



[Back to Previous Page](#)

Back to [Home](#) > [Content](#) > [PR, Perfected](#) > PR, Perfected: Crisis Communication: What Should Have Happened

✉ [Mail](#) 🖨 [Print](#)

PR, Perfected: Crisis Communication: What Should Have Happened

Industry pros weigh in on PR snafus and share savvy approaches

By Whitney McKnight – July 27, 2009



RELATED:

[AG PR, Perfected: Pitch Like A Journalist](#)

[AG PR, Perfected: Media Training for Journalists](#)

With the help of some PR veterans, we turn recent adventures in crisis communications into case studies you can use to improve your own snafu response.

White House Okays Air Force One and F-16's to Fly Over NYC at Low Altitude

A White House internal investigation [concluded](#) that "organizational ambiguities" in the White House military office caused New York City to relive the horror of Sept. 11 when Air Force One, tailed closely by two F-16s, flew at a very low altitude over lower

Manhattan mid-morning on April 27, 2009.

What they did: It was six hours before the White House officially reacted to the event with an apology from White House Military Office Director Louis Caldera. Soon after, [reports](#) followed that a "furious" President Obama had demanded an internal investigation to determine "why that decision was made and to ensure that it never happens again." Within two weeks, the investigation results were released, detailing how what was to have been a routine photo op for marketing purposes instead became a White House-authorized fright fest. The day the report was released, Caldera [resigned](#).

What experts say should have happened:

- **Gayle Falkenthal**, president of San Diego-based Falcon Valley Group and co-author of the crisis communication portion of PRSA's Accreditations in Public Relations exam, notes that this was a crisis the White House brought on itself, "which far worse to deal with," she says, than a crisis done to an organization, because it makes an organization look "inept". She says three basic tenets of crisis communications are missing: first, acknowledge the crisis not from your point of view, but from the point of view of the ones affected; then to find out exactly what happened and why, and finally, to state exactly what you've learned and how you'll prevent it from happening again. Falkenthal says she gets, "no impression that there's any true understanding of just how badly this was handled, and the effect it had on real, living human beings." She says that now there has been an investigation, the White House needs to publicly detail how protocols and reporting relationships have been corrected. Falkenthal says she's bothered that in the report, "there was an admission that officials deliberately decided to hide from the public the exact nature of the fly-over. This demonstrates that they knew it was a problem." Caldera's resignation was appropriate, says Falkenthal, but came too late: "Acceptance needs to be immediate to successfully communicate responsibility."

Conclusion: Says Falkenthal, the lack of a coordinated official White House response after the fact makes this, "one of the worst PR bungs I've seen in years."

"Acceptance needs to be immediate to successfully communicate responsibility."

- **Jonathan Bernstein**, president of Bernstein Crisis Management in Sierra Madre, Calif., and publisher of *Crisis Manager* newsletter, says, "This is a classic example of how every operational decision has a PR implication. People in operations don't typically talk to the PR department, but they should always work together." Calling the event a "colossal error in judgment", Bernstein cites the lack of a "clear-cut policy in place regarding public notification when multiple agencies are involved -- one understood by all parties," as the primary cause of the confusion. Bernstein says he is impressed by the speed with which the White House turned the report around and gives it "high marks for transparency, given that it is clearly an interim report, one that calls for a comprehensive study" for how to fix a "broken" system. After the due process of the initial investigation, Bernstein says "anything less than someone losing their job tells the public that this was not a serious event." To that end, he says Caldera's resignation was "wise."

Conclusion: Bernstein says that the way this crisis has been handled so far is a "reflection of the openness and transparency of this media-savvy president."

- **Kim Fuller**, president of Kim Fuller Public Affairs in Tulsa, Okla., and former crisis

communications director at FEMA and the NTSB, says the whole event "flaunted basic Public Safety 101 protocols," which she says should anticipate -- and answer -- every question citizens might have about events being out of the ordinary. Although Fuller says the report was timely, she doesn't believe it goes far enough towards explaining why the mission was kept secret. "If this report is to be taken seriously, the White House should lay out what the structural ambiguities are and what their recommendations are to close those holes," she says. In her opinion, Caldera was not necessarily to blame, but thinks his resignation was appropriate, although it should have happened sooner.

Conclusion: "The administration needs to step back and do some strategic planning for all contingencies. I don't think Obama knew this was happening, but it doesn't look good for him," she says. If the administration doesn't demonstrate they've learned from what happened, and put preventative measures put in place, Fuller believes it "could and probably will happen again."

Amazon Appears to Censor Certain Authors

After several authors noticed that their titles had lost their sales rankings on Amazon.com, they emailed the retailer in search of an explanation. The company responded that certain titles were not being listed due to their "policy regarding content." Since it seemed to be affecting mainly GLBT and erotica titles, an angry chorus of tweets erupted online, accusing the company of censorship, and calling for a boycott. Bloggers soon followed suit.

