

Preventing Multicultural Crises

All crises have the potential to have a negative outcome, but few are as detrimental as those that involve race. Such crises have the potential to stir up a significant amount of unwanted attention from press, influencers and the community.



Figure 3.2 Few crises are as detrimental as those that involve race.

Kim L. Hunter, Founder, President and CEO of Lagrant Communications

Hunter's integrated marketing communications firm creates and executes comprehensive, culturally sensitive and relevant advertising, marketing,

and public relations campaigns, targeting the African-American, Hispanic, and LGBT (lesbian gay bisexual transgender) markets. Following are his suggestions on how to prevent multicultural crises.

Crises that originate from racial discrimination have burned bridges among large companies like Sony Pictures Entertainment, CompUSA and Southern California Edison and the minority communities. Although, it is almost impossible to prevent crises, especially racial, from happening, there are proactive steps that can help prevent most.

Understand that there is no formula on how to handle a crisis successfully, but it's important to have policies and procedures set in place that are constantly being reviewed and tested. Working in a 24-hour news cycle, particularly with various social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, it's important your policies and procedures be a living and breathing document that is fully understood by the senior leadership and staff. Internally it's best to utilize a company's employee resource groups to test key messages and visuals before going public. Externally, it is expected that you have a spokesperson that represents each ethnic group and when necessary speaks the language of that group.

Hunter advises following the seven Page Principles, developed by the Arthur W. Page Society (AWPS), which capture key concepts that should be considered when determining how to develop a plan and respond to a crisis. They are:

1. *Tell the truth.* Let the public know what's happening and provide an accurate picture of the company's character, ideals and practices.
2. *Prove it with action.* Public perception of an organization is determined 90 percent by what it does and 10 percent by what it says.
3. *Listen to the customer.* To serve the company well, understand what the public wants and needs. Keep top decision makers and other employees informed about public reaction to company products, policies and practices.
4. *Manage for tomorrow.* Anticipate public reaction and eliminate practices that create difficulties. Generate goodwill.

5. *Conduct public relations as if the whole company depends on it.* Corporate relations is a management function. No corporate strategy should be implemented without considering its impact on the public. The public relations professional is a policymaker capable of handling a wide range of corporate communications activities.
6. *Realize a company's true character is expressed by its people.* The strongest opinions—good or bad—about a company are shaped by the words and deeds of its employees. As a result, every employee—active or retired—is involved with public relations. It is the responsibility of every corporate communications department to support each employee's capability and desire to be an honest, knowledgeable ambassador to customers, friends, shareowners and public officials.
7. *Remain calm, patient, and good-humored.* Lay the groundwork for public relations miracles with consistent and reasoned attention to information and contacts. This may be difficult with today's contentious 24-hour news cycles and endless number of watchdog organizations. But when a crisis arises, remember, cool heads communicate best.

Hunter continues:

These principles should always be incorporated when determining how to respond to potentially reputation damaging situations. Don't make the mistake of thinking that minorities are alike or that there is a "one size fits all" approach when dealing with a crisis. It's important for brands to have established relationships within the diverse communities to sustain a positive reputation.

This includes having regular visibility in the different communities and understanding who the key influencers, community-based organizations and major stakeholders are.

Hunter believes that the minority markets are keenly aware of brands that are not authentic. This is why brands should avoid only participating once throughout the year during national observances like Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage month or LGBT and Pride month, and should show commitment throughout the year. To be authentic and mitigate a

crisis, it's important for a brand to learn as much as possible about the customer's traditions and beliefs. To build a better understanding of the African-American, Hispanic, and LGBT communities, Hunter notes some of the nuances in these communities.

African-American/Black Community

As their interests have historically been neglected, African-Americans have shown a high degree of loyalty to businesses that give back to their community. With a buying power of nearly one trillion dollars in 2013, it's important for businesses to understand that African-Americans are loyal to a company that invests in their community and supports it by educating, motivating, and empowering them. Having relationships with major civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), National Urban League, National Action Network and Rainbow PUSH Coalition is critical since they have historically been deeply rooted in the community. It's also important to note that the African-American/Black community is not a monolithic market and in addition to African-Americans, includes representation from West Africa and the Caribbean.

Hispanic/Latino Community

Currently 16 percent of the total U.S. population, the Hispanic community is the largest and fastest growing minority segment in the USA and has a projected growth to 60 million by 2020. It is important to understand how culture defines the identity of the Hispanic person. If you don't understand what makes them unique, you will not understand why they remain loyal to certain brands and not to others.

Hispanics place a high significance on the family. The family is the most important social unit and is a close-knit group, which goes beyond the nuclear family. Spanish language also notes a strong connection to Hispanic heritage and is shared with the family and the community. When it comes to sources of information, Spanish-language media like Univision or Telemundo and Hispanic organizations, like National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO), Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and Salvadoran-American Leadership and Educational Fund (SALEF)

News can sometimes be circulated faster by social media than by traditional news media (see [Chapter 5, “Social Media and Crisis Communications”](#)). Reporters must spend time getting to a crisis site and then transmit a story while bloggers already at the site, with little or no expertise in reporting, can get information transmitted immediately. It may be accurate; it may be misinformation. The trained reporter, hopefully, will find more complete information than the blogger or the Facebook friend. He or she will know what questions to ask and what answers to seek.

Still, without doubt, both social media and traditional media must be targets of communications as swiftly as possible. Ideally, the two should be contacted simultaneously and immediately because if accurate data is not disseminated, inaccurate data is. If the crisis is online, then online communications is probably best (see Domino's Pizza, [Chapter 12](#)). If your communications staff is too small to permit simultaneous communication, then a decision must be made as to which is more urgent for your business.