

A Clucking Good Campaign: How KFC Dealt with a Comically Unexpected Crisis

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Part One: Synopsis

Background

Kentucky Fried Chicken, or KFC, is a fast food chain from America that is known for its fried southern offerings and buckets of chicken. KFC's mission and values are broken down into three simple "house rules." They are "be your best self. Make a difference. Have fun." These coincide with the brand's service values of "at KFC, we have a passion for food, and serve it with pride... it's our job to ensure every guest leaves happy."

The public targeted by KFC are their customers, the media and the employees at their franchises. The stakeholders were PepsiCo, Yum! Brands, KFC executives and employees. These stakeholders are important because they were the face behind the response to the crisis and represent who were effected most if the campaign went sour. The audience for this crisis campaign was clear due to the most affected group being the customers from the United Kingdom as well as the employees whose jobs were put on hold. The customers were directly disrupted due to their daily interaction with the restaurant ceasing. Meanwhile, the employees were losing their source of income until the crisis was over. The company knew that if the message and campaign resonated with these two groups, the outcome of the unfortunate situation would not completely damage their reputation. In the end, the main objective of the campaign was to remain transparent and nullify any concerns during the KFC chicken shortage.

The Event

On February 14th 2018, a seven-vehicle collision occurred on the M6 between the second and third junction. Shortly after, another accident occurred on the first junction. These three junctions were what stood between the DHL truck carrying the KFC chicken shipment and the warehouse in Rugby where the chicken was stored. This DHL warehouse was the only place KFC received their chicken shipments from. Having just switched suppliers in order to cut costs, the blow of having a supply chain error was quite strong. So, with the delays standing between DHL and KFC, a chicken shortage began throughout most U.K. stores. By February 16th, there was a lack of chicken at an overwhelming number of locations causing many franchises to shut down. The main issue at hand is that the essential item of KFC is the chicken. On February 18th, only 266 of the 870 restaurants in the U.K. and Ireland were open. This issue led to an uproar of angry customers on social media asking "how can a chicken store run out of chicken?" Customers were even contacting police stations about their missing chicken, with the hashtag "#KFCCrisis" trending on twitter. As for employees, the KFC franchises that were closed had no word from corporate as to when they would open back up. Many hard-working employees were left without an income at this time. Finally, as February 23rd rolled around, the stores were beginning to return to their regular routines post-delay. However, this did not come without a crucial response from KFC.

The Response

KFC decided that in order to deal with the issue, they would have to resonate with their customers and brand. At first, they tried to donate the excess chicken that was delayed by the accident to charities but the charities could not take it for safety reasons. This left their positive

PR ploy strictly up to their words. They decided they had to play up what everyone was thinking: a chicken store without chicken is not ideal. This idea led to a bold, yet effective, full-page ad in The Metro. KFC printed a picture of their iconic chicken bucket with their logo rearranged to say “FCK.” This was a risk but it definitely paid off. The photo was followed by a sincere and humorous apology, facing the blame head on. Not only did the ad show the humble nature of the company, but it also got the consumers to laugh a bit about the whole unfortunate ordeal. KFC also continuously updated their consumer on social media, hopping in on the #KFCCrisis trending hashtag, and did not let anyone get swept up in rumors or have the issue spiral out of control. They also made their social media posts cheeky by playing up chicken jokes like “why did the chicken cross the road” and other self-deprecating humor. Due to these proactive actions on KFC’s part, their ability to deal with this crisis was praised by people all over the world. The company did not use the supply chain as a scapegoat for their apology and they also did not leave the world confused about where their beloved chicken was. Overall, KFC made their responses short and sweet, while staying true to their authentic and transparent brand.

Part Two: Analysis

Point 1: Avoid blame deflection

The number one priority of a consumer when choosing to trust a company is whether or not they find them reliable. This is why a company must not deflect the blame while **remaining a sincere entity in the eyes of the consumer and keeping an authentic tone throughout crises**. A sincere company will step forward and acknowledge their part in a crisis in order to keep their consumers looking at them in a positive light. This leads to an authentic audience that will stick with the company through thick and thin because they know the organization will stay true to their morals.

