Introduction

Why in the world would my company need a Chief Crisis Officer?

Good question; here’s the answer: In the modern, media-saturated business and social environment, “crisis response” is most often dominated by communications concerns, i.e., ensuring the public, media, employees, and other stakeholders know (1) what has happened; (2) what may happen next; and (3) what you are doing about it. And the stakes have never been higher. In this new web and social media-dominated era, a fumbled, ineffective public response can mean the difference between a crisis you manage and one that manages you. In ways not imaginable previously, a public-facing crisis can have devastating and long-lasting consequences for an organization’s goals, success, and even its existence.

Chief Crisis Officer is built on the premise that every company and organization must identify a leader and a structure for effective and efficient crisis communications response. Using real-life examples, analysis, and tactical guidance, this book will break down crisis events into their component parts and provide both a strategic approach and proper tools to enable a Chief Crisis Officer to assemble his or her team and respond when an inevitable crisis occurs.

★★★★★

Shit happens.

When it does, you need the right plumbing in place to deal with it. And you need a plumber who knows how the system works, and how to clear a drain when things get clogged.

This, in essence, is what Chief Crisis Officer is all about.

“Eww!” my wife remarked upon hearing this comparison. “No one is going to read a book that starts off talking about poop!”

I hope she’s wrong, and that you’ll excuse my vulgarity. I’m not someone who throws around such language casually, but in all honesty, there’s no more apt analogy to describe the main theme of this book... and no reason to sugarcoat it. A crisis—whether it’s an accident, workplace incident, product recall, data breach, lawsuit, or investigation—is, more often than not, what we call in the old neighborhood a “shitstorm.” Effectively cleaning up the mess is what this book is all about.

But let’s put my thesis in more dignified, business-like terms: In Chief Crisis Officer, we will examine two premises that are essential to public response
when negative events or issues threaten to do reputational harm to you, your company or organization, or your personal or business goals:

**First**, you need systems and procedures in place that respond when a crisis hits (the plumbing).

**Second**, you need a Chief Crisis Officer who understands those systems, how they work, and when to use them (the plumber).

In the chapters to come, we will explore the structure and protocols you need to respond appropriately when a crisis occurs, and the particular skills and expertise of the Chief Crisis Officer to ensure you come through a crisis or other sensitive reputational event in the best possible shape.

**Reached for Comment, Company X Could Not Get Its Act Together**

We’ve all seen it before, whether on local television, in your daily newspaper, or in the pages of The Wall Street Journal: “Company X could not be reached for comment.”

The story in question is often highly negative in nature, involving either an immediate crisis event (product recall, workplace incident or data breach, to name a few) or, perhaps, a longer-term crisis like an investigation or lawsuit. The lack of response only makes things worse. The audience doesn’t know the facts, so they speculate; they don’t know the company’s side of the story, so they assume the worst. Allegations or unexplained negatives just hang out there, crying for some sort of explanation, some sort of context that would help the public understand why the company, organization, or individual is the subject of such unflattering publicity. Readers or viewers think: “Why isn’t the company available for comment? Don’t they know how bad this story looks? Don’t they care?”

I’ve been doing this for more than 20 years, so I can tell you the following with a high degree of confidence: When you see a lack of response during a crisis, it is often **not** intentional, and it is usually **not** because there was nothing to say, no way to manage the spiraling negatives that threaten both reputation and livelihood. Rather, in most situations, that lack of public response happens simply because the party in question couldn’t get its act together in time enough to respond. And more often than not, that’s because they didn’t have the structure or protocols in place to make such a response efficient and effective, and because no one was identified to lead the effort before media and other audiences.

This is the problem that *Chief Crisis Officer* is designed to help solve. Although this is a public relations book, it is less about the “creative side” of
PR—cute soundbites and images, branding campaigns, media tours—and more about process, leadership, and message.

The Curious Profession of Crisis Counselor

“*You have a corpse in a car, minus a head, in the garage. Take me to it.*”

—Winston Wolfe, *Pulp Fiction*

“It’s handled.”

