



Tips for Disclosure on the Web Confirmed by Tire Companies under Fire

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NOVEMBER 8, 2000 -- Corporate public relations managers can learn a lesson from two leading tire companies about how to handle communications during a crisis when the pressure for information is on from media, shareholders and others, reports LeFile.Com (<http://lefile.com>), the online web management journal for executives.

Both Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company and Firestone have demonstrated the uniqueness of the corporate web site as a primary medium for putting out information fully, quickly and broadly, LeFile notes. This is in contrast to others who may issue a press release to the media and leave it to reporters to interpret and carry out the broad dissemination of information.

"Disclosure to the media remains essential," noted LeFile's editor William Dupuy, a long-time crisis management expert. "But doing that alone leaves the interpretation to others. Astute managements are waking up to the fact that their own corporate web site gives them world-wide 'broadcasting' capability and the ability to post their own messages in real time.

"The result is the fullest possible disclosure and the enhancement of the corporate web site as the one place for employees, shareholders, customers, suppliers as well as the public to visit for immediate, complete text of statements. It's like having your very own CNN channel."

From the time the Firestone-Ford tire recall issue hit the news in August, Firestone has been diligent about posting full text of press releases, summaries of Congressional testimony, details of data supplied to government investigators, speeches and customer communications on its web site -- www.firestone.com.

In contrast, Ford's corporate web site (www.ford.com) and numerous customer web sites (among them is www.fordvehicles.com) have carried far less information.

Goodyear, the latest tire manufacturer to be challenged in the media about the safety of some of its tires, answered the November 7th news reports with a quick response to the media followed a few hours later by posting on its corporate web site the complete statements to the press as well as a letter to customers and educational information regarding how tires are manufactured and should be maintained. The Goodyear site is www.goodyear.com.

"Whatever the final determination of the allegations against Firestone and Goodyear, their actions to communicate quickly and fully, especially on their web sites, should accord them a high level of confidence by their publics," Dupuy said.



Tips for Disclosure

LeFile offered these "tips" for corporate officers to follow when a crisis develops:

- (1) Assess the facts quickly. Determine what you know as fact and what you don't know. Begin preparing a position statement promptly. If you don't know the answers or need more time, say so.
- (2) Create top-level team leadership. The quick-response communications team must be led by the most senior officer and the chief communicator. Among the team members will be legal counsel, whose advice will be important but whose real work would come later if litigation occurs.
- (3) Don't hide. Confidence will be inspired by a face-it attitude. An "I don't know but will find out..." response is acceptable in the early stages of the crisis if the inquiries come as a surprise about an unknown issue. Follow up quickly, however, with a more thorough statement.
- (4) Run, don't walk, to be visible. Russian president Vladimir Putin acknowledges the political error he made by not going immediately to the scene of the Russian submarine crisis. Numerous CEOs have done the same thing in their own situations. It's wise for the "top man or woman" to be visible as soon as possible to confirm that the company will do the right thing.
- (5) Establish the corporate Web site as the primary source of information. You can make the corporate site the "first stop" for investors, employees, customers and even the media if you consistently prove that it contains timely, complete information. Press releases, speeches, and letters to employees, customers and shareholders are all important as individual acts. But they are disjointed, non-unified communications that take time to distribute using conventional means. Unify all communications on the web site and post them in real time as they are developed. In this way, your special audiences with concerns can get the information directly from you when they hear news reports or rumors.
- (6) Final note. It goes without saying that honesty is the by-word in crisis communications. No manager will succeed in the final analysis with any approach that is based on less than the highest ethics.

The full report can be seen at <http://lefile.com/articles/speciall-report/management.htm>

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