines to Avoid in Your Next Crisis

By Tom Gable
CEO, Gable PR

Crises come in all forms and sizes, from local political scandal, the nuisance law suit about spilled hot coffee at a fast food restaurant, corporate malfeasance, alleged embezzlement in a not-for-profit, sexual harassment issues, hazardous waste spills, to manufacturing, transportation or other accidents that take human lives.

Skilled public relations professionals have been dealing with these issues and more for decades. They have honed best practices and tempered them under fire, increasing the odds of success in any crisis program. Good advice and case histories abound. But advances in how the world communicates instantly and in living color (photos from cell phones, drive-by videos of transgressions, amateur news casts, rumors in the blogosphere, etc.) have added new complexities to the art and science of crisis communications. The race is increasingly to the swift and, as detailed later, the trustworthy.

But extreme dangers are hidden along any path to success in managing a crisis. In analyzing failed or derailed crisis programs in over 30 years in public relations and journalism, certain approaches and characteristics stand out like the tall poppies of Australian lore that rise above the masses only to be trimmed back when fortunes turn or hubris prevails. The itemized list could go on forever. For focus, we've narrowed the key reasons for failure down to the top ten (or bottom ten as the case may be) most threatening land mines to any crisis program. Individually, not every land mine can be fatal. But one blast can lead to another, making the goal of getting through the crisis unscathed unlikely or impossible. Almost all can be dealt with honestly and strategically. Knowing they exist is a start. Start tip-toeing here:

1. **Guilty (or not completely innocent)** – The evidence exists – against the company, CEO, employee, organization, product, or service – for an illegal action, horrible occurrence, affront to humanity, threat to public safety or other transgression. The crisis management team needs to implement its plan, starting with a quick review of the crisis check list carried elsewhere in this book (Page:?). The team analyzes the crisis in context and with a host of factors before determining the response, including developing a clear understanding of the obvious legal ramifications and liabilities. Being totally guilty requires a different response than being guilty on some counts or a single count, not totally without blame or possibly the victim of circumstance. There is also intent. A major fast food company didn't intend for its customers to be felled by e coli. The crisis

was an aberration. The company had solid food preparation processes, procedures and rules in place, so was able to turn the tide fairly quickly after an initial 30-percent decline in its stock. Another food preparation company that had poor processes in its plant and a history of being cited regularly by health inspectors for unsanitary conditions hired the most expensive crisis counselors in the country and tried to spin its way out of the harsh light of media scrutiny with pledges of future adherence to the law, firing people and even giving portions of future sales to minority training programs. Land mines were at every turn. It lacked the culture, history, core values and other attributes (see below) to escape. Customers fled, contracts were cancelled and it soon filed for bankruptcy.

2. **No Plan** – When issues arise, the best organizations pull out a well-rehearsed crisis plan and implement quickly, confidently and successfully. Should any uncertainties or ambiguities exist, the crisis team and its consultants deal with them effectively as additions to the plan, rather than as another set of distractions for the unplanned and clueless companies. In the halls of the unprepared, staff is usually found ricocheting around the offices in search of enlightenment in between panicked calls to the lawyers or searching local directories for crisis communications counselors. Plans include proven processes, clear marching orders, strict lines of communication and access to an array of supporting evidence. The above mentioned food company with the good reputation, culture and core values had built but not launched Web sites to deal with worst case scenarios in its industry, including e coli outbreaks. The sites included an overview of each area of potential concern, their history of managing in each area and abundant evidence to support each claim. Should it ever be needed, the media could immediately download video showing the company's advanced sterilization, heating and cooking procedures, with testimony by outside experts on the high standards the company followed. Graphs depicted different temperatures required to cook its foods. The sites provided glossaries of unknown or obscure terms, with definitions from outside resources, such as government agencies, academicians and independent consumer groups. Crises happen. If an organization is ready with its own plug-and-play plan, everyone will sleep a lot easier before the crisis, during and through the post mortem when the team gives high-fives around the room and pops a cork of bubbly to toast its success.
3. **Lack of Culture, Core Values** – This sounds like something out of the feel-good movement of several decades ago where everything would be better if we just held hands in a circle and sang Kumbaya. Wrong. Real culture and values contribute to reputation for the long term. If you haven't thought about your reputation, exhibiting positive core values and demonstrating proof of principle over time (walking the talk) as a part of organizational strategy long before the crisis hits, you will start below ground zero when the bomb lands, no matter how good your plan. Incorporating image as a part of corporate strategy is essential to the long term success of any organization. Studies by Charles Fombrun in his classic book *Reputation* and others clearly demonstrate the benefits of a good reputation in succeeding better than your peers in a number of ways. For businesses, a positive reputation contributes to faster revenue growth, better margins, higher price-earnings ratios and improved employee morale, among other things. Positive reputations aren't spun out of air or the CEO's frontal lobe on short notice. They are built

over time. The leaders in any niche or category determine what they stand for and then provide ongoing evidence over time to support the position. As they walk the talk, they are rewarded accordingly. Marketing and strategic planning experts note that these so-called intangibles can often have more importance in building a company's reputation than tangibles (technology, intellectual property portfolio, array of services, etc.). Good companies operate in the no-spin zone, relying on corporate culture, solid facts, quality people, honesty and integrity to carry the day (week, month, year, decade). On the flip side, analyze perceptions about the character of any organization brought into question in a crisis of any magnitude. For those in the most difficult straits, you'll find fields of land mines and shortcomings: missing or inconsistent core values, less community involvement than their peers, higher employee turnover, slower sales growth and records of poor customer service, among other things.