A sincere public image by avoiding blame deflection is important in order to keep the audience in agreement with the company. In the case of chicken shortage, KFC had many chances to push blame off on to the company further up in the supply chain, since KFC's new supplier, DHL, was physically involved in the chicken shortage event. However, KFC executives knew that shifting the blame would not solve anything and the only thing customers want in a time of uncertainty is a company that is true to their promises. Therefore, KFC placed sincerity first by apologizing for their role in the crisis. In simplest terms, they said "FCK" and moved forward through the disaster.

The sincerity shown by KFC is in direct contrast with the shifty nature of the Apple iProblem case. While KFC had no problem owning the chicken shortage issue right away, Apple jumped through hoops to make it look as though the blame for the poor treatment of their labor was on Foxconn. KFC used the sincerity as an advantage to prove themselves to their consumers while Apple tried flying under the radar. In fact, the shady practices were seen as positive between Apple and Foxconn executives, as they often refused to open the factories to the media. According to former Apple executive Louis Woo, "nobody really knows [Foxconn], [Apple is] doing well... why should [Foxconn] open [the factory] up?" After being forced into sincerity by the public, Apple finally chose to be interviewed by their partner, ABC. However, this delayed agreement after shifting the blame up their supply chain hurt Apple's reputation in the long run.

Authenticity is key when dealing with a public under stress. They want the company they know well to own up to their mistakes. The authenticity that KFC showed by avoiding blame deflection is what made customers more willing to accept their apology. In the cheeky tone of the brand, KFC phrased the delivery mishap as a "why did the chicken cross the road" joke. They also simply admitted the mistake as a "teething problem" in the new delivery process. This gave the public a chance to respect KFC as a mature and proactive company as opposed to a shady money-grabbing entity.

This is the exact issue that Apple failed to avoid in the iProblem case. It was not until Apple had been called out by the media that they said anything about the mistreatment of their factory employees. Even with the media callout, Apple only restated their Supplier Responsibilities and remained to secrecy regarding their involvement in the issue. This copout from Apple made it appear as though it was only Foxconn to blame for any mistreatment of the workers. Apple only cared about the lowered cost of production. This led to them avoiding the bad press all together until the whole scandal blew up in their faces.

Point 2: Apologize like you mean it

The best thing to do when in the wrong is to apologize, simple as that. An apology at a proactive and proper time shows that the company **cares about the issue, avoids media from taking control of the truth and allows the organization to avoid being forced into an inevitable apology**. So, overall, it is important for the company to create their own narrative prior to the media spinning the issue out of control.

The most obvious reason to apologize is to show that the organization cares about the issue at hand. KFC made that their first priority when facing the chicken shortage crisis. They wanted the public to know that they were sorry that they let them down. A “no comment” from an executive would have been quick and easy but the KFC fan-base would have dwindled in the wake of an uncaring apology. If a chicken store runs out of chicken, they have to show their humility to the public in order to set things right. The simple “FCK” bucket ad was to the point and a risk that showed the public that the organization was willing to be vulnerable for them. The addition of the #wheresmychicken hashtag on Twitter and self-deprecating humor gave the public clarity on KFC’s stance. The consumers then had a positive outlook on KFC after they actually made a caring and authentic effort to make things right.

A good juxtaposition to the way the chicken shortage case was handled is the BP Oil Spill case. Instead of initially doing everything they could to ease the public’s minds, BP executives produced lackluster apologies that reflected that they only cared about their own well-being and profits. Intent on shifting the blame just as in the Apple case, CEO Tony Hayward claimed that “[BP was] not responsible for the accident.” The company then took their missteps further by discounting victims of the accident by saying that they will place “illegitimate claims” in order to profit off of BP. The organization made it obvious from their initial presence that they did not care about the issue’s effect on the public nor did they have any intent to apologize properly. This led to a notoriously bad reputation for BP in years to come.

KFC also avoided the media taking control of the story by issuing a meaningful apology. The full-page “FCK” bucket apology already had so much of an impact on audiences that the media would have trouble spinning the crisis out of proportion or shining a negative light on the sincerity of the company. The response from KFC was short and to the point, leaving no room for doubt and catching the attention of the public everywhere. Suddenly this crisis from the UK became a PR triumph heard around the world with positive headlines such as “a masterclass in Crispy Chicken Management.” This apology was so bold that it was able to go viral before the media could even get their hands on the issue. The bolded “we’re sorry” followed by “a chicken restaurant without the chicken. It’s not ideal,” took the words right out of the media’s mouth.

