



Hezron Insights
Connecting Brands with Audiences

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A PR Guide to Transforming Crises into Opportunities with Effective Messaging

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Welcome Message



About Hezron Insights

No matter your experience, there's always something new to learn and ways to improve. "Hezron Insights" provides you with the tools and resources to elevate your Public Relations, Leadership, and Life Skills.

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A PR Guide to Transforming Crises into Opportunities with Effective Messaging

You value your customers, but let's face it—some can be a thorn in your flesh.

Whether it's constant complaints, unrealistic demands, or a tendency to overlook the bigger picture, dealing with difficult customers is an inevitable part of running a business.

But has your company ever plunged into a potential crisis, expecting the worst from these challenging customers, only for them to offer you solutions instead?

Achieving such unexpected outcomes requires effective messaging.



My Story

Sometime back, a company I worked for faced relentless attacks from bloggers who spread a blend of falsehoods and exaggerated claims, tarnishing our reputation. While some issues were beyond our control, others stemmed from our customers' actions. As the saying goes, "The customer is always right."

Imagine a customer you served over 50 years ago returns today to collect some critical documents they never picked up. Could you provide them within a day or two? Probably not. It could take days, weeks, or even months, given that operations were manual back then.

In response to the bloggers, a crisis communication team was swiftly assembled to develop a counter-strategy. After an hour-long meeting, the team agreed on the need for a response but debated the method, tone, and delivery channel.

In crisis communication, the type of response is critical and can include apology, denial, corrective action, justification, silence, or evading responsibility, among others. Quick decision-making in such moments is always crucial.

In this guide, I'll outline how we navigated negative publicity, sharing the steps I took and the lessons I learned.

Press Statements in Crisis Communication

Press statements are vital tools in shaping the narrative, dispelling misinformation, and reassuring the public. A well-crafted press statement can address concerns, clarify facts, and provide essential information without admitting liability.

However, some companies fear such statements might draw more attention to the issue, potentially exacerbating the situation. The last thing any company wants is to appear as if they are admitting liability before a proper investigation is concluded. Yet, silence can be equally dangerous, as it may be perceived as an admission of guilt.

Whichever way, your goose is cooked. The question to ask is: Which is the lesser evil?

In our case, a response was our lesser evil.



Message Design: The Power of Framing

Customers often aren't aware of the challenges a company faces in its operations, and understandably, no company wants to reveal all its internal struggles. This is where PR specialists come into play, using the opportunity to connect with clients through storytelling.

Framing is crucial—presenting information in a way that highlights certain aspects while downplaying others. This can significantly influence how your audience interprets your message, the emotions they feel, and the decisions they make.

In my journalism class, I learned that a good story should connect with the audience's personal feelings, inspire sympathy, offer hope, address both real and imagined threats, reflect on struggles, evoke happiness, and encourage a shift in perspectives.

To achieve these goals, we followed these FIVE steps to tailor our messaging:



Step 1: Scenario Setting

We began by painting a clear picture of the staff who are directly serving clients. These employees often work long hours, extending beyond their scheduled shifts, are constantly on the move, and are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of clients. Some juggle multiple tasks simultaneously—answering calls while attending to online queries, all in a bid to provide the best possible service under immense pressure.



Message Extract:

A visit by this reporter paints a vivid picture: staff constantly on phone calls talking to clients, printers humming non-stop, and browsers being refreshed as another group of staff check for incoming email requests.

"Here it's all about serving clients. When I report to work at 7:30 a.m. and sit at my desk, I only lift my head at 6:00 p.m. when the queue finally flattens," recalls one officer.

Goals

- **Creates a Relatable Narrative:** By highlighting the team's daily struggles and unwavering dedication, the messaging effectively demonstrates the company's resolve to manage the crisis. Stressing the long hours and persistent efforts reinforces the company's deep commitment to its clients.
- **Clarifies Reasons for Delays or Limitations:** By vividly describing the surge in client interactions and the ongoing attempts to address them, the scenario sets a realistic picture of the challenges. This helps manage client expectations, reducing the potential for frustration by explaining the causes of any delays or service interruptions.
- **Showcases Commitment and Hard Work:** By showcasing the team's daily challenges and tireless dedication, the messaging effectively conveys the company's determination to navigate the crisis. Emphasizing the extra hours and unwavering efforts underscores the company's strong commitment to serving its clients.
- **Enhances Transparency and Builds Trust:** Offering an inside look into the company's operational challenges demonstrates a commitment to transparency. This openness promotes trust and credibility, showing that the company is not only being forthright about the difficulties it faces but is also actively working to resolve them.

