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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 48: DAN WEBBER – CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Organizations and companies have been dealing with crises and crisis communication from the very beginning. But today, due to the digital age, there are new realities when it comes to crisis communication and reputation management. Now when an organization or its leader makes a mistake or a questionable decision, it has the potential to take on a life of its own on social media. And when that happens, not only is the company's reputation at risk, but so is its bottom line and possibly its future. Some of the world's top businesses rely on communication and marketing consultants like Edelman to develop their online communication strategies. Our guest on the podcast today is Executive Vice President and Director of Operations for Edelman DC's digital team. A group of 80 professionals in Washington tasked with reputation management in the digital space. Dan Webber joins us to talk about the changing landscape of crisis communication and what businesses, organizations, and leaders need to know to positively position themselves. Here's our conversation with Dan Webber of Edelman.

Ken White

Dan, welcome back to your alma mater. It's great to see you. You do come back and really contribute to the students and to the school, so thanks again for being back. It's nice to have you in Williamsburg.

Dan Webber

It's good to be here.

Ken White

You are a communication expert, especially crisis communication and, in particular, in the digital space. Can you tell us what it is you do for Edelman?

Dan Webber

Yes, that's exactly right. I in our DC office, and I specialize in digital crisis management. And what that really means is, you know, as we've explored, we've always had a crisis communications team, and I think that's something that's pretty standard with PR companies, communications marketing companies. But in the last seven or eight years, we started recognizing that with the advent of an explosion of social media that, there would not be ever be a crisis without an online component. And so, about seven or eight years ago, my boss said, you know, you need to start getting in there and working with this social media stuff, quote unquote. And you know you could see it one after another each new crisis, whether was the BP oil spill that the online reaction in itself became almost a bigger crisis than the actual catalyst event.

Ken White

Yeah.

Dan Webber

And so that's where I, from the digital team, partner with the crisis team and really think about how are things unfolding online. Who's driving conversation? Where is it going? Where the agendas. How do we measure our response? You know, with digital tools, we're able to try things in real time and optimize and track our results. Unlike we've ever been able to do before. So there's a lot of really cool opportunities, but there's a lot of also a lot of challenges that come with the digital component to this.

Ken White

Do people, executives professionals, for the most part, do they understand the incredible impact this can have? Social media on a crisis.

Dan Webber

Some do some don't. I think you're seeing, obviously, with millennials and what we call native adopters of social media and digital, this is just how they communicate, and they get it, and they don't only get the potential impact and the significance of it, but they also know how to put things in context. Oh, that's not really a big deal. You know, if people are posting on Facebook, it doesn't mean it's a big deal. Now juxtapose that with executives who are new to social media. They may freak out when they get something on Google, or they'll say you know, what's this thing that's happening on my face or Twitter, or you know, it's kind of fun, you know, I just got a Google alert. We need to turn off Google Alerts, and I don't mean to be poking fun. Well, you know, sometimes that happens, and so they will overreact when they see something online. And so a lot of my job is actually translating what's happening both for the digital natives, you know to give you know to allow them to navigate in the way they need to but also for executives who are just trying to understand, you know, why is Wikipedia appearing so high in search results and why

can't I just go in and change things. Why are we getting this huge influx of comments, and how do we respond to that? Why is there a Google alert being triggered, and what does that mean for the organization? And so we push them. Half of our job is just kind of sifting through all the noise and being able to find the gem, the intelligence that allows them to inform the strategy of how they react to respond to a crisis. And you know, another part of this is trying to help them have a measured approach so that they don't create more problems for themselves and overreact in social media.

Ken White

A measured approach in a couple of ways. You're also measuring the data, right?

Dan Webber

That's right.

Ken White

So you can actually see results. And so it's not so artsy.

Dan Webber

That's right.

Ken White

It's pretty scientific.

