

# Maria Sharapova Learns New Lessons of Crisis Communications – Social Media Drives Narratives

✘ *By David E. Johnson, CEO, [Strategic Vision PR Group](#)*

[Social media](#) drives narratives and brands react to the social media narrative. This means that many of the old rules of crisis communications no longer apply as social media drives a crisis regardless if everything was handled correctly or not in addressing the situation with the media and key stakeholders.

We saw this happen this week with tennis star, [Maria Sharapova](#). Sharapova, the world's highest-paid female athlete, admitted that she had tested positive for the recently banned drug, [meldonium](#) while doing a standard drug test at the Australian Open. The five-time Grand Slam champion announced that she had tested positive and that she had been taking the drug for health reasons since 2006. The drug had just recently been banned. The International Tennis Federation (ITF) announced that it was provisionally suspending Sharapova as of March 12, 2016. From a crisis communications response, Sharapova had done everything right. She was proactive in announcing the scandal herself rather than allowing it to be announced in the media and losing a news cycle. Normally that would have defused the situation considerably, save for social media.

Social media, particularly Twitter exploded with attacks on Sharapova and implications that there were even darker scandals that she was hiding and hoping to avoid coming to light by her admission. Many traditional media outlets as has

become commonplace began picking up the Twitter comments and doing speculative stories on what other scandals involving the tennis great might emerge next.

Sponsors of Sharapova who have stood by stars with far worse scandals – Tiger Woods, Michael Vick, Kobe Bryant, and Lance Armstrong bailed from their sponsorships of her. First Nike announced that it was suspending its relationship with her. Porsche and TAG Heuer quickly followed suit. Others are expected to join them. The major reason wasn't because of Sharapova's admission but rather the social media outcry, particularly on Twitter. Brands react more to social media outrage than traditional media coverage and traditional media coverage now follows social media outrage to keep a crisis alive.

This leads to the point that in crisis communications, no longer must a crisis communications strategy be developed to deal with the media and key stakeholders, now a social media policy must be included in any successful plan. Bloggers and key influencers on Twitter and Facebook, as well as, the average person must be addressed via a clear social media policy during a crisis. If not as we are seeing a firestorm will ensue and brands will bail. Maria Sharapova is the first but certainly not the last to fall victim to the new rules of crisis communications in the social media world of today.

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