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[TradeOnlyToday](#) > [Columns & Blogs](#) > [Marketing Insight](#) > Each needing spin control, Tiger blew it, Dave aced it

Each needing spin control, Tiger blew it, Dave aced it

Posted on January 25th, 2014 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



Don't come after me with a club! I promise there's something this industry can learn from the Tiger Woods public relations debacle.

There are precious few who haven't heard about or read about Tiger's fast and furious fall from grace. One PR miscue after another has derailed the career of one of the world's greatest athletes, damaging his carefully crafted brand and public persona forever.

Is he still the best golfer in the history of the sport? No doubt. Will fans continue to follow him (and the game) when he emerges from his self-imposed exile? Absolutely. But has his wholesome, all-American image been irrevocably tarnished? Unequivocally yes. He will never reclaim the untouchable brand he once owned in the minds of an adoring public. And the saddest thing is it didn't have to be that way.

The news broke on the Friday following Thanksgiving when our most famous Orlando resident slammed his Escalade into a fire hydrant and a neighbor's tree around 2:30 a.m. The fact that his wife, Elin, happened to be holding a golf club, and the vehicle's window had been smashed to smithereens, fueled immediate speculation of a marital dispute. His cancellation of three police appointments and stubborn refusal to answer questions further fed the flames.

The long communications lapse was followed by an indignant statement on his Web site in which he decried media reports surrounding the mysterious incident as "false, malicious and irresponsible." He demanded privacy. Unfortunately, he didn't understand he had already lost control of the story.

Tiger should have struck while the iron was hot. At the outset, he should have analyzed all the potential outcomes. The heretofore master shaper of public opinion was naively clueless about the disaster that was beginning to envelop him. Since his first reported love affair had commanded front-page positioning in the tabloids earlier in the week, he should have sucked it up and gone public, admitting his mistakes, apologizing to his wife, family and fans, and asking for forgiveness and privacy while he dealt with his demons.

He needed to show genuine remorse. If there's one thing Americans are good at, it's forgiving their celebrities. Just look at the recent case of David Letterman, who handled his adulterous affair(s) with uncanny precision. He got ahead of the news and controlled the message. Embracing his trademark self-

effacing humor, he apologized publicly, avoiding what could have easily become a personal and TV ratings disaster.

While this strategy probably wouldn't have curbed the hailstorm of reported adulterous liaisons, it would have given Tiger an early measure of control and a better chance of swaying public sentiment and sympathy. Licking his wounds in private, while holed up in his mansion, left him wide open to a frontal global media assault, not to mention the avalanche of salacious jokes that shot through cyberspace faster than a Tiger Woods drive. The press and the public smelled blood and lusted for more. The media gallery positioned itself outside the gated Isleworth community for weeks, hunting for prey. As of early January, the elusive Tiger still hadn't been spotted.

As allegations of multiple infidelities began to mount, he posted yet another impersonal message on his Web site, apologizing for letting his family down and expressing regret for his transgressions – the same ones he earlier had vociferously denied. Only after they had been discovered did he admit to having faults and falling short of perfection. The message lacked sincerity and came far too late.

As days passed and more lurid details about his sexual dalliances unfolded, sponsors began reconsidering the initial support they had voiced. No longer did Tiger conjure up positive sentiment and the squeaky-clean, family-friendly image they – and the public – had bought into. Not surprisingly, several major sponsors have since abandoned him.

Tiger's PR was clearly not up to par.

What's the lesson to be learned?

If you ever find yourself facing problems that have potential public recriminations, remember the three Fs of crisis communications. Be FIRST to address your target audience. Take the offense rather than be caught in a defensive mode. Seize control of your message. Second, be FAST. Don't waste a moment. Ignore the problem at your own peril. Third, be FACTUAL. Avoid half-truths, omissions or lies. Be honest. That isn't to suggest you shouldn't confront the situation with your best game face, but avoid spin that can damage your credibility.

In my 30-plus years as a marketing and PR practitioner, I've counseled companies that have run into negative PR. Let's consider two tactics and their outcomes.

Client No. 1 had a product malfunction that was discovered in the field. The ramifications were potentially dangerous to users of the product. The client addressed the issue immediately. Members of the management team worked together to develop a strategic plan. Once the internal logistics were handled, a detailed communication plan was formulated. An advisory was sent to dealers explaining the situation in detail, instructing them how to handle and repair the problem. Regional sales managers followed up immediately with every dealer. In timely synchronization, a customized letter was mailed to all registered owners of this model, likewise advising them of the situation and confirming the company's commitment to fully resolving the issue at no expense to the customer. Instructions were provided along with a contact name and a toll-free number for those with additional questions or concerns. A press advisory was readied for response if inquiries were received. At significant expense, the problem was corrected. A survey followed to all affected owners. Customers were pleased by the manner and speed in which the issue was addressed and resolved. A potential public relations nightmare had been averted.

Client No. 2 was contacted by a disgruntled customer who demanded that his boat be replaced because of an alleged structural issue he claimed made his boat unsafe. The company paid for a survey of the

customer's boat, which determined it was structurally sound. However, the unhappy customer vented his anger on several boating Web sites, trashing the company and the product. The company, on advice from its attorney, chose not to respond. More dissatisfied customers joined the fray. Although we were the company's advertising/PR firm, we were never alerted to the situation until after it had festered online, without response, for weeks. When I asked why we hadn't been consulted, I was told the legal advice had prevailed. Weeks later, I was lunching with a publisher of a major boating magazine who asked why our client had "stuck its head in the sand" and had "failed to deal with their unhappy customers." He cited a large group of boat owners who had banded together and filed a lawsuit, details of which had been leaked to his publication.

In the end, the company won the legal battle (the suit was dropped), but in the process it lost valuable brand equity, market share, and the trust and goodwill of both the press and some customers, not to mention the dealers who were left to fight the problem alone.

I was debating this topic with good friend and PR veteran Mike Walker of the Walker Agency, and he reminded me of the Tylenol capsule poisoning fiasco in Chicago in 1982. "The minute the story broke, the company pulled everything off the shelves," says Walker. "By demonstrating this concern for its customers ... the company actually improved its reputation, and a brand was saved."

The moral of this column: If you're confronted with a potential PR calamity, grab the tiger by the tail.

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