Dan Webber

There is, I think, a lot of crisis practitioners for a long time, especially in the political arena. A lot of it was an art form. And there were some really good practitioners. These are the advance guys who go out there and stage something, you know, staging. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall. Really great stagecraft. Now you can marry it with amazing amounts of data and analytics that allow you to micro-target audiences and understand what they're saying how they're saying when they're saying it. You can even time when you put a statement out or what you put a piece of content out, knowing that that's the time when most of your audience is going to consume that content. If you're trying to reach an audience of 18 to 25-year-olds who eat at a fast food chain, you probably are going to you can actually look at data and say, well, if I want to communicate to them, if I look at just the behavior I may I might want to communicate to them between the hours of 11:00 pm and 2:00 am rather than you know 2 o'clock in the afternoon. And so there's a lot of interesting pieces of data in science that we can now apply to crisis response. We could put out a message and optimize it in real-time. Sounds like a lot of buzzwords, but it's really quite powerful in terms of the science that you can now bring to the art form. You still have to have the art form, and there's still a vital importance of telling a good story,

being compelling, bringing human emotion to your response in your reaction. But now we can add a new level of science to this, which is really quite powerful.

Ken White

Yeah, and that art and science together makes it absolutely fascinating.

Dan Webber

It's pretty cool.

Ken White

There are a couple of strategies you've talked about in terms of crisis that there's the reactive strategy and the proactive strategy. What does that mean? What are those?

Dan Webber

Yeah. I think most people, when they think of a crisis response, they think of, you know, the big boom happens, and now we're all reacting and responding to that actual catalyst. And I would say if that's your strategy, you're in store for some really tough times. The meaningful impact that you can have on crisis preparedness and your ability to actually navigate risk is it's all the homework that you've done in advance. Professional athletes call it muscle memory. The military talks about operational readiness. It's about identifying your risks in advance, creating some kind of process protocol governance structure, training, practicing, getting it down so that you have the reps under your belt and you understand what might come at you and how do you react to it. So that you can then get to the bigger questions, the more important pieces, which what is our strategy for then going forward so that we can actually move out of the crisis and move into recovery and then restitution within a situation. If you're caught flat-footed though you could be, you can have the best instincts in the world, and that will be a really challenging series of events. So we look at crisis management as actually front-ending almost 80 to 90 percent of your ability to respond well in a crisis is that the homework that you've done in advance. And I think one of the things that is interesting to think about is you could be a really great executive, a really great practitioner of selling widgets offering a service. Very few people are spend their day, you know, dealing with crises. Outside of their normal business.

Ken White

Right, right.

Dan Webber

And so when you throw at them a whole new issue that they would have never even thought of beyond again, just a customer service issue or something like that. That can challenge the enterprise and challenge your ability to actually do business as usual, and

that's what we're talking about. Not just the normal issues management. We're talking about things that challenge your ability to do business as usual and perhaps even challenge your license to operate and exist as a company or organization. And those are the things that we're thinking about. You have to take time. You have to be as deliberate as you are with your business strategy as you are with crisis prep and recovery.

Ken White

And not having that strategy is like trying to play a football game without a playbook.

Dan Webber

Absolutely.

Ken White

You're just going in totally blind, but yet many organizations have nothing.

Dan Webber

Yeah and if you take that same analogy if they play without a playbook they actually may show up with like you know instead of eleven people on the field that are you know filling out all the positions you might show up with eleven tight ends and you know because that's one of the biggest questions we ask is where does the buck stop who's making the call who's the quarterback. And that's something that many companies and organizations don't spend time thinking about who's the core crisis team. I once went into a situation where you had 32 people making the decision. They were reviewing press statements. And you can think about how grueling that is even if they're all in the same room, let alone virtually how much time it takes, and you know the moment something happens, you're on the clock. The comments on Twitter, the posts on Facebook they're all adding up. The media's assembling outside. And if it takes you six hours to even decide on an issue, you're in trouble. That's why at the very least, you need to know who's on first who's making the call. Where does the buck stop?

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Dan Webber in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you get to the next level with its certificate in business management program coming up in October. It's a five-day program for the professional who lacks an MBA or wants to improve on critical business and leadership skills. For more information on the certificate in business management program, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Dan Webber on crisis communication in the online space.

Ken White

So you have to have that team, and then again, the next step is if there is a spokesman to be determined. How do you coach organizations on that? Is there a set game plan, or do you wait and you've got to do a little reacting, I would suppose?

