

**PRWeek**  
eBook

**PRWeek**  
**CRISIS**  
**COMMUNICATIONS**  
**CONFERENCE**

**April 18, 2024**

**Washington, DC**

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**haymarket**

# Lessons of the Day

It was a sold-out crowd on April 18 in Washington, DC, for PRWeek’s second annual Crisis Comms Conference. The one word we wanted everyone to associate with the event was “lessons.”

Each of the 13 sessions was crafted to help attendees learn something about dealing with modern crises. We knew the agenda had to feature leaders from organizations who have dealt with recent, high-profile crises.

Mission accomplished as the CCO of Southwest Airlines and the chief comms and marketing officer of USA Gymnastics shared incredible detail and candor about some difficult situations they continue to navigate. The same could be said of SAG-AFTRA’s chief marcomms officer, who took part in a panel on dealing with labor strife, which also featured a PRWeek Hall of Famer and a top UPS executive.

If you want to teach folks about crisis comms, a good place to start is with Risa Heller, the counselor *New York Magazine* dubbed the “crisis communications warrior.” Her keynote was followed by tactical conversations about navigating global conflicts, the pharmacy conundrum and leaning on purpose to thrive amid crisis.

Doing is a great way to learn. So, the morning closed with an interactive session, led by Molson Coors’ Adam Collins, that had our nearly 300 attendees respond to a crisis presented to them.

The afternoon kicked off with a highly anticipated session focused on bridging political divides (and, yes, both sides of the aisle were represented). Politics — and the uncertainty it brings to brands and comms — was also a key factor in two other post-lunch panels. (It’s an election year, after all.)

In between, a presentation opened many eyes by focusing on influencers and a key issue far too few talk about. And our closing session, fully apropos for the time, drilled deep into the misinformation and disinformation emergency.

For those who attended this year’s conference, thank you. For those who didn’t, we look forward to seeing you next year. If you need some inspiration to do so, we believe you’ll find it — along with some helpful lessons — on these pages.



**Gideon Fidelzeid**  
VP, Haymarket Studio

KEYNOTE

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Photography by Jason Dixon Photography

## KEYNOTE

# The Makings of a Crisis Communications Warrior

Words **Jess Ruderman**



**SPEAKER:** Risa Heller, CEO, Risa Heller Communications  
**MODERATOR:** Gideon Fidelzeit, VP, Haymarket Studio

“One of the things you’re always trying to figure out is what happened, what actually happened and what might happen,” advised Risa Heller, CEO of Risa Heller Communications and the 2024 PRWeek Crisis Comms Conference opening keynote.

“There’s always a very direct reminder that you must have chutzpah to tell someone that the truth really matters,” she continued. “Without the whole story, it’s really hard to do a good job.”

Hailed as a “crisis communications warrior” by *New York Magazine*, Heller has much guidance to impart upon all

communicators regarding how to best handle any and all crises.

It starts with reading “the shit” out of newspapers and everything cover to cover, especially for those coming up in communications. Some must-haves she lists for anyone who wishes to be a good crisis counselor: a lot of curiosity, an insatiable appetite for how these things come together and being a student of the media.

“There’s a lot of common sense that comes with doing communications,” suggested Heller. “It’s a skill you learn by doing. It’s not really a skill you can [be

taught] in school. You can learn a lot by just aggressively reading the news.”

## Crisis comms is an art

Heller described crisis comms as an “art, not a science,” emphasizing that her job as an outside adviser is to “land the plane” for her clients and understand what they want. If a client desires an outcome, she’ll work nonstop to get them that outcome.

“If you’re in a crisis, the news is moving very, very quickly,” she noted. “You want to be able to explain to someone what’s going to happen and hopefully they’ll understand it. It’s very important to understand who your internal stakeholders are.”

Transparency is another key factor in properly responding to a crisis. You never want any of your partners to be surprised to see their names in the news, warned Heller.

In response to an audience question about handling international crises in areas where there are no established resources or media relationships, she emphasized the importance of having a local partner. Even though the things Heller understands about the media are mostly true everywhere there’s a free press, cultural norms can make a response distinctive.

Riffing off some audible agreements from the audience, Heller noted there’s a notion that if you let the story run without saying anything, you can clean it up after. That’s a bad idea, she asserted.

“You want to keep everything wrapped together if you can,” concluded Heller. “I’m a big believer in working with the media when you can. Generally, you can do a lot better if you play ball.” •

# Navigating Global Conflicts in 2024

Words **Barbara White-Sax**

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Dealing with global conflicts is becoming harder and harder for communications teams — and the playbook for how to address these issues keeps shifting. Organizations must balance pressure to comment on conflicts or political events against the risk that any miscommunication or misjudgment can cause irreversible damage.

In this session, “Navigating Global Conflicts in 2024,” sponsored by Alethea, Lisa Kaplan, founder and CEO, Alethea; and Neil Cassley, senior director of corporate affairs at PayPal, conferred about the importance of controlling the narrative and the tools and tactics comms pros can use to actively manage risk in the current media environment.

