



**Jbp**

# Reputation Management Playbook

**Don't have PR nightmares**

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The Post Office accounting software scandal has gone down in history as arguably the worst PR disaster in British corporate history. Whilst it has been an exceptional case, organisations are not perfect and will face a crisis at some point in time. However, a crisis can actually help enhance your reputation if dealt with proactively, speedily, transparently and empathetically and being true to your values throughout the situation. All things that the Post Office failed miserably to do.

Here are six golden rules to ensure you don't wake up to a PR nightmare....



### **1 Prepare, Prepare, Prepare - leave no stone unturned in preparing for a crisis**

Never think it will never happen to you. It will, every organisation will face a crisis during their lifetimes. And it will all happen at breakneck speed in the digital world we operate in. So, don't leave anything to chance and be completely prepared. Firstly, make sure you have a comprehensive plan of action in place, documenting procedures when a crisis hits your organisation so that everyone is clear about their roles and responsibilities, the chain of command and reporting requirements. Make available the contact details of all those that make up the crisis management team - internal and external team members – and make sure they're updated constantly. Reserve team members should be on standby to cover illness and holidays. Regular training to practice worst case crisis scenarios should be in place. Also ensure you have the right spokespeople who can best represent the values of the business, are calm under pressure and are trained to deal with tough lines of questioning from journalists.



### **2 Always be reputation ready by working at your reputation at all times**

At JBP we've developed the concept of a reputation risk register for our clients. It's designed to help organisations think hard about their reputational risks across all operational areas. For example, we've worked extensively with healthcare charities to map out clinical, health and safety, financial, IT and leadership risks; and what's in place, including any evidenced based data, to demonstrate that the organisation is proactive in this risk area – these represent your proof points when responding to a crisis.

This not only helps avert reputational risks becoming reality by keeping on top of them on an ongoing basis, but also to deal effectively with any lines of questioning around an operational crisis that does happen to occur by highlighting that the company has done everything possible to avoid it in the first instance. By being reputation ready in this way also helps staff members responsible for leading different operational areas to challenge the leadership about any reputational chinks in its armoury.

Also, harness social media by listening to what people are saying about your organisation online. This can raise the alarm bells early on and help your organisation get on the front foot quickly prior to any escalation of the situation. When word is out there about the unfolding crisis it also allows you to gauge audience sentiment helping shape suitable crisis responses.



### **Respond swiftly and appropriately, and be true to your brand**

Crises won't wait for you. Speed is of the essence as a slow or no response gives the distinct impression that you're not particularly organised or concerned or you've got something to hide and don't want to face up to the issue.

At the same time information on the issue can still be emerging so you don't have the full picture. It's therefore important in the initial stage of the crisis not to be drawn on speculation and to say anything that hasn't been verified as you could land yourself in even hotter water.

Instead buy yourself time and issue an initial statement after a rapid assessment of the situation and the implications for the organisation. This should show concern, an urgency to understand the full facts of what has happened and why, and a desire to keep everyone updated on the situation.

Be honest and open. Show that you care a damn. Look in the mirror and ask yourself, how would I feel if this happened to me. Communication from the outset should reflect the brand values of your organisation. Empathy and sympathy should be expressed as appropriate. Never lie nor say 'No comment' - it just comes over as being obstructive and that you feel you're above giving a response. Don't be reactive and blame others at any point. However, if a statement is untrue then you have every right to correct it but do it in a professional way. As part of the rapid assessment of the crisis in its first phase, anticipate questions that will be asked and be ready for them. Draw responses from the reputational proof points in the reputation risk register you've created as per action point 2 above.

And finally, don't forget to put a hold on any other communications, including scheduled social media posts, that have been planned as there will be a high risk of being accused of being inappropriate.



### **Don't just be ready for the media, but for all your stakeholders**

Crisis management isn't just about effective communications with the media, it's critical to engage with all stakeholders who could include any of the following depending on the nature of your organisation: customers, employees, suppliers, local communities you serve, investors, trustees, shareholders, government, regulators, members of parliament, strategic partners and sponsors.

Careful consideration will need to be given to the approach you take with stakeholder communications and engagement, including sequencing (for example you would not want top clients hearing about something first in the media); tailored messaging for the different stakeholders; the channels of communication and whether it should be verbal, written or in person.

Think of ways you can make your communications around the crisis less faceless and more open, authentic and personal, for example by sharing video updates featuring your main spokesperson, which are prominently placed on your website and across your social media channels.



### **Constantly monitor the situation, provide transparent updates and plan for life after the crisis**

Keep on top of the crisis, listening to what people are saying on social and what any internal investigations are revealing. Be transparent with updates to key stakeholders when there is something to say. And at the earliest opportunity start planning for life post-crisis, by dealing with all the issues identified that need fixing and treating the situation as an opportunity to learn lessons and, if appropriate, to share them across your supply chain and/or within your sector.



### **Take stock of your management of the crisis**

In addition to the business learning lessons and applying new best practice to its operations in the wake of a crisis, it's just as important for the crisis team to review what went well and what could be improved upon so any future crises can be handled just as effectively, if not better.

*Chris Lawrance, Managing Director at JBP, has more than 35 years' experience in managing reputations in the corporate and public sectors. He was a former press officer for a number of Government Departments and in number 10 Downing Street during John Major's tenure as Prime Minister before joining JBP. He has advised clients on many crises including workplace fatalities, company restructures, business administrations, cases of bullying and sexual abuse, mass redundancies and company fraud.*