

Spin city: how do you weather a PR crisis—and come out on top? - Smarts

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WHEN YOU'RE FACED WITH a public relations crisis, it's important to be on top of your game. We posed three PR nightmares to public relations experts and asked what they'd do.

(1) You discover your company's PR director has been publishing falsely optimistic information about the company's profits.

Says Jonathan Bernstein, of Bernstein Crisis Management LLC in Monrovia, California: "Assuming the PR director has done this willfully and hence is legally liable, announce ASAP that:

* Inaccurate information has been released.

* The company deeply regrets what has happened and is determined to make amends.

* The person responsible has been fired.

* The company is cooperating with any investigation.

* An accurate restatement of the previously false information will be released imminently."

Going forward, Bernstein warns, you'll have to convince the investment community that systems are in place to prevent this from recurring.

(2) Your restaurant's chef is caught on hidden camera coughing into a customer's food; the film ends up on the local news.

Says Bill Furlow of Furlow Corporate Communications in Tustin, California: "If the employee was shown intentionally doing [this], I would fire him or her immediately. The restaurant owners should not refuse to go on camera as part of the story; rather, they should acknowledge being appalled at the behavior and pledge to do everything in their power to prevent something similar from happening in the future. [Also] announce they are bringing in a food-safety expert to provide mandatory training for the restaurant staff."

(3) Your retail store's Hispanic employees sue you for discrimination, then picket outside your store during business hours. (We're assuming you are not guilty of the allegations).

Says Ron Dresner of Your PR Department LLC in Farmington, Connecticut: "Let your lawyer evaluate the situation. Talk to police about picketing rights--your rights and [the protesters'] rights. Create a one-sheet for employees and customers, explaining that this claim has no validity. Refer all inquiries [to one person]. For the press, create a little more aggressive press release than the one-sheet."

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