Disney finding itself the subject of QAnon conspiracy theories after two of the company’s employees were arrested for human trafficking. Starbucks’ being targeted by activists during the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. Rumors flying after Kate Middleton released a photoshopped image of herself. These are three recent examples of narratives in desperate need of deft handling.

Kaplan noted that companies need to continually monitor and quickly identify narratives that pose potential business risks.

“If you don’t have eyes on what’s happening,” she said, “it’s going to be a major problem.”

Comms pros need to assess threats from anywhere in the world.

“The internet doesn’t have borders and things that happen in one part of the world directly impact your company in other markets,” added Kaplan. Maintaining strong relationships with the company’s legal, risk and compliance functions in other parts of the world serve as “your early warning systems.”

Expanding your social listening net worldwide and going deeper than mainstream outlets can be a huge benefit. Slack can also be a valuable listening tool.

“Our most important stakeholders are our employees,” asserted Cassley.

## A consistent global message

When speaking out does become necessary, Kaplan stressed the importance of ensuring the company’s corporate values are reflected in any messaging and that communications stay on point and remain accurate and consistent.

Increasingly, messaging needs to go global. “You need your local counterparts and stakeholders to be very, very involved and be part of the decision-making process,” advised Cassley. He cautions, though, against having “different arms of a company around the world saying different things speaking in a different voice.”



### SPEAKERS:

Neil Cassley, senior director, corporate affairs, PayPal  
Lisa Kaplan, founder and CEO, Alethea

MODERATOR: Gideon Fidelzeit, VP, Haymarket Studio

“If you put something out that’s misleading, then you become the story,” warned Kaplan. Cassley cites Kate Middleton’s mishandling of the photoshopped image as one example of how important it is to have “the right experts around you to navigate the changing landscape.” The current landscape, he noted, requires “cool, calm heads and the right experts in the room.”

Access to the right experts will become even more important moving forward as the risk of deep fake images becomes a bigger concern.

“Anytime somebody from your company is speaking in public, make sure you have a record of what actually happened,” cautioned Kaplan. She reported that some companies are experimenting with protecting video files from unauthorized changes using blockchain technology.

“There are things you can do to be more crisis-prepared if that does happen,” concluded Kaplan. •

# How Southwest Airlines Handled Reputational Turbulence

Words Frank Washkuch



**SPEAKER:** Whitney Eichinger, SVP and CCO, Southwest Airlines  
**MODERATOR:** Steve Barrett, VP, editorial director, PRWeek

Southwest Airlines' 2022 crisis, which stranded travelers across the country when it canceled 16,900 flights during the holiday season, became such a big news story that it was mocked on *Saturday Night Live*.

This was taken in stride by the airline's top communications executive.

"We had Michael B. Jordan, so that's a win," joked SVP and CCO Whitney Eichinger about the skit's casting.

Kidding aside, Southwest should have acted more quickly to get in front of the story, she admitted, adding that the airline took seriously its mission to win back customers' trust, knowing it would not get another chance.

Eichinger, who was named SVP of culture and communications in early 2023 before taking on her new role, also noted the effectiveness of getting CEO Robert Jordan — who himself had only stepped into his role less than a year earlier — in front of employees as part of the crisis response.

After an initial hiccup in which the volume didn't work on an internal Microsoft Teams call, Southwest got back on track by sending videos to its employees several times a day at the peak of the crisis. A microsite was also created.

## The pandemic prepared Southwest

Comms tactics had to be adjusted and honed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tactics used then to guide employees through a particularly rough patch proved helpful again.

"Southwest is very employee-centric," asserted Eichinger. "That helps us in our communications. Transparency is something we take pride in."

Since the cancellation crisis, the airline has worked to restore trust with consumers, as well as other important stakeholders, such as the federal government. It has also honed parts of crisis communications that are as much art as science, such as getting the cadence of employee and external communications right and differentiating a true crisis from an operational issue.

In terms of winning back consumers, Southwest was able to make some passengers' days — maybe even their whole summers — when a delayed-flight-turned-impromptu-singalong became a viral hit on TikTok after passengers were delayed following a Taylor Swift concert. The carrier also benefited from another Eras Tour video when a passenger asked the flight crew if a plane could fly over SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California.

Of course, Southwest has relied on more than the world's biggest pop star to refurbish its image. The carrier did the nuts-and-bolts work of issuing refunds to the passengers affected by the holiday-season delays and cancellations before the federal government required it to do so, reported Eichinger. Its COO also frankly apologized for the delays — "Let me be clear: We messed up," Andrew Watterson told lawmakers in February 2023 testimony before Congress.

Eichinger credits, in small part, the communications team's access to other parts of the business for restoring confidence among the public and stakeholders.

