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Pinpointing BP's Pitfalls:
Eight Ways to Reconnect After a Disaster

The public has watched in disbelief as oil has gushed into the waters of the Gulf Coast for nearly two months. What's also hard to believe is the way BP, and at times the U.S. government, has chosen to handle the disaster.

Here's how they could have better connected with the public throughout the spill—and explains the lessons you can learn from them.

By Maribeth Kuzmeski

For the past two months, our eyes have been glued to news of the Gulf Coast oil spill. And with each barrel that gushes into the Gulf, our anxiety and frustration rises exponentially. Much of our ire is aimed squarely at BP. With each day that passes, the oil company is buried deeper in a disaster that will surely be difficult to overcome. And what makes the situation worse is how BP has chosen to connect with the media and the public during these critical days—resorting to misleading information, poor communication, and neglect in order to dodge responsibility for the spill.

The way BP has handled the oil spill should serve as the standard to avoid for any company facing such a disaster in the future. Obviously, it would have been best for the company to have prevented the spill, but once the damage was done, the company could have mitigated some of the backlash it received.

In a disaster, you expect public opinion to be at its worst immediately after the event. With the BP spill, backlash has gotten increasingly worse—and continues to get worse because the company hasn't communicated effectively.

And it's not just BP's image that has suffered. Poor communication has also negatively affected the public's view of the government.

People are looking to the president for solutions and until his recent national address they had been mostly disappointed. Neither BP nor the U.S. government has been able to successfully connect with the public since the spill began. When it finally stops, both could be left with irreparable damage in terms of public opinion.

Obviously, few companies are likely to be involved in disasters of the magnitude of the BP oil spill—few have the capacity to wreak such immense physical and environmental destruction. But bad things can happen to any company—a financial scandal, a

contaminated or faulty product, a high-profile lawsuit. What's essential is how you react and connect with your most important publics.

Below is some advice for how companies can mend relationships and immediately start reconnecting with their customers and the public after a disaster.

Practice full transparency and full disclosure. Until it makes the decision to lay all the cards on the table after a disaster—to be upfront about its decision making process and solutions—the company in question is stuck behind a roadblock. It is impossible to begin rebuilding relationships with customers and the public in general if you aren't being honest and upfront with them about what has happened. As BP has found out, a lack of transparency attracts closer scrutiny and suspicion.

At different stages of the event, it has been revealed that BP wasn't being completely truthful about the spill. At one point, it wasn't allowing the media to get close to the site. And it turns out the company had a higher quality video feed much earlier than previously revealed. By not being fully transparent and disclosing what they know, BP officials have affected their believability. As it stands today, I think a lot of people are wondering if they can trust any communication the company puts out there.

By not being fully transparent, I think the U.S. government has also missed an opportunity to get the public fully on board with them. People want to hear that the government is doing its part to stop the spill. They want to hear what the government is working on, and what the government plans to do to help the citizens of the Gulf Coast. It wasn't until just recently that we began to receive a clearer picture from the president about what he thought the government's role should be.

Get out in front of the disaster. There is no better example of this than Johnson & Johnson and Tylenol. After several people died from taking cyanide-laced Extra-Strength Tylenol in 1982, Johnson & Johnson immediately accepted responsibility. The company immediately recalled all Tylenol products (even though it likely was an isolated incident) and developed a tamperproof seal. They began showing the public that they were doing everything in their power to protect the public and fix the problem.

When you get in front of a problem, it doesn't make the problem go away, but at least it shows people that you are doing something about it and that you care. Caring is a key point of connection. Your public has to see that you care enough about them to forget your own company's well-being for the moment and instead do what you can to restore *their* safety and *their* well-being. So much of it is perception.

Because BP was slow to accept responsibility and show they care about what the spill is doing to the Gulf Coast, I don't think people perceive that the company cares much about them. And that is something that can be very difficult to overcome when you are trying to rebuild relationships with a public that feels it has been wronged.

Step up and take responsibility. An important part of reconnecting after a disaster is accepting responsibility. Johnson & Johnson's quick acceptance of responsibility is one reason the company was able to recover so handily after the Tylenol scare. Unfortunately, in the case of the BP spill, the company has only reluctantly taken responsibility for what happened.

Especially during the early days of the spill, there was a lot of finger-pointing between the companies involved in the spill. No one wanted to say it was their fault. BP should have recognized that no matter whose fault it was it was going to come down to them to fix it. They should have taken responsibility from the get-go and said, "There was an accident. It's horrible. We apologize for our role in this disaster, and we are committed to doing everything we can to fix it as quickly as possible."

The government too has seemed to try to deflect responsibility for its role. It was almost two months before the president openly acknowledged that the mismanagement of the Minerals Management Service played at least some role in the events leading up to the rig explosion and the spill. Until someone takes responsibility for the disaster, the public doesn't feel like there is anyone fully in charge of fixing the problem.

