

A Maverick's Approach To PR Crises (And the Mueller Report)

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There are several important lessons that young PR practitioners who want to specialize in crisis PR can learn from the Mueller report.

The most important one is that once an individual or individuals are involved in a crisis it becomes part of their DNA and can be revived by the media at any time, especially when journalists are reporting on new similar circumstances of others. **Prime examples: President Trump, Wells Fargo and Facebook.**

The second most important lesson is that in a legal matter, just because an individual or individuals are not found guilty does not mean that they will no longer be the subject of press reports. **Prime example: Presidents Trump and Clinton.**

During my PR career, I've had clients with PR crises, nationally and internationally. In each case, I personally strategized the media approach, using my account teams as needed. Of course, this went against the "wise men"



of PR crises, who feel that only a PR crisis team can solve the problems. *(Nonsense: An account team, of savvy PR practitioners should be able to successfully navigate a PR crisis; if not, the client should demand a new team).*

Below are some out-of-the box approaches I strategized regarding four client PR crises that young practitioners probably didn't learn in communication's school and definitely weren't discussed positively at PR agency seminars, where the message regarding client crises is to call in a specialized PR crisis team, which rings the cash register for the agencies. *(I was labeled a maverick for going against the norms of PR crises and using common sense instead of a hackneyed PR crisis plan.)*

Example One: I was assigned to manage a national account whose yearly three-month program was under constant media attack since it was instituted many years before my involvement. I

suggested that the client ignore the attacks and not personally respond to them. Instead, I suggested a pro-active element to the program, which consisted of having well-known individuals defend the program. The client gave it a one-year try. It was so successful that it continued for an additional seven years, until the client moved in another direction.

Example Two: Prior to a national electronic convention, a competitor of my client announced that it would unveil a new device. My client knew that the competitor's new product would dominate the news coverage, which would position my client as being a laggard in the field. My solution was to have my client hold a press briefing the day prior to the convention at which future product plans were announced. By doing so, news stories about the competitor's new product introduction also included my client's plans.

Examples Two and Three: Both of these examples concerned foreign clients, whose past treatment of individuals received negative media coverage. My advice to both clients was not to try and justify historical facts. Instead, I suggested they acknowledge past mistakes and invite reporters to speak to current government officials who would explain how things have changed, and, importantly, make certain that journalists had a free hand in speaking to whomever they wanted to. While the past history was included in stories, the focus of the articles was how things have changed for the better.

At first glance, you might wonder what the above examples have to do with the Muller report. But before you come to the conclusion that they have no connection, think out-of-the box and you might see the nexus.

Immediately after the Attorney General released the letter about the reports conclusions, Democrats were attacking the report and the A.G. But like clients in a PR crisis, comments by the losers – in this case the Democrats – are taken as a grain of salt by much of the public and the unbiased press. In

fact, the Democratic rhetoric, with minor word changes, sounded like it came from their old PR playbook, ignoring what I've long told clients: "There is no one size fits all PR crisis plan. Each crisis deserves new thinking."

A better plan for the Democrats and clients you may have in PR crises is to use a strategy that I used in the above examples. I would give a heads-up to certain reporters and arranged one-on-one interviews or round table discussions with clients; No major press conferences (*Excluded from the heads-up were reporters known to go for the jugular.*) Also, I did not try to be a gate keeper and hide the client. While having the authority to answer questions, I always put the reporter in touch with the client, giving an appearance of openness.

The reporters appreciated that they were treated as journalists doing their jobs and not as enemies. Importantly, the stories contained the client's message points and were more believable to the public because they were included in stories by respected journalists.

The lesson that all PR newbie's should learn is that letting an unbiased media report on the message points of a client in a PR crisis, is more believable than an all out attack, as the Democrats are currently doing. The Democrats should stop attacking and let the facts from their investigations do the talking.

The take-a-way from the above is that in all PR situations don't follow the herd; just because rules are written in PR text books doesn't mean that they are correct. They're just opinions. Create your own roadmap; think out-of-the-box.



About the Author: Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller, and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports programs. He also traveled internationally as a media adviser to high-ranking government officials. He now is a frequent contributor to public relations publications, consults on public relations projects and is on the Seoul Peace Prize nominating committee. He can be reached at [arthursolomon4pr \(at\) juno.com](mailto:arthursolomon4pr@juno.com)