

Early Data in CI-UGA Survey Show Differences in PR Pros' Views of DEI

An oft-heard refrain is 'We all have biases.' One question is how biases inject themselves in crisis and crisis communication.

Those are some of the questions a new study from the **University of Georgia** and *Crisis Insider* aims to answer.

The study also explores how communication executives and PR pros assess complex and challenging industry-wide issues (e.g., workplace health, ethics in conflict management, and diversity, equity and inclusion [DEI]).

As we know, such issues are influencing organizational crisis preparedness. Survey respondents identified essential elements required for organizations to be prepared to tackle these challenges.

INSIGHTS ON DEI AND CRISIS

- **70.7:** % of Male participants who agree that their organization has a diverse leadership
- **59.8:** % of Female participants who agree that their organization has a diverse leadership
- **83.7:** % of Male participants who agree that their organization has an inclusive work environment
- **77.3:** % of Female participants who agree that their organization has an inclusive work environment
- **83.3:** % of White/Caucasian participants who agree that their organization has an inclusive work environment
- **Participants' Profile:** 156 White/Caucasian, 97 Female

Source: U of GA/PRNEWS Survey, March 2021, (192 participants)

The research also provides insight into general crisis leadership and issues management for communication pro-

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WATERCOOLER

For Worst Offenses, Execs' Apologies Should be Public and PR Pros Must Fight for the Right Words, Not Best Legal Phrases

This month's reader question deals with a critical part of crisis communication, the apology. Our respondent is T. Denise Stokes, who heads **DS Marketing & PR**. Most recently, she was a communication manager at **Six Flags America**. Her response was edited for space and clarity.

We'd like to include your questions. Please send them to: sarenstein@accessintel.com



T. Denise Stokes
Owner
DS Marketing & PR

Question: How do you counsel a leader to issue a heartfelt apology, particularly when the person is reluctant to admit culpability? What best practices do you recommend for preparing communicators to handle these situations?

T. Denise Stokes: Let's assume the executive is accused of misconduct and is apologizing to employees, business partners and possibly the public. In the worst cases—financial, medical or sexual misconduct—the executive(s) should issue a public and private apology.

In most cases, you're going to have to consult with a legal team before a word can be said. That's when you, as the PR pro, have to fight for the right words, and not just the right legal words.

You can't fight too long, though, as time is of the essence. However, a holding statement can buy time for the PR team. A statement also lets the public know that the company, or executive, is at least aware of the situation.

First, you need to let [the executive] know that every word and gesture will be scrutinized, especially since the [optimal] apology is issued via video or TV. Merely sending a written statement to employees, business partners and the public just won't cut it. A video statement is a much more powerful gesture that will show remorse and contrition.

Prompt expressions of regret and remorse should include 'I'm sorry' and 'I regret.' The executive needs to acknowledge the harm caused to victims, the executive's role in it and how he/she will change.

PREPARING COMMUNICATORS

Think through worst-case scenarios. And I mean all the things that you think could never happen in a million years! Do it now. And, do it often. There are times when even quarterly crisis planning isn't enough, but it's at least a good start.

It's not uncommon for a major corporation to have a crisis playbook of 25 pages or more. If you don't, you have homework to do.

Think through who will be your speaker(s). Ask yourself, are you ready to put your face on a company crisis? Once that's determined, practice, practice, practice your company message.

If I ever had to beg and plead with an executive to apologize, I would sincerely start considering finding another place of employment! Your reputation as a PR person is also at stake. 

professionals.

So far, the preliminary data (192 respondents) show significant differences related to the perceptions of a diverse workforce, leadership and inclusive work environment between women and men [see chart, page 5].

In addition, it appears that there are significant differences in perceptions among diverse racial and ethnic groups, but there are too few participants with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds at this time to make solid conclusions.

That most participants in the survey are White PR pros we expected to some degree. This reflects the [lack of racial and ethnic diversity](#) in the PR workforce. Still, we would have liked to include insight from additional practitioners with diverse backgrounds.

PERCEPTION AND REALITY

Practitioners' perceptions are critical when they evaluate situations/environments and make important decisions related to an organization's positioning.

If an organization's perceptions about DEI issues are different from those of the public, there is the potential to create a discrepancy.

For example, when communicators perceive that the organization's workforce or leadership is diverse and its work environment is inclusive whereas its publics perceive otherwise,

this may lead to an incident that could develop into a PR crisis.

Thus, organizations should consider hiring independent firms for DEI audits or set clear DEI goals and objectives to ensure that the organization has a diverse workforce and leadership as well as an inclusive workforce.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

As we noted above, thus far we have surveyed 192 adults who are PR pros in the United States. All participants are at least 18 years of age and span across groups such as gender, education, company size and ethnicity.

The survey is active until March 15, 2021, and available through multiple PR networks. Data collection will continue through March.

Surveyed practitioners' assessment of these key issues and their organization's preparedness is measured through a 7-point Likert or Likert-type scale 1-7, where, for example, 1 indicates "completely disagree" and 7 indicates "completely agree."

Next month's *Crisis Insider* will include a full article on the survey's findings. 

—Sara Ervin and Solyee Kim

Sara Ervin and Solyee Kim are PhD students at the University of Georgia

PROFILE

How Helping Journalists Decipher Technical Material Can Prevent Negative Stories from Growing into Crises

The majority of stories in this publication feature aspects of crisis readiness or describe how brand communicators act once ensconced in a crisis.

The story below, though, looks at how a communicator prevented an incident that might have grown into a crisis.

As Durée Ross, president and CEO of **Durée and Company**, can attest, the cannabis and CBD industry [presents unique opportunities and challenges](#) for PR pros. One of them is getting sample products to journalists. Obviously, you can't do that with marijuana.

As such, sometimes journalists order products on their own as they write about the sector. In some cases, they may send products to labs for testing. An added issue is that journalists are doing this on their own, without input from communicators. That means journalists must decipher lab reports on their own, not always an easy task.

THE ARCANE NATURE OF LAB RESULTS

In the cannabis/CBD sector, labs typically issue a [Certificate of Analysis \(COA\)](#), a document that verifies details about a product's ingredients. COAs help interested parties know what ingredients are in cannabis products they are purchasing.

Sometimes, though, lab results are deceptive. For example, a test that finds metal in the contents could actually be picking up ingredients contained in the packaging, not in the cannabis. A dropper or bottle may contain trace

amounts of metals.

Regardless, this is an issue that can lead journalists to make incorrect assertions in stories. It falls to PR pros to assist journalists in these situations.

EDUCATION IS KEY

Recently, Ross handled such a case. A reporter called who was working on an exposé. The reporter planned to write about products from a company Ross represents.

During the call, the reporter questioned the purity of a CBD product from the company. She noted a lab test indicated THC and other trace elements in the product.

The issue, Ross says, was the journalist was unable to interpret lab results correctly. In addition, the lab was not certified to test for what the reporter was seeking. The reporter was unaware of this.

"Everything was within the margin of error, but [the reporter] didn't understand how to navigate that," Ross says. During their conversation, Ross was able to educate the writer about the industry and testing procedures.

Ultimately, educating the writer worked. The journalist changed the story's content. Instead of naming the company and its products as culprits, the article went in a different direction, Ross says. 



Durée Ross
President & CEO
Durée and Company