What they did: Two days after the storm broke, an Amazon spokeswoman told The Associated Press that "an embarrassing and ham-fisted cataloging error" and a "system glitch" were responsible for de-listing not only thousands of GLBT and erotica titles, but mind-body-spirit, sexual reproduction, and other titles, but that the situation was being corrected and measures were being taken to "make this kind of accident less likely to occur in the future."

What experts say should have happened:

- **Eric Yaverbaum**, president of Ericho Communications in Tampa/ greater NYC and the author of *Public Relations for Dummies* and *Leadership Secrets of the World's Most Successful CEO's*, wonders why a company that pioneered online retailing chose not to engage the online community where the discussion was happening. "While the AP is obvious, that's a very short list. This started on Twitter. They should be taking Twitter as seriously as they would *The New York Times*." Yaverbaum says it appears Amazon lacks a crisis team that "thrives on the heat of the moment." He says that if it took the company two full days to respond, then "they clearly had no plan in place to address an issue like this." Meanwhile, he says, "They are not helping clarify for me how they feel about the issue." He points out that first they said it was a policy decision, then they said it was human error. This ambiguity leaves it open for others to interpret what they want, which Yaverbaum indicates can ultimately hurt them because, "Perception matters at the cash register."

Conclusion: "This should be an opportunity for Amazon," says Yaverbaum. "They have built a very successful brand, ready made for the generation born with a mouse in their

hand. Now they should be engaging Twitter." But unless Amazon really does want the public to believe they are targeting certain materials, he says the first thing Amazon needs to do is let buyers know that not certain titles were affected and why, but how they feel about these titles having been de-listed, so as to avoid the impression that they were actually censoring their inventory. "And I would get on that yesterday," he says.

"If it's important enough for someone to bring up to your company, then you need to respond.... Today's PR is always a conversation."

- **Brian Reich**, principal at EchoDitto, Inc. in Washington, D.C./Boston, author of *Media Rules!*, and co-team leader for former presidential candidate Howard Dean's online campaign presence, says, "Amazon's first mistake was that they didn't take the initial wave of complaints seriously. If it's important enough for someone to bring up to your company, then you need to respond." And not, he says with "lazy language. By pulling out the formulaic response about the policy, they didn't really listen. But today's PR is always a conversation." Compounding their initial dismissal of the issue, says Reich, is that they still haven't fully explained what happened. "I see no advantage to them being opaque about it, either." Reich says it's not hard for Amazon to do what needs to be done, but that they aren't making the effort. "They should be flooding the zone with information. Otherwise, it's not hard for people to fill the vacuum and assume things that might not be true. Amazon needs to be proactive, show us the glitch, tell us how they found it, are fixing it, explain what they've learned and how they're preventing it from happening again," he says.

Conclusion: Reich says Amazon's challenge is two-part: first, even if their sales aren't significantly affected, he says they now have to combat people thinking that the company has a distinct point of view about the GLBT community. "So far," he says, "the story is defined by Amazon's silence." The second is that they need to consider who's on their front line of customer complaints. "They need people who can listen to what's being said and put it in perspective so there's a human connection."

- **Abbie Fink**, vice president and general manager of HMA Public Relations in Phoenix, says, "Amazon didn't react fast enough," especially given that they are big players online "And when they did react, it wasn't consistent," says Fink, referring to the first response being that it was policy, the second that it was a glitch. "They seemed completely unprepared. If Amazon actually is trying to control their inventory rankings, she says, "then whatever conversation is going on about their business decisions needs to be communicated to their public response team. Any change in business as usual requires a ready response." That Amazon chose to go to a more traditional media outlet, the AP, omitting Twitter altogether, also concerned Fink, who says that, "Today, media is media. It's not social media versus traditional media, or print versus online. You need to use the appropriate channels to reach the audience where they are." For that reason, she says that at a minimum, Amazon should have had a link on their home page to a place they were Twittering about the situation.

Conclusion: Fink warns that Amazon had better get prepared for another onslaught, whether about this or another event. "Right now, they don't seem proactive. They should have a response team tracking the Internet at all times, looking for trends in what is being said about them," she says.

Whitney McKnight is a New Jersey-based writer and public relations consultant.


Add New Comment

You are commenting as a [Guest](#). You may select one to log into:

 Profile

 Connect

 Twitter

- Logged in as
-  [Logout from DISQUS](#)
- Logged in as
- using Facebook Connect ([Logout](#))

[Use Media ▼](#)

1 Comment 

Sort by [Community Page](#) [Subscribe by email](#)



[CarrieLeber 1 hour ago](#)

what a great set of circumstances and answers - very practical, helpful and thoughtful!

Carrie Leber
LMG

- [Like](#)
- [Report](#)
- [Reply](#)
- [More ▼](#)

Trackback URL

[> Send a letter to the editor](#)
[> Read more in our archives](#)

[Back to Previous Page](#)

mediabistro.com inc., call 212-389-2000

[PRIVACY POLICY](#) Copyright © 2009 mediabistro.com inc. All rights reserved.