

BEING REASONABLE

BY MARC BABEJ

Advertising When Business Is Not as Usual

UNTIL RECENTLY, PAID MEDIA OPERATED IN SPLENDID ISOLATION FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD. It was a fair-weather form of communication designed to shine a positive light on advertisers, under conditions that were business as usual. But in recent years, crises that left consumers feeling vulnerable and uncertain have repeatedly intruded on marketing relationships. With reality banging on the door, it's time to consider what to do when business is not as usual.

To get a handle on this issue, we need to distinguish between endogenous and exogenous crises. Endogenous crises arise from within a specific company or industry and have an impact on that specific company's or industry's audiences. Think Enron, Tyco, and the investigations into the insurance sector. The traditional advertising response was to let crisis communications PR handle the mess and "go dark" until the dust had settled. But in today's hypercompetitive marketplace, more companies like American International Group, the insurer battling an accounting scandal, choose to advertise in the face of controversy.

Bayer's Aleve brand went even further, confronting a crisis head-on. Last December, media reports wrongly alleged that Aleve was unsafe. Sales dropped sharply. When the FDA set the record straight, the Aleve team took the initiative. As Jay Kolpon, Bayer vice president, marketing, puts it: "Advertising is our mass market means of communications, so we decided to get out the good news." The good news crisis platform proved so effective that it became Aleve's permanent campaign theme, and sales are now approaching pre-crisis levels.

Endogenous crises might affect an *aspect* of audience's lives, but exogenous crises — crises triggered by outside events — can disrupt people's *way of life*: Only halfway into this decade, we have witnessed the marketing repercussions of several exogenous crises. The attacks affected wide swaths of the U.S. economy;

and the trans-Atlantic rift over the Iraq war led to double-digit declines in sales of products identified with France.

Exogenous crises are especially treacherous for marketers: Events are beyond a company's control, and by the same token can push audiences into crisis mode. When that happens, motivations and priorities are turned on their head. The basic functioning of a product or service, taken for granted under normal conditions, becomes all-important, while the bells and whistles that often capture attention become irrelevant.

The key to effective advertising during a crisis is to prepare marketing contingencies — identifying potential scenarios, anticipating their impact, and formulating a response. Specific plans vary by industry and situation, but the overall objective is consistent: Support audiences in a time of need.

For example, mobile telephony providers could help customers avoid phone network congestion during a crisis, advising them to use text messaging as an alternative to voice calls. According to Sprint spokesman John Polivka, text messaging operates on a separate network less prone to congestion than regular phone networks. Advertising could seed the idea preventively, with providers, following up with a reminder text message to customers during a crisis.

Media can contribute to marketing contingency planning in two important ways: First, identify the most suitable media outlets for a variety scenario. Second, make sure media space in these outlets will be available when needed. Based on his extensive experience working with airlines and electric utilities, David Heller, vice president and media director at Colby & Partners, recommends prenegotiating with select fast-turnaround news media outlets. For crises that could affect several clients simultaneously, try arranging for dedicated crisis commercial pods while regular advertising has been pulled.

With marketing contingencies in place, clients are less likely to be caught off-guard, and in a much better position to serve their audiences. The greatest reward is being remembered for it long after the crisis has passed — because as we all know, a friend in need is a friend indeed. **M**

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