4. **Big Hat, No Cattle** – Another land mine to tip toe around or fix immediately is having a corporate history of hype or muddled communications strategies. In a crisis, the media will launch quick database research to see how you've been covered in the past, by whom and in what context. The sharpest writers will then check with your peers, trade associations, professional organizations, former law and accounting firms. Marginal companies who haven't dealt with Land Mine No. 2 -- core values -- often leave a trail of disgruntled professional service firms who served them previously and can now be used as a source in the gruesome discovery process. Lack of credible data and substance become apparent quickly. The first blood is let. With no redeeming values, countervailing evidence from the empty suits at the management level or even a marginal reputation to cast doubt on the charges, the media feeding frenzy begins. Each day brings a new report of chicanery and spin, driving the organization toward Armageddon in the C Suite. At this stage, the organization needs to evoke the Metamorphosis Gambit (sometimes called the Nuclear Option), which involves management change, reorganization, new strategic planning and total repositioning. The gambit can work for anything from a small non-profit organization struggling to shed an old cocoon or a billion-dollar NYSE firm that has suddenly come face-to-face with its transgressions as its stock price tanks and even the most loyal customers hit the eject button.

Gable PR witnessed this phenomenon when representing a small company with brilliant technology that had been acquired by a billion-dollar company for its stock, which had gone up rapidly based on the company's regular announcement of exciting new business initiatives into the hottest new markets, including untapped emerging areas around the world. However, the company was playing it fast and loose with its business strategies and corporate culture, or lack of same. The media found evidence of bribery by the parent in securing a telecommunications contract with a third world country. Shortly thereafter, an agency of the federal government said it was putting its contract with this company on hold because of the bribery allegation and also so it could review what it said might be questionable billing practices. The media dug deeper and found that almost every one of the much-hyped major acquisitions in pursuit of more revenues and a higher price earnings ratio had turned sour or tanked. The company buried the information in amendments filed to its SEC 10-K form, possibly assuming the amendments wouldn't be

read. It would restate earnings to reflect discontinued operations, then announce a new acquisition and pursuit of a hot new niche. The media pieced together the trail and negative coverage ravaged the stock price. Its potential acquisition by a Fortune 500 company was canceled. The company eventually paid huge fines on some of its transgressions, wiped out its executive suite where the transgressions had originated (although the alleged main culprit, the chairman, hung on), took huge write-offs on its discontinued operations and announced a new vision for the future. Following its metamorphosis, the company fluttered ahead with better direction and was soon acquired by another huge conglomerate, although at a lower valuation than had appeared at hand a few years earlier.

5. **CEO Ego** – CEOs can have egos as big as the Ritz and think he or she is a natural media star. They refuse to train, rehearse or follow a script or plan. They ignore the gravity of the situation and think they can charm and spin their way out of the morass. The worst occasions occur when CEOs have bullied their internal staffs into being afraid to provide authentic, sincere counsel. You can see them coming: the MBAs out of central casting, with neatly coiffed presidential hair touched with streaks of grey, a solid jaw, sharp blue eyes, resonant voice and engaging smile, but dumb as a trout when it came to media relations. They are confident they can charm anyone. “I could talk a dog off a meat wagon,” one CEO bragged. Unfortunately, he was already in trouble, having failed two of the earlier tests listed above about culture and providing evidence. The media had done its due diligence and quickly probed into the details of declining sales, escalating administrative costs and higher turnover. Without training and having his core messages set, he was caught unawares and folded like a thin tent in a tsunami. He actually started sweating and fidgeting, like the character in a Saturday Night Live skit who was being interviewed by a faux Mike Wallace for selling defective whoopee cushions. Our CEO tried to use his booming voice to make points, then stonewalled and finally tried to change the subject. The reporter kept asking the same question in different ways until she had what she wanted, then hopped off the meat wagon with a little Filet Mignon and hot sauce for her readers.
6. **Attorneyitis** – This land mine occurs when otherwise good messages and communications that the CEO and crisis team have approved get handed off for legal review and come back bruised, bloated and infected with the deadly disclaimer virus. Short, compelling copy turns fuzzy around the edges. Statements of fact become weighted down with convoluted clauses and abundancies of redundancies (In one set of Frequently Asked Questions that Gable PR crafted to explain a law suit our client filed against a magazine for libel and slander, a sharp 19-word sentence nailing the editor for deceit was turned into 100 words of circumlocution without a verb). The test: read a sentence out loud and if everyone’s eyes glaze over like you were reading from C-Span transcripts or they laugh so hard they herniate, start over.
7. **Torpor at the Top (also called Coagulation in the C-Suite)** – The media are almost always on deadline and pressed to complete their rounds of interviews with sources from all sides. Many have preconceptions that will drive the coverage, often in a way not

appreciated by the target organization. With a well-rehearsed crisis plan and message strategies in place, an organization can dedicate itself to responding as quickly as possible to the media call instead of setting it aside and agonizing what to do while waiting for the lawyers to return your call. The process includes knowing the time zone where the media call originated so you don't get stuck in a time warp between west coast and east coast and lose the opportunity to respond. Providing solid facts and evocative quotes ensures more balanced coverage. If the organization is in the right, its fast response and candor can lead to establishing positive media relationships that can be of major benefit for decades.

