


 WORLD FOOTWEAR

Contingency public relations is essentially the art of planning for an incident, usually a disaster, you hope will never happen. If it happens to someone else, don't be so sure that his problem won't impact on your business.

Why the leather industry needs to **stick together**

The client was the CEO of the European division of a major international chemical company, with its colorants and adhesives used in a multiplicity of industries. The potential for problems was real and he understood the complexities of modern media and communications. He also understood that there were pressure groups that didn't like what his company did. So he issued a memo to the effect that he was the only person authorised to deal with any contentious problem.

I told him that it might sound sensible but his solution was totally impractical. "You're sitting in London and there is a fire at your plant in Ireland. The local

media want an instant response," I explained. "What are you going to say—you can't see what's going on from your office? Or what happens if your security people have a problem on a Sunday—does the man on the gate have your home phone number? (No, was the answer.) Or perhaps a national newspaper has heard that a client of yours has a problem with a product that contains your chemicals but, because you have plants to visit all over Europe, you're out of your office for three weeks out of four. But you're in luck—you happen to be in—but then TV news picks up the story. Can you cope with a TV inquisitor or do you let him make a complete fool out of you?"

His contingency planning changed quickly, and all top executives were given training on how to handle TV interrogation! In business you can't expect problems only to occur Monday-to-Friday, 9am-5.30pm on a day when you're at work. The tanner or footwear manufacturer, however, might feel that his world is far away from that situation.

A different scale

That was simple enough. It's not always that easy. When an offshore oilrig blew up in the North Sea in 1988, the fall out was tremendous. In terms of human lives lost and the economic impact, it was enormous. It also showed up failures in

contingency planning to cope with the worldwide media interest, which the company thought it had been adequately prepared for. Those whose job it was to cope with local and international media couldn't sustain their physical or mental effort. It required teams of people. The corporate switchboard couldn't cope. A standby switchboard was installed, hopefully never to be used, as one of the lessons learnt. A 24/7 contract with a helicopter company came into being, ready to fly journalists in case of need at short notice.

The key to these anecdotes is that they affected single companies from which other companies could learn. Importantly they are single events, which may or may not happen again. In today's world a business ignores forethought and planning at its peril. But perhaps the situations described seem too remote. If so, consider this recent news, which was carried on www.leatherbiz.com and in *World Leather*.

Adidas loses case for kangaroo football boots

"A ruling from the Supreme Court of California has banned the use of kangaroo skin for football boots and other types of athletic footwear in the state. The case was brought against adidas, Sport Chalet and Offside Soccer by UK-based animal-rights group Viva! (Vegetarians International Voice for Animals), which feels the kangaroo needs to be protected.

Adidas currently sells ten styles featuring kangaroo hide, although less than 1% of its total footwear range contains the skin. A legal representative for the company said that it would continue to sell the shoes—such as the Copa Mundial and Predator styles—in the state until other issues in the case are resolved and that the case could eventually be referred to the US supreme court.

Viva's campaign director Lauren Ornelas said: "Using wildlife for shoes is not acceptable." However, adidas argues that none of its footwear is made from threatened or endangered kangaroos and that it does not condone the inhumane treatment of animals. Another line of defence is that kangaroos are extremely common in Australia and that numbers are increasing.

Reports indicate that new signing for LA Galaxy David Beckham recently decided to stop using boots made from kangaroo skin

Crisis Management in the Leather Sector: Identifying the causes

Two main areas:

1. Indigenous
 - consequences of animal diseases
 - chemical pollution
2. Exogenous
 - lobbying from protectionists
 - environmental agencies
 - social conflicts

Source: *La Vie en Rose, Paris/ILF*

as a result of pressure from campaigners, despite claims that they are lighter, thinner and more flexible."

This is surely closer to home. Everyone operating within the leather sector, from cattle farmer to finished goods manufacturer, has to have a crisis plan in place, in effect, to plan for disaster, which is not just physical.

One man's meat is another man's poison

There is no problem with the world being divided into omnivores, carnivores and vegetarians—or even vegans. The problem arises when one group tries to impose its preference or social agenda on others who do not wish to change their lifestyle. By fair means or foul. What we are finding today is that different groups, who one would think do not have common cause, sometimes come together to form alliances, cause havoc and then follow their separate paths again. The only way to thwart those who wish to attack you is not to provide them with the ammunition, through malpractice, carelessness, cutting corners or crass stupidity. It's a clean hands policy. In recent years, there have been numerous examples which impact on our industry as a whole. Drawing the threads together, seeing the pattern evolving, is not always that easy.

This is not to argue for collective paranoia but rather for collective awareness. As someone smarter than the writer once said, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.

There are factions out there without any formal structure but which are able to draw huge numbers of people together. The mechanism is the internet, that global form of communication that can be used for ill or good. There are many disaffected

FOOTWEAR FOCUS

Preparing a Crisis Management Programme for the Leather Industry

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure"

1. Steering Committee
 - create a steering committee
 - maintain frequent and regular communication
 - be reactive to all new developments
 - check information for accuracy
 - make any corrections
 - distribute information to fellow members
 - take a decision and act on it
 - plan the PR strategy
 - create key messages
 - nominate a spokesperson
2. Scientific Committee
 - begin working on different crisis causes
 - have certain scientists immediately available for journalists
 - facilitate and legitimise your messages
3. Create the tools
 - create a database in each country
 - update the database regularly and transmit it

Source: *La Vie en Rose, Paris/ILF*

people who feel that the globalisation of business has been of no benefit to them. Their belief is that globalisation has destroyed local industry and local communities. Even though excellent demonstrations and arguments can be produced to show the benefit of globalisation for small companies, those opposed are not open to persuasion.

