

Recent headlines provide a lesson for hospitals

by Nancy Cawley Jean



I'm a big proponent of taking responsibility for your actions. It is a practice I try to live by, and I expect the same from friends and colleagues, as well as companies. I think this is especially important in a crisis, and I truly believe it can make or break a company's brand management.

Social media provides us with incredibly useful tools for doing just that. While some hospitals are still reluctant to break into this medium for a host of reasons, recent headlines are providing lessons in how these tools can help you through a crisis, and are providing some important lessons for us all.

For example, right now there's a brand in big trouble--BP.

We all know about the oil spill in the Gulf. The news is everywhere. This week, Tony Hayward, the CEO of BP, was talking up the media circuit, appearing on national shows like "Today" and "The Early Show". Not only did he not take responsibility for the spill, he even went so far as to say that it wasn't his company's fault.

Even though the company is doing the right thing by addressing the crisis, from a public relations perspective, Hayward ruined any message that might have come after that. Although BP's social media team is attempting to do their part by tweeting stories about the company's efforts under the sea and about the hotline it has set up, it all falls short in trying to save the brand because there's no responsibility assumed or stated.

An apology and accepting responsibility for an error goes a long way, whether it be because of an oil spill or a medical error. By starting there, you have much more of a chance to redeem your reputation.

In a previous post, I noted that recognizing a lingering issue publicly is the right thing to do in a crisis situation; doing so through public channels like social media can go a long way toward repairing a brand. However, while BP's faux pas is pretty clear here, there's another situation that is not so clear cut. It's that of blogger and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center CEO Paul Levy, who has built quite a reputation around being transparent.

Initially, he seemed to be practicing anything but transparency with regards to an incident involving a personal relationship with a fellow employee. I'm a big fan of Levy's, and could understand his reluctance to air his dirty laundry in the social media realm, but it seemed to be out-of-character for him to avoid talking about a problem, regardless of how personal it was. That, in itself, was a bit jarring.

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Earlier this week, however, Levy issued two apologies: one through a statement distributed to the media, and another, a more personal apology to the readers of his blog. While Levy, no doubt, will still face much scrutiny for his actions (and especially for waiting so long to comment on them), his personal apology to blog readers already has produced a fair amount of support via comments to the post.

Personally, I've been part of quite a number of crisis situations in the hospital setting, as well. I understand how hard it is to publicly admit a mistake. That usually comes in the form of a well-written, carefully planned media statement. The world of social media is part of the follow-up, and in most cases, the social media component includes what is being done as a result, like a video message from the president, or correcting blatantly inaccurate comments in social channels. I think there are several reasons for this. Social media is still fairly new and represents a bit of the unknown. For most, there's no comfort level with social media. And of course, "We're sorry," isn't often part of a brand's standard media statement language!

What we have to remember, however, is that through social media, word now spreads like wildfire, and you must be prepared to respond if your brand is threatened. Rumors abounded last month after a faulty virus update from McAfee disabled our entire system's computers. The following tweets show not only how rumors can easily--and quickly--distort the truth, but also how they can be quickly addressed if you're monitoring for this information.

- @GetWired retweeted this from @vmyths: McAfee rules out cyber-terror re: yesterday's antivirus attack. Death @ RI hospital a coincidence until proven otherwise.
- We responded with: @vmyths Good morning. I can assure you that no deaths occurred as result of yesterday's McAfee issue. Patients were safe throughout.
- He then posted the following: @RIHospital asserts "patients were safe throughout" the McAfee antivirus attack last week. Don't get duped by urban legends!

With what we know about brand management and the power of social media, when an opportunity arises to take responsibility for a situation, I'd suggest the best practice might be to whittle down those media statements to a simple message: an apology that will fit into 140 characters. That tweet might be the one that's heard around the world.

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