GRADING RESPONSES IN SOME FAMOUS ORGANIZATIONAL CRISES

By Emmanuel A. Smart, Strategic Public Relations Consultant

****

JETBLUE '07 VALENTINE'S DAY CRISIS

The Exigency: *Due to poor weather conditions on the East Coast on Valentine's day, 2007, the popular discount airline, JetBlue, chose to ground most of its fleet. The problem was that the planes filled with men, women and children; passengers, some up to nine hours, parked on runways going nowhere!*

Despite JetBlue's pre-crisis stellar reputation, this was bad PR!

More than its bank account, this debacle threatened to irreparably damage JetBlue's reputation, an even more valuable, and hard to replace company asset.

Grading the response: *Hesitation, again, losing precious response time.* ***Grade C-***

Result: *Though JetBlue founder and CEO, David G. Neeleman, deserves an A+ in his crisis management efforts, it may have been too little, too late to save his personal reputation, ultimately leading to his ouster months later.*

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>><<<<<<<<<<<<<

FEMA: THE HURRICANE KATRINA CRISIS AUGUST 2005

The Exigency: *Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast region on August 29, 2005. Despite television showing images of poor, destitute and desperate citizens crying for help from FEMA, the president or anybody, it was nearly four days when some measurable help arrived.*

Grading the Response: *Slow, confused, at best.*

At worst, no response at all. Lack of coordination among the various agencies resulting in loss of precious time, a luxury you cannot afford when crisis strikes. ***Grade D***

Result: *Utter disaster all the way around; FEMA's reputation in jeopardy; its legitimacy as emergency agency threatened. Louisiana governor's reputation so badly damaged she chose not to run for reelection; Michael Brown, former FEMA director replaced; President Bush's image tainted as well, etc. etc*

<<<<<<<<<<<<<>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

THE 1989 EXXON-MOBIL VALDEZ OIL TANKER DISASTER

The Exigency: Despite the passage of time, 18 years to be exact; despite efforts to show the company in positive lights, Exxon Mobil, in 2007, still bears the scars from its 1989 Valdez oil spill environmental crisis. Its oil tanker ran aground spilling more than 100 million gallons of crude oil in the Prince Williams sound in Valdez, Alaska.

Grading the Response: Hesitation, pontification, shifting the blame. When first invited to make a statement, the official words as reported in the media was that the company's CEO "doesn't do things like that." This pontification was followed by various other missteps, such as blaming the media, and the locals. **Grade D**

Result: By the time the CEO or someone of stature became involved, 100 million gallons of crude oil had fouled the pristine coastline, destroying natural habitats for wildlife, and sources of livelihood of residents. With it, Exxon-Mobil's reputation may be forever tarnished.

****

Emmanuel A. Smart is President of SMART EXPRESSIONS, a Strategic Public Relations and Organizational communication firm based in Houston, TX; offering lectures, workshops, counseling and support on: 1. Building, managing and leveraging the power of good organizational reputation; 2. Spokesperson development; 3. Crisis management strategies; more. For more information, visit http://www.smartexpressions.com; call 713-834-4138 or email: esmart@smartexpressions.com.