

# PR disasters

## and how to avoid them

**Ruth Shearn, managing director of RMS PR, says business leaders must learn from the recent Cadbury PR disaster...**

**B**ungling Cadbury chiefs have exposed their ignorance of public relations for failing to come clean over one of the biggest business stories of the summer.

In a gargantuan PR disaster Cadbury bosses are under fire for allowing Easter eggs go on sale to children, despite knowing of a possible salmonella risk. It's a salacious story for the media and a foolhardy decision by the management to risk the reputation of an historic, much loved company.

Cadbury has enjoyed the reputation of being one of the most cherished brands in the UK for many years. Their sponsorship of the

nation's favourite television soap and the decision to continue advertising their products during the Second World War while all their competitors axed theirs proves they know a thing or two about promotion. So what went wrong?

The whole issue highlights how easy it is for a business to slip out of public affection and be turned into a company that is demonised, accused of cover ups and greed.

The Birmingham company has already stated that it will change its policies for handling future scares. One of those policies surely has to be the PR function.

The strategy appeared to start well. Despite the nature of the story, the PR team at Cadbury was slick. They provided samples of all the problem products to the media, a hotline was established for retailers and consumers, senior management was available for comment. The products were splashed all over the broadcast, web and print media and

the firm was seen to be socially responsible, accepting the financial cost of withdrawal on the chin and being portrayed as, pardon the pun, all round good eggs.

The confectioner quickly announced that it was taking a million chocolate bars off shop shelves, as they had potentially been exposed to salmonella in January.

### **Crisis point**

Then it all went pear shaped. It was revealed that the company only informed the Food Standards Agency (FSA) about the scare in June, months after the Easter egg sales peak.

The FSA even weighed in to unhelpfully add that there had been a sharp rise in the number of salmonella cases this year (although there is no suggestion, naturally, that they are linked to Cadbury products...)

The tale has now developed to the stage where it is being alleged that Cadbury failed to inform food





watchdogs about salmonella contamination at one of its factories, despite nine cases of the bacterium being identified over a four-month period. The story goes that the confectionery giant admitted to the potential health hazard only after pressure from the Food Standards Agency (FSA) before withdrawing the million bars of chocolate.

Being accused of a 'cover-up' and coping with headline hungry MPs camped outside the factory, calling for a 'a full and public explanation' of why it had waited so long to admit to the contamination is bad PR. All this could have all been avoided if the company had managed the process of communication more professionally.

In contrast, the PR for the gleeful FSA has been excellent. By putting

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the boot into Cadburys they are promoting their own organisation as having teeth, of being a powerful industry regulator and backing public health concerns (after all this is the perfect PR opportunity to piggy back).

The fact that Cadbury decided not to take any action back in January or report it to the FSA because they thought the amounts of salmonella

*Hiding is not an option*

were 'minute' and posed no threat to health is shocking. Any PR professional getting wind of this story at this stage should have sensed alarm and advised management not to sweep it under the carpet.

Cadbury said the withdrawal of its products was 'precautionary' and levels of salmonella were 'significantly below' those which

would cause a health problem. Any organisation that discovers minute traces of any poison, toxin or harmful bacteria should be communicated properly to customers and stakeholders. In the eyes of the media and the public, a minute trace

## The PR plan was too little too late for Cadbury

of salmonella is just too much. Look what happened to Edwina Currie.

In a nutshell, the PR plan was too little too late for Cadbury. The day they discovered salmonella in their chocolate in January, they should have set the PR wheels in motion. They would still have had time to solve the problem and ramp up the positive PR for the sales of their Easter eggs.

Businesses need to be switched on in this media savvy world. The public hates nothing more than a food company that fails to look after the health interests of its loyal customers.

## Top ten tips

1. Don't crawl under a stone hoping the issue will go away. Equally, don't make any hasty defensive comments.
2. Investigate quickly to establish if the story is true. Ensure you know all the facts before responding but remember speed is of the essence.
3. Make sure someone is available to speak to the press – ideally someone with seniority and not a press officer, as this will show that the issue is being taken seriously. Ensure that they are fully briefed and know how to deal with the media.
4. Don't ever try to outsmart the media with smart or facetious comment and never, ever say 'no comment'. You'll only make things worse.
5. Acknowledge public concern, even if you think it is misplaced. In a media crisis, the public is always right.
6. Actions speak louder than words. The public does not want statements and press releases so always respond decisively – you must be seen to take swift action.
7. Make sure that you communicate with your key audiences – the customers and clients who will be affected by the story – on a more personal basis than through the press.
8. Discover which areas of your business are vulnerable to negative press coverage and prepare a plan in advance.
9. Have a crisis management plan ready that deals with the practical side of coping under the media spotlight. The plan should detail who will make the decisions and who will take calls from the media. Can your current press or publicity officer cope? Do you need extra help?
10. If you do, get it – common sense and intuition are fine but they need to be backed up with experience and expertise from a professional.

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