

Leaders and crises: Do they mix?

 By Jason Warner

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Many companies have realised the importance of communicating in a transparent and accountable manner, shifting away from stereotypically closed-door corporate communications and spin to a more human, and therefore relatable, voice.



In the world of social sharing, a second can be lifetime. With over 750 million Facebook users and 200 million tweets sent a day, information has never been shared more quickly. This has had a tremendous impact on many facets of everyday life, but it has also forced business to adapt, or suffer embarrassing consequences as rumours take on a life of their own.

Brands are no longer able to take their time when responding to complaints, criticism, or the dreaded company-wide crises which have seen massive corporations flayed in the media.

So what about the boss?

Several high-powered CEOs have taken to Twitter and other social networking platforms to share information directly with customers.

A great example of this occurred earlier in the year, when Taco Bell president Greg Creed used the video-sharing platform YouTube to tackle claims that the Tex-Mex franchise used 'fake' beef in its products.

In January this year, law firm Beasley Allen Crow Methvin Portis & Miles PC filed a class-action lawsuit against Taco Bell, claiming the company was misleading customers. The lawsuit stated Taco Bell's meat contained only 36% US Department of Agriculture (USDA)-inspected beef, which was below the legal limits of what could be called beef.

Creed took out print adverts in *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, thanking the law firm for attacking the brand, and then appeared in the YouTube video stating that Taco Bell's mixture consists of ground beef that is 88% USDA-certified

beef and 12% seasonings, water, and other ingredients that Creed said were Taco Bell's "secret," but which he revealed in the YouTube video.

The end result was that the suit was dropped in April, and Taco Bell fans flocked to defend the brand.

Local seems lekker

A local example of CEO engagement occurred in June this year, when Vodacom's network coverage inexplicably dropped a day before the Regulation of Interception of Communications and Provision of Communication-Related Information Act (otherwise known as the RICA act) came into effect. This Act required every mobile phone user in South Africa to register their SIM card to their actual identity.

Scores of people attacked the brand on Twitter, blaming Vodacom for dropping the ball right before the try line. While the network denied that RICA was behind the outage, CEO Pieter Uys used his personal twitter account ([@uyspj](#)) to help customers throughout the night.

While Uys was not able to appease every single subscriber, his commitment and personal touch came across as honest - and [people took notice](#).

After a while, Uys even started receiving compliments along with the complaints, with people thanking him for turning the normally corporate industry on its head by committing himself to improving customer experience.

How not to do it

The opposite of this can be seen across the equator, where media mogul Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation faces its biggest crisis yet.

[News of the World](#), one of the UK's longest running tabloids, was forced to close after 168 years of going to print, when it was discovered that journalists had hacked into the voicemail accounts of dead soldiers, a murdered school girl and survivors of terrorist attacks - all in the name of getting a scoop.

Grisly stuff indeed, but the paper and its staff paid the price, with several staff members arrested and Murdoch himself being ordered to appear before Parliament. While this crisis is vastly different to that of Vodacom's network glitch, it's more about how the figurehead of the organisation acted (or failed to act).

Obviously, in this case the widespread damage has already been done, and no amount of spin or communication will see the guilty parties untainted. But Murdoch, as the face of the corporation, was noticeably quiet in the days after the scandal broke, only appearing in an interview in the *Wall Street Journal* (which happens to also be owned by NewsCorp).

In the meantime, however, parody accounts have surfaced, taken the Mickey out of the entrepreneur.

Murdoch's failure to create a presence on any platform means others have simply done it for him.

Only after having his entire corporation dragged through the mud did Murdoch apologise in full, issuing a direct apologies which appeared in several leading UK broadsheets. But was that too late? Many critics (as well as the general public) seem to think so.

Is social media for me?

But does this mean every CEO should be on social networks? Well, yes. But it's not that simple.

Any CEO who plans to engage with customers online should be schooled in social media and public relations. They should feel confident, not only in themselves, but in their products and services. They should be aware that the Internet can be ruthless, and people unforgiving. Every CEO who is online has taken knocks from perpetually unhappy customers, but most have recovered.

In the end, it's up to each individual CEO to stake a claim, take ownership of their brands and promote honesty and transparency.

People have a knack for spotting phoney personas, and using corporate speak and marketing spin is not going to do any favours for leaders in the social media space.

Ultimately leaders are meant to provide direction, clarity, confidence and trust. If you're a CEO, managing director or any manner of thought leader in your organisation, just lead and be yourself on social media channels.

By doing this you'll have followers in no time, and hopefully create enthusiastic and passionate brand evangelists.

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