On the other hand, the BP oil spill was a field day for the media due to the company’s failure to streamline an apology. There was absolutely no PR elegance. The lackluster BP press releases and quotes set off the media to question the company’s sincerity. Hayward even stated that he “was not a part of the decision-making process on the well” allowing the media to produce concerns of the transparency of the company. This led to global frustration as well as headlines highlighting the immaturity of the company. If BP had planned better they may have had the success of a streamlined response like KFC.

The worst look for a company during a crisis is for them to be forced into an apology due to the public shame. Although it seems like common sense, many companies find themselves

floundering in this position due to poor management. KFC, however, beat around the bush and produced a rapid and astounding public apology that felt authentic and true to their voice. This gave the public some certainty to hold onto amidst the downfall of one of their favorite companies. It is important for companies to produce an apology in the right tone and at the right time. If a company is trashed by headlines for not saying sorry and then are humiliated into producing an apology, the public will lose sight of the company that they once trusted. If there is an issue, own up to it and apologize outright.

Despite this being an essential of crisis communication, BP still managed to humiliate themselves without giving an authentic apology. This led to poorly put together apologies sparked by media humiliation, such as the one from the CEO that ended in “I would like my life back.” If BP had been bold and thoughtful at the beginning of the crisis instead of fighting back against what they had done wrong, they may have avoided the poorly drawn out apologies that only made the issue worse. KFC took the reins and apologized boldly prior to any humiliating statements from the media or missteps from their executives. It is better in the long run to be proactive prior to being beat down by the media into an apology.

Point 3: Tell your side of the story first

Nobody tells a story better than the source itself, so why would a company not give the public the truth prior to a third-party. If an organization tells of their wrong-doings before someone twists the story, they can be **proactive in telling their side, they can control the media and this avoids the risk of a disproportionate reaction from their trusted public**. By being proactive, the company can paint a truthful picture and create an initial impact that will be meaningful to consumers. If the consumers are on the brand’s side, they will avoid media exaggerations and have a proper reaction to the issue at hand.

The reason a company should tell their side of the story first is to show that they are a proactive organization in the wake of trouble. If they do not get their word out first, the company is at risk of a third-party telling a twisted version of the event. KFC was proactive by quickly producing their bold ad for the public and having a social media strategy for managing all of the negative and confused responses. In fact, in the first seven days, the company took over 321 media enquiries about the chicken shortage. The organization had no choice but to face the crisis before anyone twisted the story. KFC UK and Ireland head of brand engagement Jenny Packwood revealed that by producing a rapid response, the speculations were “totally shut... down [and] all of the attention was focused on [the] response.” By being proactive, KFC was able to distance themselves from a potentially damaging narrative.

This is similar to the responses from fast food chains throughout the Pink Slime case. Right before the Pink Slime scandal really picked up speed, Wendy’s made a statement that they do not use the meat in question in any of their burgers. This allowed Wendy’s to be excluded from much of the bad press because they had already gotten the first word out to the public. This not only allowed Wendy’s to excel ahead of the rest of the fast food chains in question, but it also allowed them to shed negative light on the brands that did not speak up soon enough. This is another example of proactive responses often being the proper strategy when facing a crisis.

The media can shift the public’s view on almost any issue if they get their story out without any prior input by the company. By having a hand in the media’s story development, the company can remain in positive graces with the public. As soon as the crisis was revealed to the public, KFC was facing the risk of being destroyed by the media. KFC was able to null this

threat due to the speed at which they addressed the issue on multiple platforms. By addressing the crisis head on, the media had no way to spin the story in a negative light that could potentially leave permanent damage on the KFC brand. The unhappy KFC customers, instead, could utilize the rapid response the brand produced to get a trustworthy answer. With 80 percent of UK adults exposed to the story, it was important to keep press positive and relaying how KFC was accommodating consumers. Jenny Packwood even described the crisis as “a self-fulfilling beast [they] cannot control, and the social response then became fuel for the media.” By standing their ground with rapid social media responses, the brand was able to take back the narrative.

In contrast, the narrative was quickly taken away from BPI in the Pink Slime case. By not preparing to tell their side of the story, the lean finely textured beef was quickly deemed “pink slime” by the public. This nickname doomed the company from the start, for the name carried a nasty and negative connotation for a brand already in trouble. The media then allowed the name to be thrown into the limelight and the image of the brand was tarnished very quickly.