Step 2: Origin of the Crisis and Opportunities

Next, we addressed the root of the crisis and highlighted the opportunities it presented. This situation showcased the high demand for our services, indicating the strong trust our clients have in us.

Message Extract:

From as early as 6:30 a.m., a steady stream of individuals can be seen lining up outside the examination offices, eager to collect their certificates, and transcripts, or have their academic documents authenticated.

"We are experiencing an unprecedented influx of clients. In a single day, we attend to as many as 200 people in person, and when combined with online requests, we're handling close to 600 clients daily," said one officer.

"We used to serve fewer than 20 clients in a day. The increased volume means we often have to work extra hours, sometimes even over the weekend, to meet the growing demand," he continued. According to CEO, the company is under immense pressure to serve its clients.

"We have never encountered such a large number of clients seeking services simultaneously. Many of these applicants are either attending job interviews or traveling abroad, and we cannot afford to let our alumni miss these opportunities," he noted.

Goals

- **Builds Empathy and Understanding:** By describing the unprecedented influx of clients and the strain it places on the company, the messaging helps clients and stakeholders understand the current challenges. This narrative encourages empathy, making it easier for clients to appreciate the hard work of the staff and to be more patient during service delays.
- **Manages Expectations and Reduces Frustration:** Clearly outlining the sharp increase in demand and the steps taken to handle it, such as working extra hours and weekends, helps manage client expectations. When clients are aware of the reasons behind delays, they are less likely to become frustrated or feel neglected, as they understand the situation is extraordinary.
- **Demonstrates Commitment to Service:** By highlighting the dedication of staff who go above and beyond to manage the high volume of requests, the messaging reassures clients that the company is making every possible effort to meet their needs despite the challenging circumstances.
- **Strengthens Credibility and Trust:** Being transparent about the surge in demand and the resulting pressure shows honesty and openness, which builds credibility. It signals to clients that the company is facing the issue head-on and is committed to resolving it. This kind of transparency promotes trust and confidence in the company's ability to manage the crisis effectively.

Step 3: Addressing Customer Contribution to the Crisis

Next, we addressed the root of the crisis and highlighted the opportunities it presented. This situation showcased the high demand for our services, indicating the strong trust our clients have in us.

Message Extract:

...a client who sought company's services in 1971, arrived to collect her documents. The retrieval process was lengthy, as officers combed through numerous cabinets spread across different storage locations. Shortly afterward, another client arrived, he said he sought services in 1981 but never collected his documents.



Goals

- **Provides Context for Delays:** By presenting a vivid scenario where officers search through decades-old records stored in various locations, the messaging helps clients understand the complexities involved in retrieving historical documents. This context helps set realistic expectations and explains why some delays are unavoidable, thereby reducing frustration.
- **Humanizes the Challenge:** Describing specific cases, such as a client who sought services as far back as 1971, makes the situation more tangible and relatable. It shows that the company is dealing with unique, challenging circumstances and conveys the human effort required to manage these complex requests.
- **Highlights Dedication and Effort:** The scenario illustrates the painstaking efforts of the staff in combing through extensive archives to serve long-standing clients. This demonstrates the company's commitment to resolving even the most difficult cases, which can enhance its reputation for going the extra mile to provide service.
- **Builds Transparency and Trust:** By openly sharing details about the retrieval process and challenges faced in handling old records, the company demonstrates honesty and transparency. This openness can help build trust with clients by showing that the company is being upfront about its limitations while actively working to address them.

Step 4: Contextualizing Historical Issues

We acknowledged the historical challenges that contributed to the situation, particularly the slow pace of digitalization. For a company like ours, which has been around for over nine decades, it's understandable that not all records would be immediately accessible in digital formats. We used this as an opportunity to explain the complexities of transitioning from paper-based to digital systems, appealing to customers to appreciate these challenges.



