

Up Front

Pharma Crisis Communications in the Fast-paced World of Twitter *et al*

Ever since seven people died from ingesting cyanide-laced Tylenol capsules back in 1982, the reaction to the crisis by Johnson & Johnson—the makers of Tylenol—has been the "gold standard" for crisis management communications. Johnson & Johnson immediately recalled and destroyed 31 million Tylenol capsules and the "affable CEO, James Burke, appeared in television ads and at news conferences informing consumers of the company's actions. Tamper-resistant packaging was rapidly introduced, and Tylenol sales swiftly bounced back to near pre-crisis levels.

In contrast to that Tylenol crisis, the current recall of sub-par quality Tylenol and other medications for children by McNeil (a unit of J&J) and the subsequent communications from the parent company is more like the gold standard for how NOT to do crisis communications. At issue was the slow response to reports of contamination of popular over-the-counter medicines, including Benadryl, Motrin, Roloids, Simply Sleep, St. Joseph Aspirin and Tylenol.

In January, 2010, the *New York Times* reported that "Johnson & Johnson appeared to abandon its own template [ie, the gold standard in brand crisis management], stunning a few business school professors. Its conduct also drew harsh criticism from federal officials" (see "In Recall, a Role Model Stumbles"; <http://bit.ly/addrQs>).

In a letter to Peter Luther, President, NA OTC, McNeil Consumer Healthcare, FDA said "We are aware of the complaint information available to your company, the sequence of events, and the extent of your firm's follow up measures during this period. We have concluded that your company did not conduct a timely, comprehensive investigation."



The *New York Times* took J&J to task for not covering this in its corporate blog: "Johnson & Johnson's conduct is all the more out of step, analysts said, because the drug maker had been one of the first in the pharmaceutical industry to set up its own blog... [after several days], on the issue of the current recall, the blog so far has had no comment from the company."

That was January, 2010. Today (May, 2010), after weeks of the story re-

emerging in the news, Bill Weldon, J&J's current CEO, responded with a terse 250-word post to JNJBTW blog and a short interview on a daytime cable financial news program. As one commenter to Pharma Marketing Blog said, "Does J&J really think most mainstream US Moms are reading its corporate blog? No, they are gathering in other places like Facebook. Where's J&J's response in social media?"

Meanwhile, the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform requested that Weldon come to Washington, DC, on May 27, to testify about the McNeil manufacturing problems. Darrell Issa, a California Republican congressman and member of the Oversight Committee suggested that McNeil's manufacturing facilities "may be 'out of control' and not following internal standard operating procedures, much less FDA regulations." Issa has asked committee chair Edolphus Towns to postpone the May 27 hearing.

According to a post on Pharmedot "J&J [wrote] back to say Weldon had back surgery today and so he may not be able to travel to DC next week. Instead, J&J is prepared to send Colleen Goggins, who heads the worldwide consumer group. Weldon would still be willing to 'communicate' with the committee after he recovers." That statement, however, is unclear as to whether Weldon will publicly appear before Congress.

Continues...

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I was asked what I would do in J&J's shoes by Melissa Davies—a mom and Social Media Practice Lead at Return on Focus, a company that helps companies market their brands.

Melissa asked (in a comment to a Pharma Marketing Blog post): "John, could you share some thoughts on what you would advise JNJ to do as part of a more fully developed social media response strategy? Are you thinking the company should have more Tweets, engage on more sites, etc.? I'm curious what you think the ideal roadmap looks like."

For what it's worth, I believe this situation calls for more information and conversation no matter what the channel or the road. But since we are talking about social media, let's stick to that.

Because the CEO has been targeted, was asked to testify before Congress, and has posted a message to the JNJ corporate blog, I believe he should lead the discussion online and off. In addition to a formal letter posted to the corporate blog, how about opening up a YouTube channel in which Weldon and McNeil executives talk directly to their audience and provide updates. They should allow comments—and respond to as many as necessary.

Twitter can work with this to keep people informed about what is going on and link to specific videos.

If Weldon testifies before Congress, get the transcript and post it before anyone else does. Ask readers to comment on how well or not so well questions were answered by the CEO and what was missing or unclear. Then clarify, clarify, clarify!

Of course, actions speak louder than words. No matter how advanced the social media response is, it won't solve McNeil's manufacturing problems.

Right now, I feel that JNJ doesn't have a handle on what's causing the problems. At least that's what I suspect from the reports I have heard. Maybe there are complicated manufacturing issues that involve things JNJ doesn't want to be made public (eg, importation of tainted supplies from China)? Maybe this is a good opportunity to provide a virtual tour of a Good Manufacturing facility with interviews of employees.

I don't know if this is a roadmap or not, but when your company's reputation is at stake, the leaders have to be visible. You can't just say "one of our companies has let you down" and leave it at that.

What are you going to do about it so that it doesn't happen again? is what people really want to hear from the executives who are in charge, not the PR department.

On June 8, 2010, I will host a live [Pharma Marketing Talk](#) podcast discussion on pharma crisis communications in the digital era and the J&J/McNeil crisis will be the case study for that discussion. We will also expand out from this case to look at the broader landscape and how, crisis or otherwise, one deals with the breakneck pace and two-way, consumer-driven nature of digital communications. Join us!



John Mack, Editor



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**Pharma Crisis Communications in
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The J&J/McNeil Case Study



A conversation with **Bill Silberg** (Principal at Silberg Consulting), **Melissa Davies** (Social Media Practice Lead at Return on Focus) **Michael Parks** (President of Pitch360), and invited **ePharma Pioneer Club** members about "how-to" to "how-not-to" when it comes to crisis communications in the faced-paced digital world of blogging and Twitter. **Airs LIVE on Tuesday, June 8, 2010 * 2:00 PM**

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