

## ‘The Art of War’ – Time-Tested Advice on Corporate Crisis PR Strategy, Litigation

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(June 26) – We have recently seen an unprecedented wave of corporate crises. Surviving today’s business environment, particularly given the 24/7 instantaneous traditional and nontraditional media, requires careful planning.

The key to survival may be found in the 2,500-year-old Chinese masterpiece, *The Art of War*. The author, General Sun Tzu, was an extraordinary philosopher and military strategist during the reign of King of Wu in China.

His compelling and detailed advice on tactics, maneuvering and the politics of war is as valuable to 21st century lawyers, business owners and officers, board members, military strategists and politicians as they were to Sun Tzu’s troops more than two millennia ago.

Sun Tzu was a master of the tools of war prevalent during his day: mounted and foot soldiers, archers and the like.

This article applies Sun Tzu’s principles to the modern era of public relations during corporate crises and addresses a more powerful weapon: the media. As Sun Tzu correctly recognized, “a wise leader plans success.” With those words firmly in mind, we consider sage strategies for successful public relations during corporate crises.

**Develop an effective corporate crisis public relations plan – now, before it is needed**



**Scott D. Marrs**

“[T]he general who wins a battle makes many calculations in his temple before the battle is fought ... many calculations lead to victory, and few calculations to defeat.... It is by attention to this point that I can foresee who is likely to win or lose.” Sun Tzu, Chapter VI (“Weak Points and Strong”).

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Careful planning is the key to success. Laying effective plans includes honestly assessing your strengths and weaknesses – and those of any potential adversary. Consider the following time-tested advice in developing an effective corporate crisis public relations plan.

- Prepare. Lay your PR communication plans in anticipation of events.  
*“With more careful calculations, one can win; with less, one cannot.”*
- Always plan for the worst.  
*“As water has no constant form, there are in warfare no constant conditions.”*
- Assemble your “corporate crisis team” with clearly defined responsibilities.  
*“A confused army leads to another’s victory.”*
- Strive to “do the right thing” in response to a problem or event; it is good business and engenders good public relations.  
*“Do the right thing and don’t try to compete for outside alliances.”*
- Calculate your adversaries’ weaknesses and maneuvers, and the public perception of yours.  
*“To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself.”*
- Find trouble before it finds you.  
*Know the enemy, know yourself.”*
- Develop a good relationship with the media and use news/web crawlers to monitor events relevant to your business. Make sure personnel “on the ground” funnel relevant intel to your PR point person.  
*“Those who do not use local guides are*

*unable to obtain the advantages of the ground.”*

### **Effectively implement your corporate crisis PR plan**

Effective execution is key to a successful corporate crisis PR plan. This necessitates a unified front, simplified theme and an effective spokesperson.

- Important messages should come from the top.  
*“Command your people in a way that gives them a higher shared purpose.”*
- Identify an official company spokesperson – and choose wisely (desired attributes: calm, good judgment, focused, authoritative). If Sun Tzu had known Walter Cronkite, he might have said, *“He who speaks for you must have the respect of those whose opinion can help ensure victory.”*
- Keep your team lean and mean – speed and flexibility are key. There is no such thing as a normal “news cycle” today; it is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with instantaneous global access to social media and breaking news.  
*“Mastering speed is the essence of war.”*
- Where sensitive public perception issues exist, best practices usually dictate an “internal” company spokesperson to convey genuine concern.  
*“Winning a battle is always a matter of people.”*
- Give the accurate perception of being proactive in identifying and remedying the problem.  
*“Plan an advantage by listening. This makes you powerful. Get assistance from the outside. Know the situation. Then*

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*planning can find opportunities and give you control.”*

### **Words of corporate crisis wisdom: Communicate effectively – internally and externally**

“On the field of battle, the spoken word does not carry far enough: hence the institution of gongs and drums. Nor can ordinary objects be seen clearly enough: hence the institution of banners and flags ... means whereby the ears and eyes of the host may be focused on one particular point. The host thus forming a single united body, is it impossible either for the brave to advance alone, or for the cowardly to retreat alone. This is the art of handling large masses of men.” Sun Tzu, Chapter VII (“Maneuvering”)

All successful crisis PR rely upon effective communication. Public relations provide the “gongs and drums” and the “banners and flags” to give your communications reach and clarity. As Sun Tzu recognized, “you fight a large army the same as you fight a small one. You only need the right position and communication.”