Dan Webber

Sure. And that's a question we get a lot, and it's a really good one to analyze. And I think there's some very smart people who've spent a lot of hours studying this. At Edelman, we do a thing called the Trust Barometer. It's a study on trust every year. Tens of thousands of people from around the world, and the questions are, who do you trust? Who do you trust to deliver good news? Who do you trust to deliver bad news? And I don't you know, I think that each year we see some really interesting findings. But one of the obvious ones is that people don't trust executives. They don't have a relationship with them. Celebrity executives are a little bit different. They have to have some affinity towards them. But people don't trust executives. People don't trust politicians. They trust people like you and I. And so if you add that to the equation of okay, really bad news, and you're going to put someone out there in front of the audience to, you know, to talk about what you're doing to recover from the situation, and they don't trust you. What do you do? Well, it's very difficult just to put Joe Schmo employee out there, right? I'm not saying that, but you have to really be deliberate about who the spokesperson is and who your audiences are. Do they react better to a man or a woman? Do you need an academic credential? Do you need some kind of, you know, how do you stage the interviews or the or the press conferences and so again, if you're winging it, then you're probably open yourself up for some more risk. But if you practice the discipline of it, you have someone who's very, very well trained. Then I think they can be an ace in the hole that you can bring out. And let me be very clear. It's almost impossible just to talk your way out of a crisis to PR or spin as many people look at the PR industry and say well, you're just spinsters. No, the truth will come out eventually. But if you have a good spokesperson, it makes it that much easier to convey your messaging and to reach the audiences with the messages that they need to hear in order for you to be able to move forward.

Ken White

And the messages what has worked what hasn't worked in terms of this is what we're going to say.

Dan Webber

Sure.

Ken White

Let's see if it flies. What's a good strategy? There probably isn't a one size fits all, of course, right?

Dan Webber

There is not a one size fits all, but I think the thing that I counsel clients on, and we really emphasize with our clients, is if you're in a crisis and there's just bad stuff happening, you need to take a step back or breath and address it first as a human being and to understand that it's okay to express regret and to be clear it's you're not taking on liability because the lawyers would just jump all over it.

Ken White

Sure.

Dan Webber

It's okay. And you need to be mindful of the legal obligations and maintaining your protection from those legal risks. But from a reputational piece of this, you need to connect as a human being. If things are happening really bad, you need to show some of that humanity, and I think there's some really good examples that are popping up all over the place with, whether it be shootings or whether you know if anyone passes away or dies if it impacts human life in any way you need to know that there are people grieving and if you're not sincere with that you're going to lose them from the moment you start talking. And so that's one of the things that we really try and coach executives and spokespeople as they're going into a crisis situation is just to be mindful of the humanity of the situation first and foremost and then be able to go into the messaging in terms of answer the questions. What are people? What are rational people asking, and some of them are, you know, what's actually happening? What did you do when you found out about the situation? More importantly, what are you doing to make sure this doesn't happen again? Those things those principles haven't changed. Digital though it's social media, I think, have made them even more difficult to navigate because there's so much noise. But you have to really kind of think about it. What's the humanity of the situation? Express the regret and then go into answering the questions that rational people are really trying to get from you. And if you dodge them too much, I think they're going to see right through you, and they might suggest, or even kind of think that you are you're slippery, that you're slimy, that you're just trying to dodge the situation. You need to accept responsibility and go into it as much as you can.

Ken White

Crisis was never easy. But now, looking back the good old days of just a few TV cameras and a couple of print reporters, wow, that would have been great. But now there's so much going on in that digital space, so much talk, often a lot of fiction that social media subscribers are seeing as fact. How do you manage that? I mean the crisis is happening. You've got the messages and so forth. But Twitter is going like crazy. Facebook is going nuts. Everything is going berserk, and you're trying to manage that. How do you deal with all that?

