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Crisis report: Some lessons are new, others old

By Andrea Obston

Bad timing, bad tweeting and bad decisions dominated the crisis landscape in 2012. That was bad for companies, but good for those of us who are life-long learners in crisis management.



Andrea Obston

Lesson #1 – Timing is everything. Bad timing is just plain stinky

Hurricane Sandy destroyed lives, took away people's homes and essentially

removed brain cells from my fellow marketing professionals. New York Times reporter Stuart Elliott complained about eager marketers trying to piggyback on the story and doing it with a terrible sense of timing. A day after the storm made landfall in New Jersey, he tweeted "To those PR people who think you've waited a decent interval after #Sandy to resume business as usual ... you would be wrong." In explaining the tweet, he wrote that he was working from home and a marketing professional tweeted him: "Good morning Stuart, hope you are safe from Sandy. When you get a moment, I have sent you an email." He was appalled.

Timing and a little sense of compassion should govern when and how you resume marketing efforts after a disaster like Sandy. If you're not sure if it's too soon, ask. Several weeks after Sept. 11, members of my firm contacted a few reporters directly, to ask if they thought it was okay to talk to them about other stories. They appreciated the consideration.



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Clockwise from left: Governor Dannel P. Malloy, Donald Trump, real estate mogul and Tim Cook, Apple CEO.

Lesson #2 – Time for a social media crisis plan.

If this year's taught us anything, it's that social media boo-boos are part of the fabric of our lives. Companies that have a process in place to monitor and respond to social media mess-ups will have a better chance of stopping them before they become viral embarrassments.

It's called digital damage control and KitchenAid knows how to do it. Here's how it played out: On Tuesday, Oct. 2, during the presidential debate, the infamous 19 word tweet about President Obama's grandmother went out to the 24,000 followers of @KitchenAidUSA. The company quickly took it down, but not before a screen shot rounded the globe many times. By the next

morning the company issued its first of several apologies (including one directly to the president) in the same medium in which the firestorm began — Twitter. When the statement of apology appeared on the company's website, it came from the person in charge of KitchenAid's Twitter channel, Cynthia Soledad. She reiterated how sorry the company was and specifically referenced the situation with "deeply sorry to president, his family, and the Twitter community." She called the tweet "tasteless" and took full responsibility as head of the team. She also promised that the jokester who posed it "won't be tweeting for us anymore." Finally, when the follow-up tweets came pouring in, KitchenAid didn't assume the fetal position. Instead, they responded to all media

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inquiries in the same spirit of contrition. They made short work of what could have been a brand-threatening incident. Clearly they had a social media crisis plan.

The lesson here is to plan for the worst in social media before you need to. Monitor your company's name, know when someone's ignited a social media firestorm and have a procedure in place to douse it.

Lesson #3 – Demonstrate leadership and compassion during a crisis.

Governor Malloy showed us how to lead during Hurricane Sandy. Before, during and after the storm, he kept us informed and gave us the sense that he was “on it.” He showed quiet confidence that Connecticut was ready to take on whatever Sandy dished out. At his news conferences, he was prepared, concerned and in charge. I'm sure this also went a long way to bolster moral with first responders. He had multiple short news conferences every day that included specific information about preparation plans, evacuations, restoration of power and shelters.

The lesson here is clear: During a crisis the most important thing leaders can do is to assure us that they are “on it.”

Lesson #4 – If you delete a tweet, it may not be sweet.

It's a rule as old as Twitter (okay, that's not old, but you get the point): Do not delete a tweet unless you want to start a conflagration about your motives. But, this year showed us that this “ancient” dictum may need to be revised. Although I never expected to use Donald Trump as an example of anything, I will here (with clenched teeth). In a rare move of self-possession the Sultan of Selfish deleted his Twitter hissy fit calling for revolution after the election. He deleted the tirade the next day.

Despite the involvement of The Donald here, there are lessons to be learned:

1) Delete anything intended for your personal account, that ended up on your company feed. Think of the misguided Chrysler

tweet slamming Detroit drivers that mistakenly ended up on the company account; 2) Delete anything that goes against your brand such as off-color or offensive language; 3) Delete anything with typos or grammatical errors and 4) Delete anything that, upon a second reading, could be seen as offensive, combative or incentive. You may take heat from the Twittersphere, but that will pass quicker than the long-term damage to your brand.

Lesson #5 – Burying bad news doesn't work.

Some executives believe sleight of hand with bad news will distract you from noticing it. If someone has to dig for your bad news, chances are they'll be pretty cranky when they find it.

Citigroup taught us this with their “magic show” approach to a major layoff. Earlier this month, they

announced the layoff of 11,000 employees. Their press release was so convoluted that one columnist called it “insulting” to employees and the media. The release read, in part: “Citigroup today announced a series of repositioning actions that will further reduce expenses and improve efficiency across the company while maintaining Citi's unique capabilities to serve clients, especially in the emerging markets. These actions will result in increased business efficiency, streamlined operations and an optimized consumer footprint across geographies.” You had to get to the bottom of the third paragraph to find the first mention of layoffs.

The lesson here is clear: If you've got to announce bad news, do it. Do it quickly. Do it directly and take the heat. These aren't truffles. No one's going to celebrate when they dig them up.

Lesson #6 – Let your mission be your lifeboat.

When Lance Armstrong gave up fighting the doping charges, everyone wondered about the impact on the Livestrong Foundation. The foundation handled it well. They formulated their reactions with

a focus on the good the foundation does. They did interviews. Their statement read: “Long before he became a household name, Lance Armstrong created a foundation to serve others facing the same fears and challenges he struggled to overcome as a result of his cancer diagnosis. Today, thanks to Lance's leadership, that foundation has had the privilege of raising close to \$500 million to serve people affected by cancer.”

His statement was the first step in focusing people on the good work the foundation does — and will continue to do — for cancer victims. It gives a grateful nod to Armstrong's role in starting the foundation and his decision to step down to avoid distraction.

Lesson #7 – Take your lumps and lose the snark.

Apple knows how to give a smart apology. We saw that with Tim Cook's statements about the flawed GPS function on their iPhone5. Nevertheless, we also got a dose of the company's natural arrogance when they lost their suit against Samsung in Britain.

Ordered by the court to publicize the decision, Apple issued a statement that showcased Judge Colin Birss' ruling that the Samsung Galaxy tablets couldn't be confused with the iPad because the Samsung tablets “... are not as cool.” In a statement on Apple's site, they acknowledged the judgment, but cited the “not as cool” element. They also characterized the decision as being out-of-step with other jurisdictions that ruled otherwise. Judges in the UK ordered the statement to be changed.

The lesson here: It's fine to act young and hip. It's small-minded to act like a four-year-old. If you mess up, fess up. Being defensive or flip about it just makes you look small.

So, what did 2012 teach us overall? To handle social media wisely, to plan for the worst and to act like grown-ups, even when we don't want to. If we could all do that, we'd all be better off for it. ■

Andrea Obston is the president of Bloomfield-based Andrea Obston Marketing Communications. The firm builds, enhances and defends reputations. Its subsidiary, Andrea Obston Crisis Management, focuses on helping clients pre-crisis to create crisis communications plans and during crises to manage communications. For more information, visit www.aomc.com.

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