Conveying your message in an effective and straightforward manner, while molding public perception, is paramount. Getting in front of the story, taking control of the situation, and properly handling the media are essential steps in every PR campaign. The following words of advice during a corporate crisis are non-negotiable:

- Communicate timely – shape the story before it shapes you.  
*In “confined terrain ... you will die if you delay.”*
- Form a “single united body” with a simple theme.  
*“In the tumult and uproar, the battle seems chaotic, but there must be no disorder in one’s own troops.”*

- Get out front, get ahead. Always return reporters’ calls before the deadline. Do your homework, know where the reporter will likely go, know the facts, and write down your talking points in advance.  
*“Bring the enemy to the battlefield and be not brought there by him ... keep the danger in front of you and safety behind.”*
- “No comment” is often perceived as “we are guilty” in today’s media vortex.  
*“You can speak but will not be heard. You must use gongs and drums.”*
- Develop succinct talking points, and drop the legalese.  
*“Another general is weak and easygoing. He fails to make his orders clear”*  
Consider: “it is important to stress that....”
- Have your talking points critiqued by another – how they sound is not always how they read (Were you really misquoted?).  
*“You must master gongs, drums, banners and flags.”*
- Always assume you are “on the record.”  
*“On dangerous ground, you must not camp.”*
- Never lie ... lest the “lie” become the story.  
*“No man, however wise, will be able to avert the consequences that ensue.”*  
Consider: “we are investigating as we speak ... we are seeking answers and expect to be able to give you more details soon.”
- Your company website and social media platforms are important tools. Use them to inform the media with a timely and consistent message.  
*“You must master gongs, drums, banners*

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*and flags. Place people as a single unit where they can all see and hear. You must unite them as one.*

- Do not “stonewall.” It alienates the public (including investors and stockholders) and your customers (those who control the viability of your products and services).  
*“In crossing salt-marshes, your sole concern should be to get over them quickly, without any delay.”*

### **Good leaders remain true students of crisis strategy – yes, this means you**

The sage advice contained within *The Art of War* takes on renewed significance in today’s business climate. Despite its title, Sun Tzu’s work makes clear that “the true object of war is peace,” and “to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.” Sun Tzu’s observations about protracted battles hold true for today’s endless cycle of corporate crises: “In all history, there is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare. Only one who knows the disastrous effects of a long war can realize the supreme importance of rapidly bringing it to a close.”

Sun Tzu also recognized that to be of invaluable service you must know when to move forward and when to retreat: “[t]he general who ... retreats

without fearing disgrace, whose only thought is to protect his country and do good service for his sovereign, [is] the jewel of the kingdom.” Good lawyers know when to mediate, when to settle and when to try the case. Good PR professionals know when and how to concede negative facts, when to initiate an aggressive PR campaign and when to lay low.

Good leaders understand the importance of public relations in protecting their client base, stock value, product viability, corporate reputation, brand awareness and overall viability. Their level of success in achieving these goals may depend on the extent to which they recognize and adhere to these age-old strategies.

As Sun Tzu stressed over two millennia ago: “war [in our context, public relations battles during litigation] is a matter of vital importance to the state [company]; a matter of life or death [corporate survival], the road to either survival or to ruin. Hence, it is imperative that it be studied thoroughly.”

Lessons of the past arm us with the ability to survive the inevitable corporate crisis of the future.

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