Preface to the Paperback Edition

In the two years since the publication of Chief Crisis Officer, company after company has found itself in crisis: the kind of negative reputational events that dominate the news and cause public confidence—and brand value—to crumble.

Let me throw a few names at you: United Airlines, Equifax, Boeing, Facebook, the NFL. Each has been involved in a crisis so high-profile that you remember it immediately upon a mere mention the company’s name. And all of these crises have one thing in common.

In each and every case, the company in question screwed up the initial response—and that, as much as the severity of the event itself, made the event a crisis. Different types of negative events or issues, to be sure; but each time, the same fumbled response led to a disastrous result.

And this just serves to prove Chief Crisis Officer’s central premise: In a crisis, it’s not the event itself that counts. It’s the response.

Indeed, research we compiled for the original edition of Chief Crisis Officer bears this out. Using proprietary software, we looked at more than 12,000 public statements issued by companies that confronted a range of crises, from the physical (like an accident or plant explosion) to the virtual (like a data breach or legal matter). In every case where the event caused sustained reputational damage, the first few days—sometimes weeks—were characterized by tone-deaf, often contradictory responses, abrupt legalese, banal clichés, and ultimately a profound lack of understanding and empathy. In each case, it was clear the company didn’t have a plan in place for communicating publicly when a negative event or incident happened. They were making it up as they went along.

We do a fair amount of work in sports-related fields these days, and I would equate this to sending your football team onto the field, and only then making up the plays. You may win the game . . . but I wouldn’t bet on it.

Throughout Chief Crisis Officer, I show how organizations of all sizes need structure, leadership, and speed to effectively manage the modern crisis. And that means (1) a Chief Crisis Officer tasked and ready to lead any crisis communications response, and (2) a Core Crisis Communications team
trained to respond effectively and efficiently. Sounds simple, but even since the book’s first publication, companies like those named above have fallen into the same potholes as those we profile in the chapters to follow.

Take Equifax, for example. It is reasonable to expect that the one potential crisis the company should have been ready for was a data breach, given that they’re in... well, the data business. But clearly, there was little planning at Equifax for responding publicly in the face of a cyberattack. Indeed, since the company disclosed in September 2017 that the private data of 143 million customers had been breached, a series of self-inflicted blunders have not only torched its reputation, but—perhaps just as damningly—exposed a shocking lack of preparedness for this worst-case scenario.

Or United Airlines. Even as the graphic video of a passenger getting dragged off a United flight went viral in 2017, the company failed to recognize the severity of what they originally referred to as an “overbook situation.” It was only days later, after it was clear that the firestorm was only growing, that United directly apologized to the victim that United CEO Oscar Munoz had initially called “disruptive and belligerent.”

And then there’s Facebook. In 2018, the Cambridge Analytica data privacy crisis reared its ugly head—which not only caused enormous reputational damage for the company and its CEO Mark Zuckerberg, but also can be seen as the first skirmish in a highly public “techlash” over the use (and misuse) of user data by large technology companies. Facebook was silent for days as the crisis grew: Zuckerberg later stated that the company couldn’t respond because they were still “gathering facts,” but by then it was too late.

It doesn’t have to be this way: not for Facebook, nor United Airlines or Equifax; not for the NFL in their current crises, nor Boeing (whose 737 Max issues are still making news as I write). And whether you are a company, a nonprofit, a sports or entertainment brand, or a high-profile individual, it doesn’t have to be that way for you either—if you put the systems and leadership in place to ensure you manage your communications response at the speed of the modern crisis.

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