

# E-Collaboration, Public Relations and Crises Management in UAE Organizations

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## ABSTRACT

*It is crucial for a company to preserve its image and reputation, and public relations (PR) and—ever-increasingly—e-collaboration play a vital role in accomplishing this goal. This study investigates strategies that help an organization rejuvenate its image after damage caused by various crises. It is important to know which PR strategies best engage stakeholders, because companies must maintain healthy relationships with all stake-holding entities in order to survive. A case study was conducted to explore what circumstances can compromise a company's image and what role a PR department would optimally play in rejuvenating it. To gain valuable insights into this topic, interviews were conducted with 28 PR professionals working in organizations that faced some crisis in the United Arab Emirates, with a particular focus on how e-collaboration can factor into the effective resolution of corporate crises within the PR department and the execution of its larger crisis resolution plan. Results suggest that PR plays a critical role during crisis management: through on-the-ground PR teams and e-collaboration, organizations can turn adverse situations to their favor and preserve reputations that would otherwise be tarnished or outright destroyed. PR should not delay designating culpability during a crisis, and should also oversee correction of the situation and help managers investigate the matter when necessary. In doing this quickly, efficiently, and competently, organizations can minimize the negative impact a crisis may have in the public eye, and because time is of the essence during crisis situations, e-collaboration plays a major role in optimizing positive outcomes in these situations.*

*Keywords:* Crises in the UAE, Crisis Management, e-Collaboration, Local Organizations, Public Relations, UAE

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## INTRODUCTION

Public relations play a vital role during crises and is critical to their effective management. Turney (2008) posits that PR practitioners typically have daily responsibilities identical to those during crises, such as “maintaining and improving their organization’s relationships by effectively

communicating with its target audiences. Public relations practitioners are not normally responsible for resolving the underlying problem(s) that created a crisis situation” (p. 1). Therefore, PR practitioners cannot (and *should* not) exercise their roles independently or direct the organization’s actions without considering and adhering to the organization’s overarching goals.

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Out of necessity, an intense amount of internal scrutiny is directed towards reputation during times of crisis. Rather than seeing this as a negative, Turney (2008) points out that times of crisis can be turned into opportunity for strengthening and growing a company if they are managed well, saying that “Effective crisis communication can actually enhance an organization’s reputation” (p. 1). Jennex (2004) defines crises and disasters as unexpected circumstances or situations that demand a swift and effective response that is “different from their normal operating procedures” (p. 86).

Even though in any crisis, PR is always looking to manage the immediate reactions, maintaining a longer-term perspective that focuses on increasing ongoing communications with targeted populations is good practice, and contributes to a better overall outcome. Latonero and Shklovski (2011) discussed the importance of quick responses during crises, and they agreed that “the general goal of risk and crisis communication...is to inform the public of potential or current events and to persuade the public to adapt their behavior in ways that would improve health and safety” (p. 5).

Occasionally, situations require immediate damage control, in which case an appropriate set of actions must be quickly devised in order to manage the situation. In the concise and memorable words of Brigulio (2004), during times of crisis, organizations must “tell the truth, tell it all, and tell it fast.” According to Shaw (2006), crisis management is:

*...the coordination of efforts to control a crisis event consistent with strategic goals of an organization. Although generally associated with response, recovery and resumption of operations during and following a crisis event, crisis management responsibilities extend to pre-event awareness, prevention and preparedness and post event restoration and transition (p. 66).*

A longtime public relations scholar and professional leader, the late Farlow (1976), compiled almost 500 definitions for the term

“public relations.” From these, he then identified the major common elements in an attempt to arrive at a cohesive definition of “public relations.” His resulting definition encompasses both conceptual and operational elements (Farlow, 1976). In essence, public relations can be defined as a professional field concerned with maintaining public image for high-profile people, organizations, or programs.

Public relations practitioners help others establish and maintain effective relationships with third parties. This work is usually performed through a public relations firm or an agency, independent consultants, or as a part of the communication staffs of corporations, not-for-profit organizations, or government agencies (Latimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth & Van, 2004). To establish a holistic understanding of the public relations function, the following definition serves well (Seitel, 2004):

*Public relations is a leadership and management function that helps achieve organizational objectives, define philosophy, and facilitate organizational change. Public relations practitioners communicate with all relevant internal and external publics to develop positive relationships and to create consistency between organizational goals and societal expectations. Public relations practitioners develop, execute, and evaluate organizational programs that promote the exchange of influence and understanding among an organization’s constituent parts and publics. (p. 5)*

Fearn-Banks (2007) describes a crisis as “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name. A crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization” (p. 2). Barton (1993) defines a crisis as “a major unpredictable event that has potentially negative results” (p. 2). Fink (1986) further adds that a crisis is an event that increases in intensity and is given much scrutiny by the media. Crisis

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