

Crisis Public Relations: Black, White and Gray All Over Go For Influence, Not Control, In 'The Great Gray'

By Matt Baron

In my 20-plus years as a newspaper reporter, I was frequently astounded by some PR professionals' failure to discover what makes journalists tick—and what really ticks them off.

In 1996, I was working on a series chronicling an orphanage's sad history of one employee after another sexually preying upon children in their care. One day, after the orphanage director had ducked yet another of my phone calls, I swung by the fortress-like facility, picked up the telephone at the locked front gate and directly contacted him.

He declined to comment, as I anticipated. I went on my way, patting myself on the back for my plucky resourcefulness.

The next day, the orphanage's PR guy (let's call him Sam Shouter) didn't see it in quite the same light. Shouter immediately launched into a high-decibel castigation of my "harassment" of the director. If I kept calling, Shouter warned me that my newspaper and I may face legal action.

Shortly thereafter, I called the director again. And I kept doing so.

Shouter's tirade was irrelevant. My ethical duty as a journalist demanded that I give the director a chance to comment for the subsequent stories that detailed more abuses.

So where did Shouter go wrong?

In two fundamental ways:

1. Shouter was seeking control instead of influence. He was out of touch with the reality of a journalist's job—to dig for the story and to dig even harder when met with resistance.

2. Shouter failed to recognize that a reporter answers foremost to two audiences: his or her editor and the eventual news-consuming audience.

While Shouter likely reassured the director that he had “gone to bat” for him, all Shouter showed me was a sophomoric ignorance of my profession. And that did nothing to help the client’s public relations.

A few years later, I noticed Shouter’s name in my college alumni magazine. It was a surprising piece of news. He and I had spoken a handful of times before our confrontation, but he had been all aggressiveness and edginess. He never took time to engage in small talk, so we never hit on our common ground.

Had I known, would my newspaper have dropped our coverage? No, of course not. But at least Shouter would have had the ability to wield more influence in what I call “The Great Gray,” those subjective areas of crisis stories that represent publicists’ biggest impact potential. In this realm, a journalist’s judgment calls loom, word by word.

More on “The Great Gray” later, but first let’s address the black and the white.

The Black

This unsavory stuff is going to get in, no matter what.

Your client was indicted on tax fraud charges. Your product was pulled from store shelves due to health concerns. Your company is laying off 200 employees.

There is no way around those elements getting into the story.

Usually, they will be the focus of the story. Don’t waste time, and trash your credibility, by trying to keep them out.

The White

This isn’t the time to insist on the reporter hearing all about the wonderful causes your company has supported over the years. Make mention of it, if you must. But that’s not the main thrust today.

If you waste reporters' precious little time with dog-and-pony shows, you'll succeed only in irritating them. Save it for later.

The Great Gray

This is where reporters have plenty of leeway, and where a great publicist can help shape the story without being overbearing and running the risk of doing more damage than good. Some suggestions on navigating this vast—and vital—terrain:

1. Develop a good rapport with the reporter.

Even if you've not previously interacted with a reporter, show you are human and that you know they are, too. Small talk about sports and the weather may be a bit much, but confirming their deadline and empathizing that you know he or she is under a time pressure to file the story will help you get off on the right foot.

2. Provide background information about your client's company or organization in a clear, compelling and thorough way.

It's not nearly enough to think in terms of what, who, when, where, why and how. You must anticipate more than the most basic journalistic questions. How can you steer reporters toward a nuanced, tempered portrayal that lessens the sting of your client's difficulty?

If you have any doubt about the quality and scope of the content that comprises your client's story, ask current or former journalists (who are not connected to coverage of your client): What else would you want to know if you were on deadline with a "negative" story? Before crisis strikes, the good ones can help you plug those holes.

3. Be forward-focused.

Clearly explain your client's step-by-step plan of what they will do to address the crisis. Even if this doesn't get much mention in the initial story, it can help trigger a follow-up piece that helps your client's reputation rebound.

4. Suggest sympathetic third-party sources.

While perhaps not entirely unbiased, these outside voices can lend a different voice to the story than the usual corporate suspects.

5. Above all else, help the reporter!

This reminder includes one for the Sam Shouter inside all of us: Don't spew ridiculous threats when a reporter is simply, albeit sometimes aggressively, doing his or her job.

Return calls promptly, even if it's only to say you are still trying to track down a spokesman or additional details. Go beyond requests and think of other background information that can help ease reporters' burden.

As they face one onerous deadline after another, journalists scramble to piece together a story's jigsaw elements. If they see you as an ally, and not an adversary, then your client will reap the positive PR benefits in the land of The Great Gray.

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