

# Global Insights from Global Leaders

**Brand Value and Reputation:** C-Suite and Crisis Communications



# What is the role of the CEO during a crisis?

We all know that it's not if a crisis will happen - that unexpected business disruption - but when. What's the CEO to do when the crisis happens? Should he jump-in and lead? Should she be the voice of the brand?

At Vehr Communications, we think a lot about the CEO's role, and that of C-suite members more generally, in the midst of a business crisis. And, we think about it from a world view. In today's world, the CEO's role in protecting brand value and reputation during and after a crisis is an important question.

That's precisely why we asked leaders of global agencies who, like us, are part of IPREX (read more about IPREX on the right), to share their thoughts and insights on this important topic. From Madrid to San Francisco, Sydney to Toronto and Helsinki to Hong Kong, these experts provide their perspectives on the role of the CEO in times of crisis.

We've already shared the insights of other global leaders on the role of the CEO in social media and also how C-Suite leaders can impact brand value and reputations. You can read those other reports [here](#).

Sincerely,



Nicholas J. Vehr, President  
Vehr Communications, LLC  
IPREX Americas President



## IPREX

Global Communication

IPREX is a \$350 million network of communication agencies, with 1,800 staff and 115 offices worldwide working across the spectrum of industry sectors and practice disciplines. Vehr Communications has been a partner of IPREX for seven years and Nick Vehr currently serves on its global board as President of the Americas region.

Today's always-on, networked society means news is reported quickly, often before company officials are able to gather information. CEOs from Australia, Spain and the United States agree a CEO needs to remain visible and accessible, but practice is the key to avoiding embarrassing mistakes.

“ **Have a communication system in place of how the CEO will communicate with the rest of the company along with their role in communicating with the media.** ”

*Business 2 Community, 2014, The Role of the CEO in a PR Crisis*

<http://www.business2community.com/public-relations/role-ceo-pr-crisis0751205#0aJmIrOVyVxLDjmm.97>

“ **An executive should not say or write anything without first considering the message that will likely reach a much broader audience than he or she had intended.** ”

*PRSA, 2011, Crisis Management: The Evolving Role of the CEO as Crisis Manager*

“ **If you do not speak for yourself quickly, or if you do so poorly, someone else – antagonist, police, government, competitor or anonymous hater – will speak for you.** ”

*Forbes, 2015, You have 15 minutes to respond to a crisis: A checklist of dos and don'ts*

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/daviatemin/2015/08/06/you-have-15-minutes-to-respond-to-a-crisis-a-checklist-of-dos-and-donts/#16ae8e2f69d2>

# 1. How can a CEO affect brand value during a crisis?

## Australia



### Benjamin Haslem

Wells Haslem Strategic Public Affairs Pty Ltd.

The CEO needs to be front and centre during a crisis. Take full responsibility for any mistakes (the buck stops with you); provide an explanation and regular updates; if necessary apologise and outline - in as much detail as possible - what went wrong, how you are remedying the situation and what measures will be put in place to prevent a repeat occurrence. If the company or organisation has a strong social media presence, use its preferred platforms to communicate with stakeholders, linking to company statements and other sources of information, including a video message from the CEO.

## Spain



### Mayte Gonzalez-Gil

poweraxle

In no other circumstance is a CEO more visible than in a crisis and his leadership can contribute to mitigate the negative effects and even reverse the situation in favour of the company.

## United States



### Michael Fineman

Fineman PR

Do not go off script. Do not answer difficult questions on the fly; rather admit that you do not have an immediate answer but that you will be sure to address the question as soon as possible. Do not fill the uncomfortable silences. Do not respond until you are prepared and know what you need to say. Though you must correct mistakes and misleading comments, do so as evenly as possible; it should not be your role to be combative. The tone you take is critically important, even more so than the content you communicate.

The global consensus is that CEOs should promote and support crisis planning, and we certainly agree. Crisis planning is the ultimate corporate responsibility and should be a critical component of any strategic communications program.

