

Commentary

They Missed The Whole Story

Roy G. Miller, Apr 13, 2009 05:00 AM

I stumble upon the Associate Press story while reading my online news feeds. It's Saturday afternoon, March 21. Within minutes, I had confirmed 263 published articles. It's already a national story, straight from Oklahoma.

It's a crisis moment for anyone at Whole Foods or its produce distributors. Ditto for the University of Tulsa. The crisis: It has been reported that the world's most lethal spider - a wandering Brazilian spider -- was discovered in a bunch of bananas at a Whole Foods store in Oklahoma.

The real crisis? Not being prepared - the absence of corporate response, information and quick-find response by all the players involved. I acted like a snoopy reporter that Saturday afternoon and tried to find who I'd talk to about the report, its accuracy or inaccuracy, and its potential impact on the grocery retailer, the college, and the zoo.

Here's my 30-minute online journey:

- I visit the Whole Foods Web site. Nothing on the home page. I visit the site's press room. Nothing about the incident.
- I visit the University of Tulsa Web site. Nothing. I do a search on the university site, keyword "spider." It delivers a link, <http://www.utulsa.edu/en/about-TU/news-events-publications/UniversityNews/2009/March/Worlds-deadliest-spider-held-at-TU.aspx>. Yes! Arg. I get a "404 File or Directory Not Found" error message. Result: Nothing.

So, where are all the professional communicators? Where are the pro-active, the professional and the prepared? Sure, I understand not being ready for a crisis, initially anyway. Life happens. But when it's crisis time, it's prime time. It's the Super Bowl moment to perform at the highest levels, to showcase our value, validity and expertise.

Right or Wrong, It is a News Story

Here's the story, as reported by AP: A Whole Foods store in Oklahoma discovers "a deadly spider" in a bunch of bananas. It's reported to be the most deadly spider in the world, according to a University of Tulsa animal facilities manager. If you get bitten by this spider, you die within 25 minutes and face a peculiar side effect, and I quote, "Researchers have found its venom also stimulates an hours-long erection in men." In addition, a city zoo official challenges the university's spider identification. A zoo official calls it a harmless Huntsman spider. No one will know for sure. The university employee destroyed the discovered spider. The story has gone national.

Our initial impression:

- A crisis communications team needed to be working full throttle. We couldn't see a team at all, anywhere.

- Where were the communicators at the retailer, college or zoo, and why weren't they courting media inquiries with facts, figures and key points that help turn the story around?
- Was anybody -- is anybody -- concerned about their corporate reputation in the marketplace?

And now what?

- Be prepared this time.
- Answer any unanswered questions. Now.
- Re-group, work together and do the hard work of figuring out what really happened, and then communicate.
- Be authentic, available and ready to share what you know vs. what you think you know.
- Provide media access to your communications team, and newsworthy content. Get this on your Web sites. NOW. And avoid making reporters dig through layers and levels of the Web site. Make it simple and quick.

These steps are just starters. Much more needs to be done. A pro-active approach can turn a deadly spider or any other disaster into press coverage and press relationships that endure, mature and strengthen your reputation. Just be prepared.

It seems they were *not*. Are you?

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