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Business Day

Who Would Create a P.R. Crisis on Purpose? Well, at Least the Sweat Was Real

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SAM HODGSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Andrew Gilman, Debra Cope and Mr. Weiss, all from CommCore. The group homes in on the speed and cacophony of the modern media environment when creating its simulations.

Just as I was stammering out some version of “no comment” to a reporter from BuzzFeed, my editor was about to field a call from The New York Post. Our company’s reputation was careening out of control, and we had no idea how to stop the damage — or slow the seemingly endless torrent of social media posts that were berating us for our ties to the world’s largest polluter.

Thankfully, the situation was entirely fictitious. It was created by a crisis communications firm that regularly simulates dire circumstances for companies in hopes of preparing them for when real public relations disasters hit. The setup is a bit like “Choose Your Own Adventure” for corporate America, where the adventure is in fact a social-media-driven nightmare.

Corporate crises unfold at lightning speed in the digital age. Companies suddenly find themselves on the defensive thanks to criticism, often on Twitter, from President Trump. Products like Tiki torches and New Balance shoes unwittingly become associated with white supremacists. United Airlines deals with a public outcry after a video showing a passenger being violently dragged off a

flight goes viral, and Equifax is criticized for its handling of a security breach that compromised the personal information of potentially 143 million Americans.

As social media makes these moments ricochet around the web like never before, companies are realizing they don’t have the luxury of calmly sitting back, assessing the situation and then deciding on a solution. They need to be ready before it happens.

And that’s the purpose of exercises like this. CommCore Consulting Group agreed to come up with a situation that would give us a sense of what it’s like to be in the middle of a corporate crisis. The firm would provide the story line, play characters like inquiring reporters and angry protesters, and provide supporting material like social media posts and published articles, all designed to make us feel increasingly panicked. We would supply the sweaty palms.

The goal is to give companies a better understanding of what they may face and how they should respond. Even if, like me, you mismanage the situation so badly that it ends with a video of a masked hacker growling out his plans to destroy your company.

THE SITUATION STARTS

I sat with my editor and a photographer in a small, glass-walled conference room. For this exercise, we were pretending that we worked on the business side of The New York Times.

In less than five minutes on the job, things went seriously awry. One of the newspaper’s biggest institutional investors had become the largest shareholder in a company that was the world’s biggest polluter, and the connection was drawing attention. A prominent blog proclaimed that The Times was “exchanging blood money for ink,” and a video from a major environmental group called on our organization to cut ties with the investor.

Now, the three crisis consultants across the table told us, we had to figure out what to do.

While crisis simulations have long been used by the P.R. industry, those from CommCore and its competitors, including a tool from Weber Shandwick called Firebell, are examples of a newer breed. They home in on the speed and cacophony of today’s media environment, tossing participants into a virtual pressure cooker of online outrage and escalating



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SAM HODGSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Above, Dale Weiss of CommCore Consulting Group helped create a crisis simulation, complete with a masked hacker, to demonstrate the “firestorm” that can engulf a company. Below, Ms. Cope and Mr. Weiss posed as reporters asking how the crisis was being handled.



press attention. The point is to compress a monthslong disaster into a few stressful hours — and see how teams respond.

“The whole goal is faster reaction time, faster recognition of the issues and hopefully faster getting the issues off the front page or out of social media,” said Andrew D. Gilman, CommCore’s chief executive, who has consulted with the likes of Johnson & Johnson and General Motors during crises.

At the same time, creating a realistic P.R. issue for a company to navigate — or, in our case, hobble through — is its own challenge. After all, clients weren’t concerned about being mentioned in a tweet from the president a year ago, Mr. Gilman said. And last month, the consulting group

added the possibility of being tied to white supremacists to its list of risks.

THE MEDIA STARTS CALLING

On a whiteboard, we had scrawled out the key issues at stake and a list of employees we needed to loop in about the burgeoning situation. It’s trickier than it appears: Too many people can complicate decisions about who’s doing what; too few and you risk not being able to adequately respond to issues as they appear.

The story had been picked up by financial news sites like The Motley Fool and environmental groups that were angrily posting to their Facebook and Twitter pages. There was even a nascent petition on Change.org.

Just as that was sinking in, two reporters from national outlets called. How was The Times going to respond to this outcry? I fended them off in a panic, saying that we didn’t have a comment yet. I couldn’t consult with my editor, who was on the phone with a member of the investor’s P.R. staff.

The simulation blended fact and fiction to make it feel more realistic. The materials included articles and social media posts, complete with pre-filmed videos, designed to look as if they had come from real publications and environmental groups. Two of the consultants had left the room to make the reporter calls to our cellphones, timing them so that we had trouble coordinating our responses.

Often, the companies doing these drills involve a variety of departments, such as legal, information technology and investor relations, in hopes that they know how to work together if a crisis does hit.

The crisis was designed by Dale Weiss, whom Mr. Gilman referred to as something of a “mad scientist” when devising each round of facts. Mr. Weiss likened the pace to cooking a frog.

“If you put them in a hot pot, they’re going to jump right out, but if you take a frog and slowly create a nice little hot tub environment, he’ll stay in and finally boil,” Mr. Weiss explained, a little too gleefully. We were the frogs.

