



Identity Crisis

BY JAMES DONNELLY

Several years ago during an agency/client report-card session, a client called me “an adrenaline junkie with a hero complex.” To this day, I’m not sure if she meant to be derogatory. Nonetheless, I’ve grown fond of the description. It’s an appropriate sound bite for part of what it takes to succeed in crisis management.

Allow me to share the pros and cons of this career path, then provide some tips. Let’s begin with the cons.

- **Forgoing your weekends.** The rumor is true. Crises often occur at the worst possible times. Key client contacts are on vacation? That’s a perfect time for a crisis. Sadly, these situations always seem to break on a weekend or just

before a holiday. You have to remain flexible.

- **Waving the victory flag is uncommon.** In crisis management, you have to set a different kind of bar for success. You’ll watch many PR colleagues trumpet victories more often, because most PR programs lead to a tangible win. For example, “We got a zillion impressions.” In crisis management, losses are obvious. They lead to front-page tabloid skewerings, massive protests, loss of sales and other problems. In contrast, most victories are subtle. You have to remind yourself that they were victories. That takes a certain amount of self-confidence. Also, if you like winning awards, be ready to shelve most of your best work in the interest of client confidentiality.

• **Growing to appreciate Cassandra.** In Greek mythology, Apollo gave Cassandra the ability to see the future but later added a curse so that her prophecies wouldn't be believed. Such is the too-common fate of crisis management pros. Monitoring and risk assessments enable us to harbingers danger and offer advice to minimize risks. Too often, warnings go unheeded because of lack of resources, paralysis of analysis or just general hesitation that is compounded by corporate bureaucracy. To stomach a career here, you have to get used to bringing the horses to water — and sometimes watching them become dehydrated.

And now, here are the pros:

• **Knowing what skills to use.** In my opinion, it takes about five to seven years to learn the 20-plus golden rules of crisis communications — and the rest of your career to challenge every single one. Crisis planning is like science. As new discoveries surface (like the emergence of Foursquare and Google Wave), planning must adjust accordingly to provide the right direction. Crisis counseling is an art — a combination of intense listening, relentless questioning, experience, instinct and the ability to counsel without being condescending. Sometimes the real art is knowing when to apply each of those skills to keep a client engaged.

• **Expanding your world view.** On the agency side, you get exposed to many different industries that help expand your world view. You never know what you might be facing. In one afternoon, you might be providing counsel to a teddy bear manufacturer about lead restrictions, to an executive-compensation firm dealing with a congressional inquiry, and to a pharmaceutical company referencing Class I, II and III FDA recall guidelines. Some days, it's like playing several simultaneous rounds of chess while on horseback.

• **Learning from the top down.** The issues/crisis team at Ketchum NY (seven of us, currently) have probably had more contact with C-suite executives than many of our PR peers. It's not a privilege we take lightly. Those opportunities push us to be ever vigilant to learn business from the top down. As a result, it's common to see us reading *The Economist*, analyst reports and legal filings. Education is truly a lifetime endeavor, and it makes us more well-rounded professionals

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This article is an update of a guest post on CulpWrit, Ron Culp's blog dedicated to PR careers. Visit the site at www.culpwrit.com or follow Culp, Ketchum partner, corporate practice director, on Twitter at @culpwwrit.

What to Consider in Candidates For Crisis Management Positions

These are ideal traits that I specifically seek when looking to hire someone to begin his or her career in crisis communications:

• **You have to love pressure.** It is a crazy career choice. Accept that and thrive on that. When things get particularly intense, you're going to have to remind yourself, "This is the path I chose."

• **You must be endlessly inquisitive.** Asking the right questions is important. Asking the wrong questions is even more important. You must ask the difficult questions to get to the bottom of a crisis situation, regardless of any political tension in the room.

• **You must write well.** A good deal of our client counsel comes down to expressing a situation in simple language that most of the public can embrace. Keep your pencils sharp and your erasers dull. ■ — J.D.

— so that's a positive. On some occasions, that access to senior leadership also creates opportunities for us to provide counsel to other parts of a client's business. You will touch nearly every cog in the business wheel.

One last benefit of choosing a career in crisis management — whether at an agency or on the corporate side — is connectivity. Over the course of your career, you'll work with professionals from legal, government affairs, compliance, human resources, IT, risk management and so on. In individual interactions, you'll learn things that few people get to know.

As a sum of the parts, you'll gain incredible insight into the challenges of business. I can't think of too many careers that provide such a panoramic view. Granted, it's usually a view of the pointed rocks below, and not necessarily the blue sky above. ■



James Donnelly is senior vice president, crisis management, at Ketchum, with broad experience in issues/crisis management, crisis training, communications training, corporate public relations and global corporate communications. Check out www.jamesjdonnelly.com for ongoing dialogue and resources on crisis management and communications coaching or follow him at @jamesjdonnelly on Twitter.