



Cruise Ship Crisis: What the PR Industry Should Be

By Diane Schawrtz

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After the partial-sinking of the [Italian cruise ship Costa Concordia](#) last Friday off the Tuscany coast resulting in at least 11 deaths and dozens still missing, the media coverage has been a balance of soft stories (one couple took the cruise instead of marriage counseling) and scandalous ([the captain](#) reportedly was at the bar drinking and flirting with a guest as the ship was sinking; another outlet reported that he steered too close to the mainland so he could impress a friend).

By now, those wearing a business hat and watching the story unfold know that Carnival Cruise Lines is the parent company of this cruise ship – and [its stock](#) has already taken a hit on international exchanges, and this being peak booking season the cruise industry as a whole will be temporarily battered. Those at the dinner table with friends and family might be exchanging “what-if-it-were us” and “what-a-shames”. My daughter noted – darkly, as teenagers do – that this incident will help ticket sales for the re-release of Titanic this Spring (she might be right).

From a PR perspective, there could be a tendency to proclaim that the cruise line should apologize often, focus on the victims and their families, and be prudent about its commercial promotions for a while, at least. To that, I say: of course – this is PR 101 and 201.

The more interesting challenge is timing – how long, how deep and how wide? Should Carnival distance itself from the subsidiary Costa Concordia? Should it take a different communications posture with consumers vs the media and investors? Should Carnival remove its Google adword campaign promoting special deals, at least for a few days? Strategy comes before tactics, so it will be interesting to watch their communications strategy unfold over the coming days. *(What do you think? Please respond below!)*

During crises like these, PR departments and agency partners at most companies will gather to take a look at their crisis preparedness plans and make sure they’re air tight. But the existing challenge is not the crisis communications plan itself, but how does PR get a seat at the important table where it can have an effect on performance – from CEOs to GMs to coaches and captains of ships? How can PR be pro-active rather than re-active to the potential crises of our times? This, I submit, is a question we should be asking of the essential PR discipline as companies continue to steer their own ships in uncertain waters.