In a recent crisis management survey of large firms in 27 countries around the world, respondents said...



**86%**

have a crisis management plan.

**59%**

carry out crisis training at least annually.

*asisonline.org, 2016, "Are CEOs Crisis Ready?"*

**“If a CEO is serving as the primary decision-maker and/or public face for the organization, all the preparation in the world can be irrelevant if he or she didn’t participate in the contingency planning, training and testing.”**

*forbes.com, 2016, "Crisis Management – Get the Boss Involved Before It’s Too Late!"*

## 2. What role, if any, should a CEO play in the prevention or anticipation of a crisis?

### Spain



#### Mayte Gonzalez-Gil

poweraxle

The prevention of a crisis implies doing an exercise to identify weaknesses of the company, establish different scenarios and anticipate courses of action and designate the people responsible for each area of the company (human resources, production, quality, customer services, press office, etc.).

### United States



#### Michael Fineman

Fineman PR

Leadership should assure that the organization is as prepared as possible: promote scenario planning, execute tabletop and/or company-wide drills, prepare positioning/messaging (brief, core statements on current and potential challenges), media training for company spokespersons, crisis team organization, traditional and social media policies, recruitment of third-party alliances and subject matter experts, up-to-date documentation, etc.

### Canada



#### David Eisenstadt

tcgpr (The Communications Group Inc.)

A CEO may not necessarily put the strategy into action (the plan may involve an approved spokesperson), but will help to establish the objectives and steps. This requires a CEO who is not absent; too many executives run and hide when an issue arises and reporters/cameras are at the door.

Honest, genuine and authentic communications are always the best policy, regardless of country or culture. A CEO should take a crisis very seriously and use his or her podium as a chance to build trust. Our biggest piece of advice: be human.

“**CEOs must act ethically, keeping intentions aimed toward the greater good and causing the least harm.**”

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*PRSA, 2011, Crisis Management: The Evolving Role of the CEO as Crisis Manager*

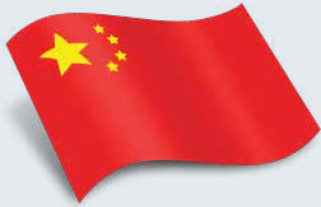
“**All public outreach should remain honest, consistent and focused on addressing the crisis as it relates to your strategy.**”

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*KCDPR, 2016, Responding to a PR Crisis: A five step brand recovery strategy  
<http://www.kcdpr.com/a-five-step-crisis-management-strategy-in-todays-digital-age/>*

### 3. What advice would you give a CEO facing a brand crisis?

#### China



**David Croasdale**

Newell PR

General advice: be open. Provide access. Be totally honest. Convey empathy ("We will be sure to get you all the information we can as soon as it becomes available. Please understand that for the time being, all we can say with certainty is..."). The words chosen, the tone of voice, body language, must all convey a respect for the media, employees, customers and a willingness to be of assistance.

#### Finland



**Harri Kammonen**

Manifesto

Take crisis seriously and have the best people, either in house or external agency, to support you in the crisis. Remember to secure customers' and employees' trust in the organization. Do the follow-up work thoroughly, and better your processes and policies when needed. Don't forget people in crisis.

#### Canada



**David Eisenstadt**

tcgpr (The Communications Group Inc.)

Truth and sincerity should be the foundation for everything you say and do. In these circumstances, an experienced and knowledgeable public relations firm can provide an objective viewpoint to help you and your team address the issue(s) as effectively, truthfully and positively as possible.



# About Vehr Communications

Vehr Communications, LLC seeks to be a strategic partner with its clients to help them manage their reputations, build valued relationships and deliver meaningful results.

To learn more about who we are, what we do and how we think, visit our website. While you're there, sign up for our monthly e-newsletter, visit our blog or download any of our publications designed to help you make the most of your strategic communications activities.

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