Message Extract:

The CEO explained that due to the manual storage of documents over the years, it may take clients, especially those who utilized the company's services many years ago, several days, weeks, or even months to obtain those documents, depending on how quickly their records can be retrieved.

Goals

- **Manages Client Expectations:** By clearly outlining the challenges of manually stored documents and the potential time frames for retrieval, the messaging helps set realistic expectations. Clients are more likely to be patient and understanding when they know that retrieving older records could take longer due to the manual processes involved.
- **Demonstrates Complexity and Effort:** The scenario emphasizes that retrieving documents is not a simple task, particularly for older records. It highlights the effort and diligence required from staff to locate and process these requests, thereby showing the company's dedication to resolving issues, even when faced with logistical challenges.
- **Builds Transparency and Trust:** Providing specific reasons for delays—such as the historical manual storage of documents—demonstrates the company's transparency about its current limitations. This openness promotes trust among clients, as they see that the company is being honest and upfront about the situation.
- **Emphasizes Commitment to Improvement:** By acknowledging the current situation with manual document storage, the messaging can thinly underline a commitment to improving processes in the future. It shows that while the company is handling the challenges of its legacy systems, there is awareness and potentially an intention to modernize, which can reassure clients about future service enhancements.

Step 5: Highlighting Company Achievements

Finally, we had to toot our own horn and highlight our successes in addressing customer needs. This was the perfect moment to talk about our automation of services, making customer data more accessible and reducing wait times. Additionally, we hinted about our big plans including decentralization of services, which will undoubtedly enhance efficiency in service delivery.

Message Extract:

The company is making steps to decentralize some critical services to ease congestion.



Goals

- **Highlights Proactive Solutions:** By describing the steps being taken to decentralize services, the messaging demonstrates that the company is not just aware of the problem but is actively implementing solutions. This reassures clients that their concerns are being addressed effectively.
- **Reassures Stakeholders with Tangible Changes:** The scenario setting provides specific, concrete actions that the company is taking to improve service delivery.
- **Reduces Frustration by Offering Immediate Benefits:** The scenario highlights immediate improvements that will directly benefit clients, such as reduced wait times for documents. This can help alleviate frustration and anxiety among clients who may have experienced delays in the past, showing that the company values their time and is working to make their experience smoother.
- **Enhances Perception of Organizational Adaptability:** By explaining the decision to decentralize services, the messaging portrays the company as flexible and responsive to emerging challenges. This adaptability can enhance the organization's reputation as being forward-thinking and capable of evolving its processes to better serve its clients, strengthening overall trust and confidence.

Impact of the Message

When we published the 700-word article and shared it online, it generated significant engagement, attracting numerous comments, shares, likes, and debate.

From a communication standpoint, the strategy was largely successful. Most clients appreciated the steps the company took to address their concerns.

The key message I gathered from all the discussions was that significant progress was being made to resolve their issues. The emotional appeal also proved effective, as many customers expressed sympathy for the overstretched employees and even suggested that the company hire additional staff to alleviate the workload.

One client commented: "It takes time to get some services, however, the institution remains my company of choice again and again."
In the end, the crisis was effectively managed, as clients were reassured and well-informed.

Sampled Client Comments



Decentralisation of services will solve your problems.



Kudos for listening to customer feedback.



Very good news for clients.



Good move, that was long overdue.



Decentralization is the key!!

Sampled Client Comments



Decentralization is mandatory to ease the congestion. The company should also recruit additional staff to assist with the process.



Explore providing those services online.



Good move CEO, indeed some clients have been stranded, some even lose job opportunities upcountry just because of documents that take time.



There is no one in the world who like long que this shows INCOPETENCY.

Next Steps

- **Communicating the Challenge:** Four days after the initial crisis surfaced, the company released a message titled "Uncollected Documents Threaten Company's Working Space." The message stressed that clients' failure to collect their documents had forced the company to convert every available room into storage space. This communication not only highlighted the growing challenge but also subtly placed the responsibility on clients to collect their documents in a timely manner.
- **Announcing a Solution and New Investments:** In the same message, the company seized the opportunity to share positive news about its recent acquisition of digital storage facilities. This move demonstrated proactive steps toward modernizing its operations and reducing future storage issues, thereby reassuring stakeholders that the company was investing in long-term solutions.
- **Engaging Directly with Clients:** A week later, the company set up a booth at a community event, offering clients the chance to apply for and collect their documents on the spot. This hands-on approach directly addressed the backlog issue along with promoting goodwill and positive engagement with the community.