Dan Webber

Yeah, you know I've I refer to them as digital, a digital wildfire. It starts to spread and take over, and if you don't do anything to address the flame, it just gets bigger and bigger. And you know, there are a couple of ways to think about addressing this, and the first thing I think about is, of course, monitoring. Understanding what is happening what's not. Is it you know where is it spreading? Who's pushing that information? Do they have an agenda? You know is it coming from a competitor, or is it coming from a critic? What's in it for them? And then once you're able to kind of identify what the actual situation is, and sometimes you may not. The facts may be kind of coming at you faster than you can handle, or they may just maybe a lot of noise, and you really don't know the truth. You then have to use that to inform your strategy and then be able to respond. And one of the things that we think about is are you actually establishing your own factual record online. Because if you're not establishing a factual record, then you're leaving it up to Google to do it for you, or you're leaving it up to the media or you're leaving it up to whomever to fill that vacuum. And people want to. They want more information. They're going to trying to devour it. And so if you're not, if you're not establishing it, then you're really handing over some of the cards that are the most important to you and the ones that you have the most control over. And I think that can put you on your back feet really really fast. Stephen Colbert, the comedian, talks about this is truthiness and how truth gets negotiated online through sensationalism and, just you know, agendas. You see it play out in the political arena all the time. You see it play out in crisis situations where there's people are looking for a villain. They want to find a villain. They want to find a hero. And so you have to establish your version of the facts, your version of the truthful record, as best as you can. And you know, sometimes it's just as simple as saying here's what we know, here's what we don't know, and here's what we're doing in the next X amount of time to figure out the next piece of this. And then we will get back to you, and I think rational people are okay with that.

Ken White

Right.

Dan Webber

And I keep using the word rational because, in the online world, you can hide behind anonymity and be completely irrational and just throw potshots, and that's that creates noise that you just need to figure out ways to kind of navigate and not let yourself get over emotional and defensive about it.

Ken White

So if I'm just I'm a part of an organization, it's a pretty good-sized organization. I don't necessarily have a relationship with the communication office or the CEO or legal what can

I, as a professional, do about crisis communication for my organization? What kind of advice do you give to professionals?

Dan Webber

I think many people think that a crisis response or management of a reputation is owned by the CEO, the president, the legal team, or even like the spokesperson communications office. And I would say there's some truth to that. They have a lot of responsibilities, but I think the organizations that do really well are the ones that recognize that everybody has a stake in the game. And so you may be a line manager, you might be a fundraiser for a nonprofit, you might be a waiter at a restaurant. You know you're interacting with stakeholders, and you need to be thinking about how am I maintaining, building, growing, and then protecting the reputation at all times. If you really buy into the enterprise. If you buy into the mission and I think that's one thing that leadership should be thinking about is, how are we empowering employees to navigate both a crisis response so when there's bad things happening. We often forget about our internal family first.

Ken White

Yeah, we do.

Dan Webber

And we need to give them something because they're going to they're gonna be asked about it at a barbecue or a cocktail party.

Ken White

Right.

Dan Webber

And if you just let them go, which they're free to do anyway, you don't control them. But if you don't give them anything then they're going to fill the space with what they think. Now on the flip side of it, you know when you're preparing. You need to make sure that they also feel empowered to identify risk into when they see the risk action around it that they're not living in a culture of fear where if they see something and you hear in the airport, now see something, say something. There are many organizations that have command and control based off of fear that if they would have said something earlier and allowed employees to kind of speak their mind, then I think they could have navigated that risk before it became a crisis. And there's a lot of really good case studies about did BP turn into an organization that focused on safety and excellence that only looked at the numbers and didn't actually empower people to think about risk. VW and some of these other recent big crisis situations is, did the organization and the culture allow for and encourage every employee to be a steward of the reputation and protect against risk?

Ken White

Last question if I'm leading an organization and there is no plan, there's nothing. We are not addressing this. What's step one? What should I be doing?

Dan Webber

Yeah, that's a really great question. I think step one is to acknowledge that you know you need to start moving forward towards a culture of preparedness and risk management. And I would say the first thing is to get a team together and identify your risks. And the team itself, it doesn't really matter who they are, but I think once you have a better understanding of your risk profile, then you can start taking steps like who is the core team that would respond to this. What's the playbook? What are the things we're doing now to mitigate that risk? But if you don't have an understanding, you're not acknowledging that there's a problem, you're not acknowledging that there's a risk portfolio that exists that whatever you want to call it the you know, the list of things that we thou shall not mention, whatever. If you don't have an understanding of that, then chances are you're probably not sleeping so well at night. You're probably worrying about things that rightfully so. But I would say that's the first place we typically start is let's organize kind of a scenario, you know what are all the different risks out there and start mapping that and having a better understanding of what what what we need to think about.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Dan Webber, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization get to the next level with business and leadership development programs that specifically fit your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Thanks to our guest this week, Dan Webber, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.