

Crisis averted: Where companies go when bad news starts coming in waves

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In 2016, when a tsunami of sexual harassment claims first started to whirl around Roger Ailes — the then-chairman and CEO of Fox News and the Fox Television Stations Group — his first wave of calls went to lawyers and other advisors. The next went to Karen Kessler, a co-founder of Evergreen Partners, a Warren-based public relations firm that specializes in crisis communications, reputation management, litigation support and issues management consulting.

“Crises seem to come in waves,” Kessler said. “For a time, financial crime was in the news, then corruption, and now sexual harassment. We’re usually engaged by attorneys, and our first step is to investigate the matter, to see what caused the issue. We have to find out, as quickly as possible, what really happened. Then we assess where we are, and work on putting a strategic approach together. We have worked on behalf of the most prominent law firms in the region and our policy is to not divulge clients unless asked to speak on their behalf.”

Typically, Kessler and her team will speak with internal employees and business partners and get a feel for public reaction if the matter has reached that point already.



Karen Kessler, CEO, Evergreen Partners. - (AARON HOUSTON)

“We consider who the audience is and the best way to reach them. But a client has to be upfront with us, or we can’t successfully assist them.”

In the case of Ailes — who resigned in 2016, and then died in May — “there was a serious divide between the way Roger wanted to handle things and our advice, so we left the assignment,” according to Kessler.

Silence is generally not a strategy, she added.

“We tell clients that one way or another, they have to issue some response. If they don’t, it’s like admitting you’re guilty as charged,” Kessler said. “That goes for every client, including athletes, celebrities, politicians, executives, and academics.

Five steps for good crisis management

Think about the situation. A crisis may turn out to be a potential opportunity to improve your reputation

Always be prepared

Think about your response and act quickly, but remember that the wrong response can resonate for years

Take responsibility

Keep a list of third parties that can stand up for you

“Unfortunately, by nature many people are slow to acknowledge that they’re in a crisis situation and need professional help. They may try to resolve it themselves, and will talk to too many people and will often be too quick to issue a denial. They think their reaction will be kept within a small circle of people, but it won’t. Then they try to hide from the press, issue misleading statements or refuse to comment, but it all catches up, especially in today’s

digital environment where anyone with a keyboard and an internet connection can get an audience.”

What if a client wants to bare his or her soul and admit they did something wrong?

“One vexing issue is knowing how to apologize and acknowledge wrongdoing and issue an apology, but doing so in a way that won’t jeopardize your legal and other standing,” Kessler said. “For example, you can undermine your own position if you start out admitting that something happened, but then you either change your story in a bid to look better, or try to claim that other people have done worse things. That’s what happened with Sen. Al Franken, who tried to deflect criticism about his inappropriate actions by pointing to another politician, Judge Roy Moore.”

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