

Coping under fire

By [Danette Breitenbach](#)

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Janine Lazarus, founder and owner of Janine Lazarus media consultancy was a journalist for 31 years, and has worked across the board from newspapers to radio...

Now she assists corporates and governments to prepare for when a crisis hits by providing them with media training she explained to delegates at the PRCC (the PR Consultancy Chapter of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa, PRISA) Networking Breakfast last month.



She says there is no silver bullet, but there are steps a company can take, so that when a crisis strikes they can respond. "Companies need to prepare for a crisis and how long it might continue for. Think about what questions you will be asked. Has this happened before? Do not be caught with your pants down. Journalists have memories like elephants. Be aware of what happened, even if it was 20 years ago."

The problem with companies is that they do not always tell the truth and even if they are, they can come across as unfeeling, she says.

South Africans, particular are not that good at being empathetic, but you have to connect with the issue and from a human point of view. By the same token she cautions against too much empathy and a prolonged period of time spent on the crisis. "Connect and then move right along, otherwise people stay in the moment. [But] This does not mean saying nothing."

Blackmail threats

Pick n Pay demonstrated this balance very well when they received blackmail threats of products being poisoned in their stores. "They kept the public informed as the crisis developed until the blackmailer was caught and the products removed. On the other hand, when Madiba was ill the government did a very bad job of this. Eskom is another culprit. Because they do not keep us informed we view them as public enemy number one."

Reaction is also immediate today as consumers turn to social media on their mobiles. For example, when a visually impair person was refused entry into a McDonalds in Northern Pretoria because they had their guide dog with them, social media went mad. Companies cannot wait; they need to respond. A social media team for a company is a given she says.

While she is in favour of companies developing a hymn sheet, she says it must be a personal message and human. "Have a key message in front of you, but if you learn it like a nursery rhyme then it loses its authenticity. Learn the key messages but interpret them and out your DNA on your message."

This does not mean everyone can have their own message. "Be sure that the team is on the same page. You would be surprised how different the views of an issue can differ from executive to executive on the same management team. Sing from the same hymn sheet."

Make sure there is ALWAYS someone available

Make sure your spokesperson is always available. If they are not, ensure the next person down the line is. "And do not refer me to your Public Relations (PR) person. Let your PR company train you, but you talk to the media."

A crisis means being proactive. If you are reactive then it is already too late. Manage the message. Give information to the media. Must sure the right person is giving out the right message.

Build media rapport and get to know the journalists and influencers in your industry. "Find out what stories blow their hair back and get to know them. Have respect for them and they will have respect for you"

Respect their deadlines. "No paper is going to move their deadline for you. The only time I have even seen a newspaper physically removed from the printing press was when Chris Hani was assassinated."

Get your people media trained she encourages. "Media is a power, but learn how to work it. The pen is mightier than the sword."

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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