Next Steps

- **Behind-the-Scenes Efforts and a Major Milestone:** Throughout these public-facing activities, the company continued working diligently behind the scenes to clear the backlog. Exactly one month into the crisis, the company announced that about 11,000 documents were ready for collection, with the service now decentralized as previously promised. This achievement was a significant milestone in the crisis response.
- **Shifting the Narrative and Earning Media Coverage:** The company's proactive and transparent handling of the situation began to shift the public narrative in its favor. This positive change drew the attention of major media outlets, including the state-owned Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and other prominent channels, which covered the company's efforts to resolve the issue.
- The turning point came when a satisfied client posted a thank-you note, praising the company's actions. Interestingly, the blogger who had initially sparked the crisis reposted this note, indicating a change in tone. This repost was followed by a series of positive comments, suggesting that both the blogger and clients had effectively signed a 'ceasefire'.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Transparency is a Double-Edged Sword:** Transparency, when used correctly, can promote trust and engagement. It's crucial to balance openness with strategic messaging to maintain credibility while protecting the brand's reputation.
2. **Storytelling as a PR Tool:** Humanizing the brand through storytelling made complex issues more relatable. This approach resonated emotionally with customers, making them more receptive to our message.
3. **Proactive Problem-Solving:** Using the crisis as an opportunity to highlight historical challenges and ongoing improvements demonstrated a proactive approach, shifting the narrative in our favor.
4. **Customer Involvement in Solutions:** Engaging customers in the problem-solving process not only helped address their concerns but also reinforced our commitment to listening and responding to their needs.
5. **Managing Mixed Reactions:** Not all customers will be satisfied, even with the best efforts. It's important to maintain a consistent and positive message while being open to feedback, even when it's critical.

Conclusion

Every crisis presents an opportunity for PR to shine, and the strength of a PR team lies in its ability to turn these challenges into strategic actions that not only counter negative publicity but also enhance the company's image.

While effective communication can provide a crucial reprieve by addressing clients' concerns and protecting the company's reputation, it must be coupled with real, back-end improvements to be sustainable. In this case, the company's strategic communication and proactive engagement turned a potential crisis into an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to clients, transparency, and adaptability.

By taking ownership of the problem, offering practical solutions, and effectively using both online and offline platforms to communicate progress, the company successfully navigated the crisis, earned positive media coverage, and restored stakeholder confidence. This highlights those genuine improvements in addressing customer issues are essential for reinforcing PR efforts and building long-term trust.



About the Author

Hi there! I'm Hezron Ochiel, an avid storyteller and a global peak coach with a talent for blending strategic communications, best practices, and life skills into actionable strategies that drive extraordinary success. For over 15 years, I have thrived in guiding startups, large corporations, and individuals in growing their brands. I began my career as a journalist, gaining experience in creative and technical writing.

My extensive brand storytelling experience led me to the Corporate Communications and Public Relations industry, where I have been a catalyst for change.

As an experienced writer and commentator, I have appeared in many global publications, including Reuters.com, TheNewHumanitarian.org, Standardmedia.co.ke, TheGuardian.com, and one of my proudest achievements is leading a media advocacy campaign with Amref.org that culminated in the recognition of Community Health Workers (CHWs), now called Community Health Promoters, within Kenya's formal health workforce.

Additionally, I have elevated health journalism in Africa by pioneering the Health Communication and Journalism program at Amref.ac.ke and establishing the Africa Media Network on Health to spearhead media advocacy across the continent.

I have contributed to more than 50% growth of global brands such as Amref.org, HIV-Free Generation, Ichooselife, global, Goodcheckup.com, and KMTC.ac.ke through impactful PR and social media campaigns.

In 2023, as part of my Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts, I launched 'Hezron's Weekly Insights' and 'Hezron Insights' to provide resources and tools for startups, large corporations, and individuals seeking to grow their brands.

My best-selling book, "Strategic Insights: A Practical Guide for Excelling in Public Relations," highlights my commitment to sharing expertise and driving success.



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