A disproportionate reaction comes from a lack of information, which can be spiraled into perceived brand ignorance. In order to keep the brand in a positive light, KFC needed to prevent the public from having a disproportionate reaction to the crisis. KFC managed to avoid this by updating the public often on their social media platforms. These updates took the form of simple Q and A’s, humorous posts or #wheresmychicken tweets. Not only did this calm their consumers during the crisis, but it also showed that they cared about their public. Throughout the whole crisis, everyone knew the exact status of the situation which calmed the fears of the consumers.

In the Pink Slime case, BPI displayed what not to do in order to prevent a disproportionate reaction from the public. The company failed to explain to their consumers what LFTB was and how it was simply just beef trimmings. This caused the public to quickly resort to blowing the issue out of proportion once they heard the title of “pink slime” for the product. Due to BPI failing to preemptively tell the public about their product, the pink slime name quickly spread across the globe and caused consumers to shun the brand.

Point 4: Take risks to address and fix the issue

In the wake of a crisis, only big actions will get the attention of a public focused on solely what the company did wrong. By taking a risk in solving the issue, the company shows that they are **true to their voice and morals, represent an authentic brand and have the power to control the narrative**. A risk that falls in line with what the brand means to the customers shows that the company values their reputation to their key audience over a few critical sources.

An apology must fit the brand in order to be trusted by consumers. KFC managed to go above and beyond with shaping their apology to their voice and character. By creating the simple, yet risky “FCK” bucket ad, KFC managed to shape a mass-apology. Although KFC could have fallen flat with this ad, they knew their audience was loyal to their favorite chicken restaurant. Therefore, this was the perfect chance for the brand to show their humility, humor and honesty in order to resonate strongly with their consumers. By using their colloquial voice, the KFC ad risk paid off for every party involved.

In contrast, SeaWorld failed to take a risk in sharing their voice within the Blackfish documentary. While accepting an interview with the director, Gabriela Cowperthwaite, would have been a daunting task, the company could have shown their morals to stand up for their organization by sharing their voice on the controversial platform. Instead, SeaWorld remained quiet in their time of need and later called the film “shamefully dishonest” after the fact.

SeaWorld's cowardly response to the film led them to appear even more in the wrong to their public.

Authenticity when taking a risk is also a huge aspect of dealing with a crisis and there is nothing more authentic than admitting a mistake. There was no question that KFC's risky response was a sincere attempt to appease their consumers. In fact, the brand poked fun at themselves and highlighted that they too are human beings who make mistakes. Allowing their customers to empathize with the issue was KFC's key to rebuilding their reputation. Authenticity and openness was the perfect next step toward breaking down those barriers.

SeaWorld, on the other hand, failed to stay authentic and therefore lost the chance for their public to empathize with them. Immediately the company began defaming Blackfish and making questionable claims about major issues, such as Dawn Brancheau's death. This out of proportion and bull-headed response made their consumers hesitant to trust the organization. Not only that but the organization failed to recognize their need for change and resulted in losses in their business. The former SeaWorld CEO, James Atchison, ended up having to pay investors \$5 million dollars in misleading them regarding the damage to the business. Overall, SeaWorld did not put in the effort to stay authentic throughout their apology and therefore they reaped the consequences.

Finally, if an appropriate risk is taken to calm the crisis faced by the brand, the company will have the ability and power to control the narrative being produced. KFC reined in that power by leaving no unanswered questions about what they did to help fix the crisis at hand. By producing a risky and humorous set of ads, KFC had the power to show the public that the crisis was not a result of team member mistake, but a bigger issue overall. Their initial excuse for the shutdown was "delivering chicken is complicated," which left people's imaginations to wander. When they delivered their bold explanation for the crisis, the consumers knew exactly what to think about the issue at hand.

On the other hand, SeaWorld failed to take power in the narrative. As stated in the last paragraph, the company did not use the Blackfish interview opportunity to initially tell their side of the story regarding their organization. Instead, they gave the power of the narrative to the documentary and therefore were forced into spiraling out of control. Only afterward was SeaWorld willing to give their side of the story, however, it was too late for many of the public opinions.

Overall, the way that KFC dealt with the chicken shortage showed that despite an unexpected crisis, brands can be elegant and put together when dealing with things. It is important to look at issues in relation to the audience the brand is addressing.

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