

The Right Way To Handle a PR Crisis ... Even When It's On-Air

By **Adam Jacobson** -September 16, 2022

In Canada, the recent dismissal of a CTV News veteran television anchor largely popular with viewers, **Lisa LaFlamme**, dominated headlines. How CTV News handled her departure was a bit part of the news coverage from competing outlets, as it was widely panned. With LaFlamme hired by Rogers' CityTV to serve as a special correspondent covering the death of Queen Elizabeth II, the bad PR hasn't exactly ebbed for CTV.

For communications, media and public relations pro **Eric Yaverbaum**, such PR crises can be avoided, even when it involves an on-air broadcast gone wrong.

Case in point: A July 2022 newscast involving Heather Kovar, a news anchor at WRGB-6 in Albany, N.Y., who received nationwide attention and was the subject of an *Inside Edition* piece on a newscast in which some news outlets said she appeared drunk and disheveled.

Kovar later explained, after being placed on leave by the Sinclair Broadcast Group station, that she was sleep-deprived after dealing with the death of a close family member. Still, the incident hastened her departure from WRGB, as she planned on exiting the station following the end of her contract on July 31.

For its part, Sinclair and WRGB handled a delicate situation and potential PR nightmare with savvy.

Here's Yaverbaum's advice on "The Right Way to Handle a PR Crisis (Even When It Broadcasts Live On-Air)."

By Eric Yaverbaum

Special to *Radio + Television Business Report*

As an expert with over forty years of experience working in communications, I've seen PR crises handled every single which way possible. Believe it or not, there actually is a right (and effective) way to handle one.

The good news is that it's simple, though it will require genuine effort and a real commitment to learning from any mistakes you may have made so that they aren't repeated. While typically, mistakes aren't intentional, the reality is that the harm caused is real regardless (hence public outcry and a crisis).

As any broadcast station knows all too well, on-air mistakes (as well as those behind the scenes) can very quickly snowball into full-blown public relations crises. This is even more true in today's digital world where critiques can quickly become viral callouts with just a few influential retweets. Knowing that the risk of making an inadvertent mistake and having it go viral is exponentially higher for radio or television broadcast stations, it's essential to know how to handle these situations ahead of time.

While having a good PR team on your side is always the safest bet, there are a few simple steps you can take to help protect your reputation.

PLAN TODAY

The first thing I tell people is to start planning for a crisis now. Waiting to build your crises response strategy until after a crisis occurs is like waiting to start a race until your competitors are already on their last lap. Being prepared ahead of time also helps you address the issue calmly and with a cool head, rather than reacting in the heat of the moment.

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Once a crisis does hit, the mistake most frequently made is rushing to respond with an inadequate, often defensive apology in order to move past the issue as quickly as possible.

Being a public figure who works in broadcasting means that millions of people can and will hold you accountable for any and all mistakes. Being called out never feels good — it’s only human nature to want to defend yourself. The intensity of that can be a lot to handle for even seasoned pros, but a rushed, defensive apology is, simply put, always going to be read as insincere and self-serving. Without fail, this will only dig you in deeper every time. Instead, your response cannot and should not be about getting out of the hot seat (as uncomfortable as it is). Apologies must be backed by a sincere reflection and understanding of the harm caused, along with a genuine commitment to do better, followed (most importantly) by meaningful action.

Responding: How to Apologize Sincerely (and Effectively)

We’ve all most likely been on the receiving end of apologies that only served to make us even more frustrated as well as ones that actually made us feel better and repaired the relationship. While this isn’t something we’re taught in school, understanding the difference between a good apology and a bad one is vital for communications professionals. It all comes down to empathy, sincerity, and effort.

An apology needs to make people feel heard and understood and it needs to communicate not only contrition, but that you are also taking action to make things right. The words, “I’m sorry” are meaningless and come across as an insincere platitude without a deeper understanding of why your audience is upset. So, before you respond to a crisis, stop and really take the time to listen to your critics. Use their feedback to understand what went wrong and the harm that has been caused (this often requires some earnest soul searching). Try to look at the mistake as a learning opportunity that can ultimately lead to positive change at your organization and fortify your relationship with your viewers.

Avoid common pitfalls like hedging, making excuses, shifting blame, and apologizing without actually taking responsibility (e.g., “we’re sorry if you feel we did something wrong”). Be direct and own up to any mistakes made. Center your audience, not yourself in your apology (don’t make it about you, even if the crisis has genuinely caused your organization distress). Similarly, avoid inauthentic and overly emotional performances (e.g., like the infamous crying CEO who posted a tear-filled selfie after announcing layoffs at his company); it rarely comes across as genuine—even when it is—centers yourself, and your viewers will see right through it. Instead, aim for authenticity; be genuine, honest, and again, take responsibility.

Remember that the point of an apology isn’t about absolving your station; it’s about making your audience feel heard, beginning the work of repairing your relationship with them, and setting things right. Most importantly, your station must understand that the work does not end with the apology—that is where it begins.

What Comes Next

After you’ve addressed your audience and have taken control over the narrative, you absolutely must follow through with continued communication and meaningful action. Without this, you will undermine your response and further damage your reputation

and your audience's trust. Actions cannot merely be performative either, they must be genuine. Whether it's a thorough investigation carried out by a third party, firing employees who are found to have acted inappropriately, conducting employee training, or reinstating employees who were wrongly dismissed, you need to be transparent in what you are doing to set things right

THE TAKEAWAY

Make sure that your entire team has truly learned from the mistake and implemented appropriate protocols to avoid repeating it. An apology without follow through is not only meaningless, but it can even further damage your reputation and your audience's trust. The ire of the public only gets worse the second time around (forget the third!).

The good news is that if your station does truly take the time to learn from its mistakes and is serious about setting things right, you can come out even stronger than you were before. Crises can become opportunities to reaffirm your commitment to your audience, to demonstrate that you value their feedback, and to fortify your reputation. Mistakes are an inevitable part of life, and effective crisis management is really about whether we can use missteps as learning opportunities to grow, learn, and evolve. The right response can go a long way towards making things right, and can even help deepen the trust between you and your audience.

Eric Yaverbaum, CEO of Jericho Communications, is a communications, media, and public relations expert with over 40 years in the industry, having co-founded Jericho Communications and served as President from 1985 until its successful sale in 2006. Yaverbaum is also a best-selling author and wrote such books as *Public Relations for*

Dummies and Leadership Secrets of the World's Most Successful CEOs. His upcoming book *The Audacity of Silver Linings* is scheduled for release before the end of 2022. A regular TV pundit, Yaverbaum's expert commentary has been featured in *Forbes*, *Entrepreneur*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *HuffPost*, *CNBC*, *MSNBC*, *Fox Business, Inc.*, and *PR Week*, among others.