



Employees are valuable brand ambassadors during periods of crisis, writes Brunswick's KEITH BURTON

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE DAYS. Communicators at a global medical technology company had done their best to plan for every contingency in announcing a wave of layoffs. No one, however, had considered the one errant stone in their proverbial Hadrian's Wall that could unleash the barbarians. When layoffs were announced, word leaked among 25 affected employees connected on Facebook. It then quickly spread to the larger workforce, the media, and other stakeholders, shaping perceptions before the company could release any official communication.

How should companies factor employees into crisis communications planning? Can they count on them to remain loyal to the corporate brand during a crisis even when they are directly affected by it? Or might they become "terrorists," as one pharmaceutical executive put it, and work against the company?

W. Timothy Coombs, an authority on crisis

communications and a professor at the Nicholson School of Communication at the University of Central Florida, reminds us that employees feel real pressure during a crisis. "First, the crisis is an unknown. They need to know what has happened and what the organization is doing to address the situation," says Coombs, author of *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, *Code Red in the Boardroom*. "Second, never forget that any crisis will have a personal impact on your employees. You are all in it together."

Toyota and Navistar are two global brands that have weathered major crisis threats. During their greatest periods of challenge, both started with a simple question: "How will this crisis affect our employees and what do we want them to say and do to support our reputation – or at least not sabotage it?" Their experience can offer insights for other companies facing the unfamiliarity and uncertainty of a crisis. →

TOYOTA: RON KIRKPATRICK

▶ “THE DARKEST DAYS OF MY CAREER ...”



ON KIRKPATRICK REMEMBERS THE day in 2009 when the US Secretary of Transportation, Ray LaHood, exhorted consumers to “park your Toyotas” during a major recall targeting the Camry line and other vehicles for possible “unintended acceleration” that allegedly led to crashes resulting in injuries and deaths.

“It bordered on being hysterical at one point,” says Kirkpatrick, National Manager, Executive/Internal Communications and Social Media at Toyota Motor Sales in Torrance, California. “Those were the darkest days of my career.”

He participated in the first meetings executives convened to address the crisis, and was responsible for making sure Toyota’s all-important first line of

communication with customers – its employees (known as associates) and dealers – were quickly informed of details and given direction on how they could help tell the company’s story. Kirkpatrick says associates and dealers are “fiercely loyal, and they had a hard time dealing with all the negative stuff. We knew that they were our best advocates. We knew that they had their own networks, and we wanted to tap into that, so we considered them extremely important.”

In times of crisis, the simplest things are often the most effective. One of Toyota’s most successful tools was *Fast Facts*, a regular short email for dealers and employees that provided a headline and three to five sentences to give an overview of the story and then a link to an article or directly to Toyota’s news releases.

To streamline the process, the review chain for *Fast Facts* was deliberately short: “It was just me and our

NAVISTAR: LISA HARTENBERGER

▶ “WE REALLY NEEDED TO DRIVE BELIEF ...”



“We have people working here who still remember what happened to us in the 1980s and say, ‘I’ve seen much worse at this company and we’ve survived,’ says Lisa Hartenberger, Director of Corporate Communications at Navistar. The company’s employees have proved themselves resilient in the face of crisis. “Our people are survivors,” she says.

Navistar is the proverbial plow that broke the plains. The 180-year-old Illinois-based company evolved from International Harvester, the iconic brand that modernized American agriculture under its founder, Cyrus McCormick. But tough times led it to sell off its agricultural business to Tenneco Case in the 1980s and rebrand as Navistar, a truck and engine company.

More recently, Navistar took bold steps to leapfrog competitors and meet more stringent US emission standards – and failed dramatically. In less than a year, the company cycled through three CEOs. Massive warranty costs tied to quality issues plagued the brand. Add to the mix a restructuring program that cut 10 percent of 18,000 jobs worldwide, and you have the full bleak picture.

Hartenberger says the company worked hard to keep its people motivated amid its most recent crisis. “We needed every employee to focus urgently on what was required – and at a level of detail. It wasn’t enough to get people to do the right things,” she says, “we needed to drive belief and help people understand exactly what the stakes were and that our work would pay off.”

Navistar focused on key leadership segments – the top 250 executives and 1,000 senior managers –

lawyer. At one point, my manager was also involved, but he soon dropped out.” To judge whether the company has succeeded in communicating with employees, Kirkpatrick uses a litmus test. “I go back to a simple thing I call the ‘backyard barbecue test.’ If an associate goes home and he’s in his backyard and his neighbor is barbecuing over there, and asks him about some bit of news about Toyota, he knows how to answer it.”

Professor Coombs was impressed with the way employees stayed loyal through the crisis. “Toyota employees consistently expressed support for the company throughout the recall. They stood with the company,” he says.

Losing employees is one of the big risks in a crisis, but that didn’t happen at Toyota. “It was the real strength of the company and it goes back to the sort of family feel that Toyota has,” says Kirkpatrick.

getting them to drive engagement with smaller teams. Employee ambassadors, in turn, were drawn from smaller-scale, open forums and webcasts with leaders, including CEO Troy Clarke.

Hartenberger emphasizes the importance of visual tools. “We created a dashboard that literally looked like one in our trucks,” she says. “It was about keeping goals and metrics front and center.” Employees are crucial brand ambassadors during a crisis, “Our employees are the face of Navistar to our dealers, our suppliers, and our customers – the population of critical stakeholders that had lost faith in us.”

Hartenberger says CEO Clarke “tries to make the emotional appeal to people about working fast and working hard, that we are saving an iconic, 180-year-old company ... helping them understand that this is a fight worth fighting.”

ILLUSTRATIONS: JESSE LEFKOWITZ



RULES OF THE ROAD

There are some basic rules to mobilizing employees in a crisis:

- Emotions run high during a crisis. Don’t leave it to your employees to interpret the facts. Tell them everything you can in clear, straightforward language. Where confidentiality or disclosure requirements limit what you can say, be as up front as you can.
- One size does not fit all. Think carefully about where your employees work, their job types, and how they interact with key stakeholders to shape and prioritize your efforts. And don’t forget retirees.
- Monitor the media and quickly correct misinformation. Regrettably, some employees are more trusting of the media than their company for information about what’s going on because of a lack of transparency or a news vacuum. Don’t be that company.
- As with Toyota’s *Fast Facts* and Navistar’s “dashboard,” crisis teams should have dedicated channels they use to keep employees informed.
- Consider the company’s social media policy during a crisis. Simply forbidding employees from using social media can be counterproductive. Employees can be a positive, authentic, trusted voice in a crisis, providing valuable support. Given clear guidance and ample information they can help prevent rumors and damage to the brand. Not only that, if you explain the rationale behind this policy, people will feel engaged and you could well mobilize a powerful army of brand ambassadors. ♦

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