One faction may see a burger company as the enemy of globalisation; another faction may be against intensive cattle farming. They make common cause when it suits them and they know that whatever disturbance is created will find its way on to TV screens around the world, make headlines in newspapers, be disseminated through the internet that called them together. There's no membership data to follow, just individuals coming together through cyberspace.

Open to logic

It is possible to have open debate and persuade one side or the other of your point of view. You may be able to demonstrate irrefutable logic, supported ►

by a plethora of facts and figures, all authenticated by independent bodies. This, however, is insufficient for the person who says “I believe”—if it is a sincerely held belief, your logic is lost. The best that you can hope for is that someone standing alongside the believer does not catch his or her ‘faith’.

The internet is a very personal and intimate tool. One individual may produce a website stating that something is bad, and provide 10 reasons why he believes it to be bad. Another webpage may state that the same thing is good and provide ten reasons why it is good. The viewer or individual surfer is cocooned from personal interaction: the decision is down to the surfer, who simply sees a single page on his desktop and is unimpressed by or unaware of the two parties. One may be a lone voice; the other may be a large corporation. The viewer still sees a single page. Your arguments better be good.

I read it so it must be true

Language is a wonderful tool. Language expresses ideas and creates images in the mind. Language in the hands of communicators can be used as subtle tools, to instil thoughts without actually stating what the reader has interpreted. But the communicator knows full well that he has planted a seed that will be difficult to eradicate. Ask the Inuits in the depths of the Canadian Arctic. One carefully placed photograph can change a world of opinion. The local way of life depended on the seal and every year there would be a cull of baby seals. One of the end products was the pelt, made up into fur coats and garments. Killing a seal with a cudgel certainly looked brutal but it was a more humane way of killing the seal than trying to shoot it. Blood on the snow, however, made one of the iconic photographs of the 20th Century. And it

effectively killed the trade in seal skins and fur. It also killed the traditional way of life of the Inuits, whose compensation appears to have been a new-found dependence on alcohol and other similar benefits of the liberal establishment who had brought enlightenment to their lives.

It didn't take long for the seal population to rise to unsustainable levels, with disease hitting the seals. The seas off Canada teemed with seals, which fed heavily on the rich, fish population. The seals, by the way, had no scruples about the size of the fish they caught. The fishing banks have been running dry—aided and abetted by the fishing fleets of certain European countries. As fish stocks began to run low in traditional European fishing areas, and EU legislation on catch size began to take effect, the trawlers crossed the Atlantic and caught what was left.

Ask the fishermen of Nova Scotia what has happened to their livelihoods, through the exploitation of the same globalisation that some people object to—the same people who have destroyed another community by playing the moral card. What people forget—too easily—is that, having played the moral card, you have no moral right to walk away from the table. The new situation you have created is as much your responsibility to sort out as anyone else's, if not more so. It is a situation that many protest groups conveniently forget or ignore. Double standards are alive and well.

Having seen successful attacks on the soft belly of ‘cuddly animal awareness’, please do not think that more traditional areas of the industry will be left alone. The Indian leather industry thought it could negotiate with so-called animal rights organisations regarding the perceived unacceptable practices of the country. It was wrong and now some major retailers around the world will not buy anything

produced using Indian leather. The retailers, once attacked, appear to be quick to give in to such protests as they are concerned about the impact of public demonstrations on their business and their shareholders. One of the world's largest supermarket chains stopped stocking kangaroo meat after its buyers were shown film footage of kangaroos being shot, wounded, and then killed while the kangaroo's joey was still in its mother's pouch. The decision maker did not bother to find out that the footage was specially set up by the animal rights' organisation. The shooter they paid had been banned by the Australian government for breaking its laws and regulations governing the cull of kangaroos.

The fact that the leather industry cleans up what would otherwise be an enormous environmental problem is of no interest to those who wish to harm the industry. It is not just leather either but leather products too—such as shoes. There are already more than enough companies peddling ‘vegan leather footwear’ as if it is morally superior to leather footwear. The same companies would probably be quite vociferous in calling for environmental sustainability—ignoring the fact that leather is a renewable resource and petrochemicals somewhat finite.

Sticking together

The problems encountered in one country should be a matter of concern to those in other parts of the world. The problems encountered by one sector of the industry should also be of similar concern. That's why the industry needs to speak with a coherent and singular voice. It needs to marshal its arguments so that all its constituent parts are able to defend it from attack from any quarter. It doesn't mean that you deny what is imperfect but it does mean that you should be able to demand accurate information about your business.

It is interesting to note that at the first IULTCS-organised International Leather Forum, held in Paris in September, crisis management and communication was the subject of one of the four round table sessions. In terms of creating your own contingency plans, you had better become acutely aware of how public opinion can be swayed. And that what happens to your neighbour is important to you.

For better or worse, you are in a global business. 🌐