Remember quantity *and* quality of communication count. In a crisis, quality of communication is important, but so is quantity. Any company facing a disaster must stay in front of the public and keep them constantly informed. In the case of the oil spill, the U.S. government too needs to be steadfast in its efforts to stay in front of the people—after all, it stands to damage the livelihoods of U.S. citizens in addition to the long-lasting effects it will have on the environment.

When there is a lack of sufficient communication, the result is anger. And when you are dealing with a disaster, anger is no good. The anger causes a major roadblock and makes it difficult to connect. Even if you eventually get it right, it takes a long time for that anger to subside. Both BP and the government would be well served by beginning to release steady updates regarding their efforts to stop the spill and then begin the recovery process. It is time for both parties to begin communicating effectively exactly what they are doing and how they expect those efforts to make a difference.

Don't shy away from tough questions. There is nothing easy about reconnecting after a disaster. Regardless of the situation, there will always be tons of difficult questions that people want answered. Make sure you're prepared to answer them.

BP executives have almost seemed annoyed that people are questioning them. The company's spokespeople, including its CEO, Tony Hayward, often come off as dismissive. When dealing with a disaster, if you have to answer a question a thousand times, just answer it. When you're dismissive or act like you don't want to answer a certain question, you diminish the public's trust in you.

BP has tried to avoid answering certain questions, and it has turned out that things were worse than BP was putting forward. It's another example of how the company has actually made things worse for themselves by not being upfront about all the issues.

Be authentic—but please think before you speak! When a disaster strikes, too often companies will go to the script. That's understandable, because you naturally want your communication to be well-thought-out. But it's important to understand that your communication also has to be authentic. Remember, people connect with other people—not with scripts. So be sure to take a break from the “official” party line from time to time and let your human side show.

There is one important caveat, however: *don't* be “authentic” in the ill-advised way BP's executives have!

For the most part following the spill, the company has stuck to scripted apologies and statements. One of the few times Hayward went off script, though, he angered people by saying he wanted his life back. Sure, he was being authentic, but the statement definitely took away from the scripted apologies the company had previously offered. If your level of authenticity does not match up to your scripted statements, then it might be best to stick to the script. If you do choose to speak your mind, choose your words very carefully.

And BP serves up another great example of not thinking before you speak. In the company's recent talk with President Obama, it was revealed that Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg mentioned BP's concern for “the small people” being affected by the oil spill. Naturally, it was a statement that rubbed many the wrong way. The takeaway lesson is that people need to feel you truly mean what you are saying, but what you are saying needs to *help* your cause, not hurt it.

Couple your communication with action. You can be providing people with the best communication possible, but if you aren't also backing up that communication with action, you won't get anywhere.

At the moment, I think this point might be a bigger struggle for the government than BP. I think as time passes and the oil continues to flow, Obama's talking about how angry he is isn't enough. It's time for that anger to be coupled with action. Thankfully, with the announcement that he negotiated a \$20 billion payout from BP, it does seem like he is starting to hold BP's feet to the fire. That kind of concrete action needs to continue. You can't be all show and no go. You have to have clear communication followed by activity.

Johnson & Johnson serve as another good example here. After the Tylenol scare, they communicated to the public that they were taking responsibility for what happened. Then they recalled their Tylenol products even though it was a huge cost to the company.

Make the public part of the process. A way to connect with people is to involve them in the process. When your company is dealing with a disaster, you must assess who you should be collaborating with, who can help you, and how they can help. When you do so, it shows people that you are working toward solutions, and they become a little army on your side.

When I consult with companies, I make sure that all of the decision makers and managers are involved in what is going on. I want everyone in the room together collaborating, because when someone is left out and new initiatives are implemented, they feel like they are being given directives. But if they feel like they have been made a part of the process, then they make sure they are part of the solution.

There is an opportunity with the oil spill to get the people of the Gulf Coast and even outside the Gulf Coast involved in the clean up, and perhaps this is where the government can take some initiative. People want to help. Obama successfully used social media and the Internet to mobilize voters during his presidential campaign, and I think these methods could be used effectively to organize the people of the Gulf Coast and any others who are willing to help with the clean-up process or even just to donate money to those being affected by the spill. By taking advantage of that help, the government and BP can bring these people on their team. They bring people into the solution, and people can better see what the plan is. People become insiders rather than outsiders whose only weapon is to criticize what they are seeing.

The bottom line is that BP took a terrible situation, and, via poor communication and mismanagement, they made it even worse. It is now much more than an oil spill. It's about the way people have been treated. It's about the fact that many people feel they have been victimized even further by the way the disaster has been handled.

If BP and the U.S. government want to come out of this situation with the ability to salvage public opinion of them, they must start working toward reconnecting through honest and open communication right away.

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The Connectors: How the World's Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life (Wiley, 2009, ISBN: 978-0-470-48818-8, \$22.95) is available at bookstores nationwide, major online booksellers, or directly from the publisher by calling 800-225-5945. In Canada, call 800-567-4797. More information at www.redzonemarketing.com and www.theconnectorsbook.com.