When crises hit, companies without plans or facing some of the other land mines outlined here can struggle internally in determining a course of action. Some advisors tell the CEO to delay, which can be brilliant or fatal, depending upon the crisis. Copy often gets written by committee. In situations such as these, communications professionals or outside consultants brought in at the eleventh hour need to light fires under the corporate derrieres of those in the executive suite and loosen the clotted communications channels. Getting back to the media with even a short statement (“We are checking all the facts and will get back to you as soon as we have an answer.”) can help mitigate pending disaster. Time rockets ahead with organizational input -- or without. On the latter, the writer or broadcast reporter might turn in a story that could crush your image like a beetle under a bulldozer. By not responding or responding after deadline, you get immortalized with the regrettable line that usually appears as the last sentence in the story: “The company was unavailable for comment.” This implies that you were ducking the issue or had fled to Aruba. A speedy response, on the other hand, generates a positive impression; the guilty don't return media calls or have the lawyers call.

In pro-active public relations, where an organization is trying to build its reputation for the long term, responding to an editor or writer's request as soon as possible has many positive benefits. The individual is categorized as being a good source and the better the information the more often the media will call. The same people are inevitably quoted by the media in roundup stories, whether in a trade journal or a major national business publication or on network television news shows. Once you are in the databases of the world, other media will find you when they research the topic. One story becomes two, two becomes four, etc., and the image grows accordingly.

8. **Dueling Fiefdoms** – We've seen warring factions fire off random shots of bad advice within the corporate halls in hopes of furthering their own interests in internal turf wars rather than contributing energetically and without guile to the master crisis plan for the overall good of the organization. Lack of corporate alignment and certainty of purpose have broader ramifications in preventing an organization from achieving its business and marketing goals. In a crisis, the problem is exacerbated and accelerated. Good organizations exhibit grace under pressure through positive, consistent communications. For the unaligned and contentious, disaster looms. The media find the inconsistencies among dueling factions and probe deeper, confronting one faction with the claims of another and repeating the process until the inside story unfolds with conflicting voices from every corner.

9. **Stuck in Jargon or Legal Land** – This isn't necessarily fatal, just annoying and a potential roadblock to getting your compelling messages through the clutter and promoting good media relations. Speaking in a sincere, human voice will help build bridges with the media and the ultimate target audiences on the other side of this filter. As noted in Attorneyitis, 100-word sentences without a verb don't cut it. Jargon in a particular niche and working with trade journals can be acceptable. In a crisis, when broader financial, business, consumer and investigative reporters are involved, one needs to apply what some media call the "Bozo Filter." This methodology came to light during a Media Relations Summit in New York featuring journalists from a wide range of leading publications, news services, on-line sources and broadcast. One noted technology journalist with one of the world's most respected publications said he had set up Bozo Filters on his email to automatically delete messages from certain agencies or individuals and those containing words he felt were useless or meaningless. These included solutions, seamless, world-class, leading-edge and best-of-class. One editor said he was done covering solutions. "Please don't write to me about solutions any more...they've become a problem." For creating compelling messages, start with the evidence developed for your crisis communications plan. Analyze the background information, input from outside resources and historical coverage of the industry, company, organization or related topic. Think big picture. Envision perfect coverage. A trick Gable PR uses to help clients focus on the goal is to have them imagine the perfect headline for this situation. What would it say and where would it appear? Then, can we work backward from perfection and align all our plans, themes, core values, evidence strategies and tactics to bring it to life.
10. **No comment** – This often springs from some of the considerations listed above (guilty, attorneyitis, torpor at the top). Avoid this nuclear land mine whenever possible. Even providing a comment that you will get back to the media as soon as you've had a chance to conduct an internal review, analyze the complaint or get input from those outside the organization is better than saying "no comment," which comes across as "guilty as charged." Armageddon may seem eminent, but there will be a future. Salvaging a small part of the reputation during difficult times can provide a starting point for building a new one for the future. Work with your crisis team to analyze your different message strategies and what you hope to achieve for the long term.

A Final Word

Some experts estimate that less than five percent of all crises are fatal to an organization or individual. CEOs reinvent themselves regularly, particularly in industries with high failure rates (technology, biotechnology, Internet). Companies and organizations go through constant change, deal with major public issues and keep moving forward. The path becomes much easier with a continuous investment in image as a part of corporate strategy, developing strong core values and avoiding potential land mines when your next crisis erupts.

###