

# The importance of choosing the right spokesperson

 By [Estelle Nagel](#)

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Whenever I conduct crisis communication training with clients, I always open with the story of Tony Hayward. Hayward, as you will recall, was the CEO of BP at the time of the oil spill in the Mexican Gulf. He made several unfortunate faux pas from the get-go - *The New York Times* reported that when the news broke, he asked fellow BP executives, "What the hell did we do to deserve this?" (video)

That was, of course, nothing compared to the comments he would openly make to the media. He famously told *The Guardian* that "the Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume."

He told another newspaper that the "environmental impact of this disaster is likely to be very, very modest." And that same day, when asked about whether he was able to sleep at night in light of the oil spill's disastrous effects, he replied, "Of course I can." Eventually, he went on to apologise. Sort of. I quote him directly: "We're sorry for the massive disruption it's caused their lives. There's no one who wants this over more than I do. I would like my life back."

A month later, he was photographed participating in a luxury yacht race.

Needless to say, BP came under heavy fire and Hayward was shipping off to some obscure BP office in the Middle East, urged (we would assume) to never speak to the media again.

## Celebrity spokespeople

Companies are seldom sunk by a crisis event itself - often these things are made or broken by the way they conduct themselves with the media. After all, the media reports what they say and how they say it - and we are left to make up our own minds.

Recently we saw a US Public Service Announcement come under fire when a YouTube prankster decided to poke fun at their choice of celebrity spokespeople.

The "Demand a Plan" campaign showed several A-list stars (including Jamie Foxx, Cameron Diaz, Reese Witherspoon and Jeremy Renner) beg for stricter gun controls. The YouTube video spliced the solemn announcement with clips from several violent movies the spokespeople have recently starred in. When Foxx condemns the Columbine high school shooting, the video cuts to scenes of him mowing down bad guys in several of his action movies and as Witherspoon begs the question, "how many more colleges?" the video cuts to a scene of her shooting a man in the head at point-blank range.

The video was featured on Fox News and in international press with most commentators applauding the creator for exposing the "hypocrisy" of the campaign.

What should have been a serious appeal for restrictions, in light of the recent Sandy Hook shooting, has become a public mockery. The message is very clearly lost. Perhaps the campaigners should have given a little more thought to their choice of spokesperson - if there is one thing that the public is generally quite unforgiving of, it is probably hypocrisy, whether it's real or perceived.

There are definite steps you should take to ensure you pick the right company spokesperson.

## **1. Chose someone who can communicate**

This is not necessarily the most senior person in your company. In fact, it doesn't even have to be someone from your company at all.

Tony Hayward is a prime example of a CEO who should never have been allowed in front of a camera. They would not have been worse off had they hired a competent PR spokesperson or put a more media-savvy senior executive in charge of media relations. Choose a person who can get key points across, and do it well.

## **2. Always undergo media training**

And that goes for everyone in the company. The media is not out to get you, but social media means that whatever is said is captured, distributed and read within minutes, and it will remain online forever. Make sure that you have a crisis communication toolkit assembled so that everyone knows who is allowed to speak, what they are allowed to say and when. A hapless employee answering questions over the phone will instantly turn that person into a spokesperson, and you may not like what comes out.

## **3. Be available**

A good spokesperson is anyone who can communicate passion and calm throughout the entire crisis. He or she can't be locked in board meetings or switch off their phones. Remember the Pick n Pay "poison crisis" of 2003? You probably don't, because they minimised the impact drastically. They gave the media hourly updates. The directors were constantly on camera, sympathising, addressing concerns. Maybe they didn't come out entirely unscathed, but they learnt an important lesson: public perception will either be dictated by you, or by someone else. It's better if it

comes from you.

#### 4. Pick a sympathetic but calm figure

Part of the reason Tony Hayward did not hold up well in public was because of his self-concerned tone. He showed no concern for the people who died or the environmental impact of the Gulf Oil Spill, he was purely concerned with how it affected him, or so it seemed. A good spokesperson finds the connection between passion, calm and sympathy. Someone who can communicate the fact that the company understands they made an error or inconvenienced or harmed the public, but that they are serious about rectifying the problem and are in control of the situation.

We're living in an age where customers are more skeptical - and more connected and empowered - than ever before. As Warren Buffett said, "It takes 20 years to build a reputation, and 20 minutes to lose it."

Make sure that the person(s) appointed to be the face of your company are able to keep that reputation intact.

#### ABOUT ESTELLE NAGEL

Estelle Nagel has worked in PR and marketing for 6 years and is currently PR Account Manager at DUO Marketing, a marketing and communications firm focusing on the ICT sector in South Africa.

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