—Olivia Pope, ABC-TV’s *Scandal*

There is a mythology around the crisis manager—the fixer, the spin-doctor, the operative—forged through movies and television programs over the past few decades. The shady Svengali, moving in the shadows to bury facts, getting the right people to say the right things; the fixer who knows what strings to pull and buttons to push to make a problem go away; the sleek operative dropping an envelope with incriminating photos on a reporter’s desk, or trading a good story for a *better* story not involving their client.

I’d love to say that my business works that way—not only would my job be easier, but I personally would seem a lot more interesting.

But that’s not what we do in the crisis communications business. Rather, consider this quote, from the 2013 George Clooney movie *Michael Clayton*:

*There’s no play here. There’s no angle. There’s no champagne room. I’m not a miracle worker, I’m a janitor. The math on this is simple. The smaller the mess, the easier it is for me to clean up.*

*Janitor, plumber . . .* very similar concepts. And this quote is an effective distillation of what crisis counselors do: We take steps to make sure the mess is smaller, so it is easier to clean up.

Which is why every company over a certain size needs to have a plan for responding to unexpected public events that can do reputational damage. And a Chief Crisis Officer and team to execute that plan. Only then can you ensure the right response when things get dirty.

There’s nothing tricky, or sly, or cinematic about it . . . most of the time.*

* Ok, I guess it would be wrong to suggest that there’s *nothing* interesting about the work we do. Over the years, I’ve been involved in many situations that seem like they’re pulled from the pages of a movie script, but even in these situations, our advice tends to be more strategic than sensational.
This Book Is for You!

“This book is not for me,” you think. It’s for General Motors. Or Toyota. Or Target. Tylenol. BP in the Gulf of Mexico. The Exxon Valdez. Three Mile Island. These are the types of companies and events that need crisis communications: Big companies, with big problems. Companies with oil rigs in the Gulf, ships at sea or thousands of potentially deadly vehicles on the road.

Not me, you think.

Respectfully, you are wrong. Crisis communications planning and execution are vital for every company that interfaces with the public and worries about the negative implications of unforeseen (or at times, perhaps, foreseen) events on their organization and its reputation.*

Want proof? Consider the following crises that occurred in March 2015, over a span of less than two weeks, involving organizations of all sizes. Each of these incidents were high profile enough that the organization in question had to issue a statement to the media in response:

- On March 3, pharmaceutical firm Orexigen accidently released preliminary clinical trial test data prematurely, endangering FDA approval;
- On March 4, TFC National Bank responded to an employee’s lawsuit over wage violations;
- On March 4, Ateeco, Inc., announced a voluntary recall of “Mrs. T.’s Pierogies” due to plastic shard contamination;
- On March 4, the Mandarin Oriental Hotel experienced a credit card breach;
- On March 5, Cedars Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles responded to a “superbug” outbreak linked to a brand of endoscope;
- On March 5, Allstar Marketing Group entered into an $8 million settlement with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) over deceptive marketing practices;
- On March 5, the police department in Las Cruces, New Mexico, responded to media reports that it used excessive force that hospitalized a suspect;

* You’ll notice I bounce back and forth between the terms “organization” and “company” throughout this book. To be honest, this is not intentional . . . I just chose whatever term sounded better in that particular sentence. But to be sure, some of the lessons contained herein are probably more applicable to for-profit companies than to nonprofits, government agencies, and other organizations (or high-profile individuals with their own reputational needs). Rest assured, however, that this book is designed for organizations of all types and sizes—business, government, nonprofits, educational institutions, the arts . . . you name it.
• On March 9, Canadian National Railway faced two separate train derailments in Northern Ontario;
• On March 10, the Houston Port Authority responded to events surrounding the collision of two ships in the Houston ship channel;
• On March 11, five high school students were killed in a car crash on the way to a high school basketball game;
• On March 12, Exide Technologies announced it was closing a lead battery recycling facility in Milton, Georgia, after entering into a non-prosecution agreement with the U.S. Attorney’s office;
• On March 13, five patients at Via Christie Hospital St. Francis in Topeka, Kansas, contracted Listeria after eating tainted ice cream; and
• On March 16, Texas A&M University accidentally posted students’ and faculty’s Social Security numbers online.

And again, this is just in a two-week period!

