

Increasing the impact of business communication during a crisis

 By [Daniel Munslow](#)

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When an organisation faces a crisis, you expect it to act quickly to mitigate the reputational risk through strategic business communication tactics.

You would expect the communications team to act as strategic advisors to the organisation's leadership, helping them to address the issues head on, thereby nipping the crisis in the bud as quickly as possible. Then, they would swiftly move on to a resilience strategy to help rebuild and enhance the organisation's brand post the crisis.

I've had the opportunity to work with several organisations, locally and internationally, on their crisis communication forecasting and strategies, as well as execution. Some organisations do it better than others. The two primary actions successful organisations have taken in managing crises of significant severity are to react quickly and transparently – the former is the result of extensive planning and preparation work. The tactics to do so vary depending on the situation, and there is by no means a one-size-fits-all approach.

For the past 14 months, automotive manufacturer Ford has been faced with the escalating Ford Kuga debacle in South Africa. How did they do, in terms of proactively managing their reputation?

Well, if we acid test the principles of (1) acknowledge, (2) set the record straight and clarify facts, and (3) disclose what is being done about it, we find that Ford managed to get virtually nothing right. Their communication was aloof and unsympathetic; shared only when pushed to do so; there is a disconnect between the brand and its customers around this crisis; and there appeared to be almost no ongoing brand risk assessment to address real issues in real time (It is imperative to work out damage versus probability factors). If there had been, no doubt the crisis would have been long over.



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Let's analyse some of the key components from a crisis communications perspective:

Social media

Organisations need to take social media more seriously when managing a crisis. In fact, in general, companies need to

independently assess how well they are *actually* doing on social media. Internally, many give themselves a pat on the back. In reality, customers often question the disconnect between what is being posted on social media and what customers' daily experiences really are.

In Ford's case, they proactively continued to promote posts, when a majority of comments about otherwise positive campaigns were echoing the public's (and customers') frustrations about the Kuga situation. These overshadowed any efforts by the social media team to move forward, and instead amplified the negative sentiments in the marketplace.

Social media teams need to be more empowered to address real issues in real time. Looking at the social media feed, there is a growing tendency to simply copy and paste generic and almost meaningless responses telling people to 'get in touch'. Here is an example:

"Hi 'X', thank you for getting in touch. Can you inbox your contact number with the details of your concern listed here and our team will be in touch." [Source: Ford SA [Facebook page](#)]

In reality, after the 100th copy/paste, you really do question the point of this. Guys, it's not about eyeballs, it's about engagement. It's about converting negative sentiments into positive ones through constructive experiences.

Tone

The overall tone seems to have left the public questioning if Ford really cares about its customers and about customer service, and whether it truly puts safety first. Especially considering some of the newspapers' headlines, such as "no brand is above the law; national consumer body forces Ford SA to recall Kuga SUVs that burst into flames".

"Ford SA is simply arrogant. I bought a new Focus recently; which had numerous faults to render it a factory default. From engine warning lights, to snapping fan belt, to alarm going off unceremoniously – the list is endless. Eagle Ford Midrand failed to help me. Ford SA was simply not interested. The bloody car is even out of warranty now. I am sure I will never spend a cent buying any other Ford vehicle in my life." [Source: Ford SA [Facebook page](#)]

It is of critical importance to identify the key messages and tone you want to convey, and make sure all stakeholders in the value chain stick to it to prevent comments like the one above. It's actually so easy to engage stakeholders when you mean what you say!

Operations

A series of social media comments really brought home the sentiment that consumers don't feel Ford was genuinely prepared to handle the unfolding crisis – operationally, or otherwise.

In reality, when dealing with a crisis, an organisation needs to have a core crisis communication team, consisting of the most senior communicators, as well as subject matters experts (SMEs) who are called in based on the scenario, and almost

always the legal and risk teams. These are determined in the forecasting plan, as well as in the issues management matrix.

In the planning phase, it would have been identified that customers would be required to engage the call centre. Therefore, an SME from the call centre would be included to ensure they are able to cascade the key messages to customers, and operationally plan to ensure they have the capacity to address the inbound calls.

"I received an email from you on the 01/01/17 relating to my first message about my cooling system using so much coolant saying that a friendly case manager would contact me. On the 09/01/17 I replied to your email to inform you that no-one had contacted me. To date I am still waiting. Hmmm." [Source: Ford SA [Facebook page](#)]

Customer concerns

Then, a sound issues management matrix would have clearly identified that the resale value of the Kuga would be affected and would impact customers as a direct result of the vehicle defect. Social media comments indicate a lack of response from Ford, at this stage, in so far as these issues are concerned.

"Mine is currently at the dealer! Losing big value on my car! Also have a problem with "key not detected" and car then refusing to start! I'm still in shock after I heard what the dealer want to offer me on my Kuga selling if back to Ford" [Source: Ford SA [Facebook page](#)]

"What will Ford do to remedy the value lost on the kugas? How will we recoup our money that will be lost on future trade ins ? This is something that Ford needs to be held accountable for. Honest, hardworking people trusted in your brand and invested our hard earned money in these cars!!!" [Source: Ford SA [Facebook page](#)]

These are in fact excellent opportunities to rebuild the damage Ford has done to its brand through its lack of communication. While the crisis is underway, they can certainly build a sound resilience plan to move forward and include these issues.

Leadership

Where was the leadership and why wasn't the executive team more visible? People want to know that those at the helm empathise with their customers and are doing everything they can. When someone dies in a vehicle you make, you get the top people to address the real issues head on. It might be uncomfortable, but that's the role of leadership – the address the difficult situations.

Think of the Emirates example and principles, when one of its B777s crash-landed in Dubai International Airport in August 2016. Within hours, if not less, the chairman of the airline was filmed acknowledging the situation and expressing his focus on safety for the airline. No fancy branding was visible in the background – it was a well-prepared scenario, and everyone knew it was about the message and what it symbolised.

We all know and accept that things can go wrong. I don't think anyone is above willing to accept that machines can fail... but then it's up to the brand to take ownership.

Ford should have nipped the crisis in the bud when they could – now it's crisis control stations...

Media engagement

A company would have wanted a front-page headline that says "Ford acts fast" or "Ford puts safety first". Instead, the vast majority of headlines since the recall this month have been the opposite – here are some:

- Now other Ford models ablaze
- Figgo and Focus owners say they cars also caught fire

- Ford is pathetic; it fails to go further
- Slam uncaring dealers

The media are a partner, working proactively with them through an open-door policy secure a lot of good faith. Shutting them out is never wise. **In conclusion**

Ultimately, what happened here is that Ford was too reactive and left the media and consumers to control the message and perceptions about the brand... and we've seen the backlash. Had they been proactive, recalled the vehicles on their own accords months ago, acknowledged the severity of the situation and demonstrated compassion and a willingness to work with customers; things would be different today.

The lesson for crisis communication: as a communicator, you need to be a strategic advisor – give the right advice and get the leadership to buy in to your advice.

Be agile, and react quickly. Be sincere. Be authentic. Be transparent.

Do not dismiss customers or make them feel as though your profits come first. Use a tone that shows your stakeholders that you live by your brand promise. If you don't – you'll risk being the next Ford Kuga communication scenario: it will be like reaching for a torch when the lights go out, only to discover that the batteries are dead.

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