DECIDING ON A RESPONSE

By now, we had issued a brief statement and linked to it on Twitter. But then, a huge poison gas leak hit one of the polluting company’s major factories, forcing thousands of people to evacuate and injuring many others. A video news report about the disaster included coverage of our newspaper’s ties to the polluter through our institutional investor, and noted the growing controversy.

Our newsroom was covering the disaster aggressively, activists were planning to picket outside our annual shareholder meeting and, somehow, the polluter claimed we were blocking its requests to run a full-page ad in the paper. This was all playing out on social media, and people were calling for boycotts of The Times.

There were so many outlets, advocacy groups and internal stakeholders to respond to that it was hard to keep them straight — and the list of options we could use to respond was similarly lengthy. Post a statement through a series of tweets? Put screenshots of a longer statement on social media? Film a YouTube video? Arrange an interview of our top executives with a journalist we trust? With each question, the room seemed to get a little hotter.

Ideally, a company would have different contingency plans set up for various possibilities, along with a set list of employees who would handle them.

“There might be holding statements about your investments, your manufacturing facilities, about your people, that you can pull from and take pieces so you’re not having to create it at the very last minute,” Mr. Weiss said.

Mr. Gilman added, “Several of our clients have war rooms where they want to be ready just in case there’s a Trump tweet, and in the same kind of way, if it’s an agency or a company that’s advertising a ton or any other business, they want to be prepared.”

That sort of thinking could have helped United Airlines respond more quickly to the video of the passenger’s removal. “They’ve got a lot of crisis plans,” Mr. Gilman said, “but mostly about aircraft crashing, not a customer issue like that.”

Nobody cared that our company wasn’t responsible for the actions of an investor, but it turned out that was part of the training as well.

“You’re a public company. People buy your stock,” Mr. Weiss said. “Stuff happens. Companies don’t do anything wrong — they do what they’re supposed to do — and yet you get hit by this firestorm of stuff.”

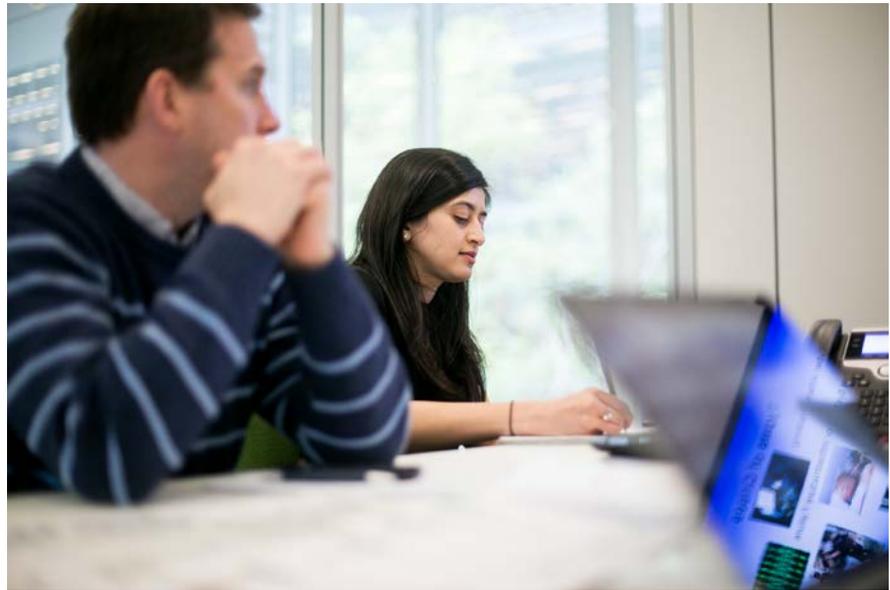
A HACKER APPEARS

As the crisis worsened, three prominent reporters and columnists quit the newspaper, citing its ties to the problematic investor. A major environmental group sold its shares in *The Times* and urged other groups to follow, saying the impartiality of our reporting couldn’t be guaranteed. The Change.org petition had amassed thousands of signatures, and the boycott was expanding.

And just as we were reeling from all of this, here came the grand finale: a video from a masked hacker speaking in a low, distorted voice. He praised the boycott efforts by environmental groups and delivered a grim message. Based on the investment connection, we were told, a group of concerned hackers planned to use a virus to wreak havoc on our facilities so long as *The Times* kept exchanging “blood money for ink.” He proclaimed the group would keep fighting for the environment, ending with: “We’re also doing this because we can.”

Stunned silence followed. Then our photographer, Sam, piped up. “Do we bring the F.B.I. in?”

Indeed, Mr. Gilman said, we had “progressed, unfortunately, in the world of crisis communications” to criminal behavior and had become something of a victim ourselves. Still, he added, that didn’t mean public opinion would swing



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SAM HODGSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Above, for the exercise, the reporter, Sapna Maheshwari, and her editor, Connor Ennis, pretended they worked for the business side of *The New York Times*. Below, Mr. Gilman laying out some of the issues that arise in a crisis, such as who should be told and what matters need immediate attention.



in our favor, pointing to the fallout from Target’s enormous data breach in 2013.

Despite any pressure we may have felt during the simulation, we had the luxury of going back to our actual jobs when it was over. But the quick escalation of the disaster and criticism from all sides made it clear why companies are para-

noid about ending up in that kind of situation — even without an ominous video from a hacker — and why they feel the need to plan.

“You can’t prevent any crisis from happening,” Mr. Gilman said. “But you can shorten the duration, you can lessen the impact and do better preparation.”