

## Not All Press is Good Press: Managing a Crisis

Gina F. Rubel

*New York Times* reporter, Peter S. Goodman, hit the nail on the head in his article, [In Case of Emergency: What Not to Do](#). Goodman shares with us the realities of bad crisis management which equals bad press. The examples he sites are Toyota, BP (who even my 10-year-old daughter sees as an environmental villain), Goldman Sachs, and others. He also sites “image implosion” examples of LeBron James and Mel Gibson, although he skipped over Michael Vick.

Goodman shares great points and the entire article is worth a solid read (or two). However, there are some important points all which are dependent upon the situation you are dealing with. 1) Heed established protocol: When the story is bad, disclose it immediately; however 2) there are times when silence is better. Tiger Woods can tell you why. And 3) don't say “anything” if there's a chance it will lead to hypocrisy and ridicule and especially if the media can tear you a part word for word.

Goodman also reminds us that lawyers and P.R. practitioners often find themselves in a battle when it comes to handling crisis communications. This is something I know all too well – as a lawyer and publicist who handles litigation publicity. I have found my Id and Ego in battle over the best way to handle a situation many times. (Don't ask me if the lawyer in me is the Id or the Ego – the public relations practitioner seems to win out in me every time.)

Goodman says, “In times of crisis, communications professionals and lawyers often pursue conflicting agendas. Communications strategists are inclined to mollify public anger with expressions of concern, while lawyers warn that contrition can be construed as admissions of guilt in potentially expensive lawsuits.” Both are correct and there can be a happy medium when they play nicely in the sandbox.

At one point in the article, Goodman quotes [Eric Dezenhall](#), a communications strategist in Washington, D.C., who worked in the White House for President [Ronald Reagan](#). He says that a corporation in crisis is “absolute chaos” and that the lawyers and P.R. consultants “despise each other.” Although this isn't far from the truth during a crisis, it makes a great case for advance crisis communications planning – a practice where most corporations (and lawyers) miss the mark.

A crisis communications plan anticipates issues before they arise. It deals in scenarios and responses. It's the “if this then that” game and it works. This process also works for lawyers dealing with high-stakes issues for their companies and clients. For example, when a law firm is going to file a complaint on behalf of a client, and the complaint deals with well-known entities, it behooves the law firm to understand who might see that “once-filed public” document and what questions could be asked. In many courthouses, journalists are assigned to review the public filings for the day to uncover stories. Just because a firm or client doesn't request media attention doesn't mean they are not going to get it.

So what is a law firm to do? Employ media strategy. Ask: “If a member of the media calls about this complaint, what are we going to say? What if they reach out to our adversary first? Should we disclose the filing or is it better to take a wait-and-see approach with a lawyer-approved statement in place? Who will serve as the spokesperson? Who are the affected audiences? Do they need to know about the lawsuit in advance of filing? How does this affect the company's bottom line and what are we going to do about it?” These are just a few of the questions that need to be asked.

On the other hand, companies susceptible to lawsuits should also play the “if this then that” game. Rather than be on the defense, employ proper planning before a crisis hits. Defense firms and P.R. firms alike can provide added value to clients by being proactive – thus putting the clients on the offense whenever possible.

At the end of the day, it is important that attorneys and public relations practitioners work together with the same agenda. Determine what needs to be accomplished and the best road to get there – even before beginning the journey.

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Published on The National Law Review (<http://natlawreview.com>)



**About the Author:** Gina F. Rubel, Esq., is the owner of Furia Rubel Communications, Inc., a [public relations and marketing agency](#) with a niche in representing professional service firms. With more than 20 years experience, Rubel and her agency have won numerous awards for public relations, marketing, website design, legal communications, corporate philanthropy and leadership. Rubel maintains a blog at [www.ThePRLawyer.com](http://www.ThePRLawyer.com), is a regular contributor to *The Legal Intelligencer* Blog and is an occasional blogger for The Huffington Post. You can find her on LinkedIn at [www.linkedin.com/in/ginafuriarubel](http://www.linkedin.com/in/ginafuriarubel) or follow her on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/ginarubel>. For more information, go to [www.FuriaRubel.com](http://www.FuriaRubel.com).

A communications expert, attorney, author and publicist, Rubel has handled a wide range of legal communications from internationally publicized death penalty appeals to whistleblower matters. A nationally sought-after speaker, Rubel reveals the secrets to law firm communications success in her book, *Everyday Public Relations for Lawyer*.

Rubel owns the award-winning public relations agency, Furia Rubel Communications, Inc. Since 2009, the agency has been listed among the region's top PR firms by the Philadelphia Business Journal and has been named one of the Top 300 WBE's in the U.S. by Women's Enterprise Magazine. Furia Rubel provides expert strategic planning and PR and marketing services to law firms, accounting firms and other professional service providers, municipalities and government organizations, educational institutions and business-to-business companies internationally. The firm's clients have been featured everywhere from MSNBC and The Today Show to NPR, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal.

A client advocate and business diplomat, Rubel knows how to apply strategic planning to achieve clients' objectives. She has been honored by the National Italian-American Political Action Committee with a Special Achievement Award in Legal Communications and Media, named one of Pennsylvania's Best 50 Women in Business by Governor Ed Rendell and a Woman of Distinction by the Philadelphia Business Journal and The Legal Intelligencer. Rubel received the Deanne White Award for Community Service from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Philadelphia Chapter and her company has received several Pepper Pot Awards from PRSA Philadelphia for their work in media and community relations.

While actively practicing law, Rubel served on a Supreme Court of Pennsylvania Disciplinary Board Hearing Committee for six years where she conducted legal ethics reviews of other attorneys. Since then, she has taught a variety of courses on public relations programs to legal professionals, corporations and universities including social media, strategic public relations planning, crisis communications, media training and reputation management.

Rubel is an active member of the Legal Marketing Association, American, Pennsylvania and Philadelphia Bar Associations (Bar-News Media Chair), Justinian Society (Past Chancellor), Philadelphia Public Relations Association, Bucks County Women's Business Forum (Past President), Bucks County Women's Fund (Board Member) National Association of Women Business Owners and Public Relations Society of America. She serves as a PR expert for the Philadelphia Bar Association Law Practice Management Program. Rubel is the past chair of the Communications Committee for the Drexel University Alumni Association for which she also served as a member of the Board of Governors and a member of the University Magazine Editorial Board.

A graduate of Drexel University and Widener University School of Law, Gina resides in Doylestown, Pa., with her husband and their two children on a 250 year-old farm. She loves to spend time with her family and pets, travel around the world, feed her photography addiction, write and practice yoga.

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