From the list above, you see small manufacturers, regional hospitals, local retailers, government bodies, police departments, high schools, community banks, and universities. All are moderately sized institutions for their industry or segment, yet all are facing the types of issues that, while perhaps not likely to land them on wall-to-wall coverage on CNN, will nonetheless portray them negatively to their respective audience. These companies and organizations were not household names, and the issues involved were not necessarily front-page news. Each incident, however, was critically important to the organization in question; each organization’s response, therefore, is vital to its perception in marketplace and ultimately, its business or organizational mission.

Thus, the critical question is: Were they prepared? Even more critically, are you?

There were other, more major crises in this two-week span as well, involving name brands that are in the headlines every day. During this period:

• McDonald’s responded to national labor issues over the payment of its minimum-wage workers;
• Novartis Pharmaceuticals was fined $12 million for giving Medicare inaccurate pricing data;
• Quantas Airlines battled fake Facebook pages;
• Hedge fund honcho William Ackman faced an investigation over potential manipulation of Herbalife stock;
• Toyota issued a recall of more than 11,000 vehicles; and
• Apple’s iTunes had a day-long outage.*

Here’s the point: Although this book is for McDonald’s, Novartis, Apple, and Herbalife to be sure, you don’t have to be a name brand to face an issue or event that will put you or your company under the unflattering glare of the media spotlight. You only need to have a public—and care about what that public thinks about you, your product, service, or issue.

Crisis Communications Is Not Just for the PR Team

![Cartoon of the five stages of a PR disaster:]

- **Denial:** Maybe it will all blow over.
- **Anger:** How dare anyone criticize? We're the victims!
- **Bargaining:** Please leave our Facebook wall out of it.
- **Depression:** What will this do to our brand?
- **Acceptance:** We accept that our lawyers will draft a heartfelt non-apology.

*These lists were compiled using the innovative software CrisisResponsePro—a tool you’ll learn more about later in this book.*

It is important to recognize that a thorough understanding of crisis communications is not just for your public relations department or outside PR firm. For that reason, although this book provides an excellent roadmap for planning and executing a crisis communications program, it is not a technical treatise accessible only to those who already have an in-depth understanding of the communications or public relations field. And there’s an
important reason for this: because planning and decision-making during a crisis involve many functions and operational levels of an organization—from the executive suite, to the legal department, corporate security, the IT department, and more.

Indeed, as you read the lists detailing crises that befell companies and organizations of all sizes, many of you who are not in a traditional PR role might have thought of the issues you are currently facing in your position and how you may assist in the response—because crisis communications touches everyone.

Thus, I’ve written this book with many audiences in mind, including:

• **Business owners:** Ultimately, it’s your business and reputation on the line. Depending on the size of your business, your personal reputation is often entwined with that of your business, so much so that it may be hard to know where one ends and the other begins. Regardless of the size of your enterprise, though, you will need crisis communications leadership and protocols reasonable to your particular organization, its culture, and the issues you may face.

• **CEOs and other senior executives:** Whether you work in a for-profit company, a nonprofit, or a public sector entity, you know from experience that you are on the front lines of the decision-making process, and the decisions made during crisis communications planning and execution can have a huge impact on your organization’s reputation and performance . . . and therefore your own. You cannot be involved in every aspect of the crisis communications effort, but you must have an understanding of how to put the right people and protocols in place to ensure the machine is running smoothly when a crisis occurs.

• **General Counsel:** Increasingly, as the chief legal officer for your organization, you are finding yourself and key members of your team involved in decision-making in many areas that go beyond tradition legal roles. As you’ll learn in Chapter 6, with regulation and legal issues now central to nearly every area of business operations, it is more common for the General Counsel to be tasked with managing certain sensitive PR concerns.*

* There is a small but growing trend in Corporate America for the PR function in an organization to report directly to the chief legal officer, and not only in highly regulated fields: For example, in fall 2015, Twitter announced that their General Counsel Vijaya Gadde was also assuming the role of head of communications for the company (see http://www.corpcounsel.com/home/id=1202739500003/Twitter-GC-Swoops-Into-Dual-Role-as-Communications-Boss?mcode=1202617073467&curindex=4&slreturn=20150914073435).