"It's not an environment where comms doesn't feel like it's getting what it needs," she noted. •

# The Pharmacy Conundrum

Words **Diana Bradley**



**MICHAEL HOGUE**  
EVP and CEO,  
American Pharmacists Association



**RANTI AKIYODE**  
Dean and professor,  
Howard University College of Pharmacy



**FRASER ENGERMAN**  
Senior director of media relations  
and issues management, Walgreens

**Competition, store closures, staff shortages and thefts** are among the key issues the pharmacy industry is battling.

How these are being handled from a comms perspective was at the heart of this session, “The Pharmacy Conundrum.”

Fraser Engerman, senior director of media relations and issues management at Walgreens, isn’t worried about competition from bigger retail rivals and telehealth providers, such as Amazon and Eli Lilly’s LillyDirect, because of his company’s 8,500 U.S. stores, each one with a pharmacist on staff.

“You can walk in there and get answers to your questions,” he explained. “You can’t walk into Amazon and ask a question about your medication.”

Walgreens’ automated micro-fulfillment centers, which fill prescriptions and ease pharmacist workloads, are also enabling pharmacists to spend more time with patients and customers.

“Innovations such as that will help us compete going forward,” noted Engerman.

The story is not as positive for the as many as 3,000 pharmacies that are estimated to close this year, reported Michael

**MODERATOR: JESS RUDERMAN**  
Senior reporter, PRWeek

Hogue, EVP and CEO of the American Pharmacists Association. This will eventually lead to a crisis in terms of access to pharmacists’ services and to medications.

Why all the closures? The majority of drugstores’ sales comes from filling prescriptions, but their profits from that segment have declined in recent years due to lower reimbursement rates for prescription drugs.

Theft also plays a key role. Stores have had to inconvenience customers by locking up certain products to curb shoplifting.

Walgreens works with other retailers such as The Home Depot and Target to “put a more proactive face on what’s happening and to show people that this is not a victimless crime, everybody is impacted” due to the inconvenience caused, explained Engerman.

## **Staff shortages and pipeline problems**

Pharmacists work in every part of the healthcare system, including emergency rooms and ICUs, stressed Hogue.

“Now there’s an increased need for pharmacists to make medicines work — and not just simply put medicines in bottles,” he added. “It’s created a new shortage of pharmacists across the country.”

Additionally, fewer students are pursuing a career in the industry.

“There’s been an enrollment challenge over the past 15 years at our school,” admitted Ranti Akiyode, dean and professor at Howard University College of Pharmacy. She noted there is the perception that pharmacy is not a good profession to go into because it is “a stressful environment where changes are being made.”

To get around that, the college promotes all the different roles a pharmacist can play and the importance of having pharmacists in the community.

Two years ago, Walgreens created a voluntary pharmacy ambassador program to help change the narrative about pharmacies and what pharmacists do.

And Walgreens has them speak at conferences and do national interviews with media so people can hear a real pharmacist’s perspective and not just “some flack talking about pharmacies,” noted Engerman. •

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# From Adversity to Advantage: How Purpose Enables Brands to Thrive Amid Crisis

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Words **Barbara White-Sax**

Increasingly, consumers expect action, not merely words, from brands. [Porter Novelli's 2023 Purpose Priorities Report](#) found that 82% of consumers expect brands to demonstrate how they are following through on their promises to people, the planet and society.

In this session, “From Adversity to Advantage: How Purpose Enables Brands to Thrive Amid Crisis,” sponsored by Porter Novelli, industry experts discussed how to define purpose in brand identity, build trust through authenticity and align actions with values.

Sandy Skees, EVP/global lead, purpose and impact, Porter Novelli, counsels brands to consider purpose as an enduring commitment to “the commons,” things no one owns but everyone benefits from, such as clean air, clean water and a non-divisive society.

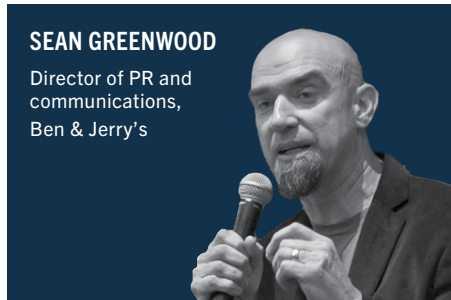
Companies should view purpose as “a long-term business strategy that leverages all of the company’s resources,” she said.

Once they make that pledge, brands need to report their progress toward those promises on an ongoing basis. Porter Novelli’s report showed that almost 50% of consumers will stop buying from companies that don’t live up to their commitments.

“The annual sustainability report can’t be the only place you talk about how you’re living out your purpose,” continued Skees. “It’s got to become part of your product story, your corporate comms story, your investor story, all of it.”

When defining purpose, Skees urged comms pros to start with the company’s origin story.

“That’s the place to find your purpose,” she asserted. It’s also a bellwether for informing how a company should respond to crises and issues.



**SEAN GREENWOOD**

Director of PR and communications, Ben & Jerry’s



**HALLEY KNIGGE**

Divisional VP, communications, community and inclusion, REI



**SANDY SKEES**

EVP/global lead, purpose and impact, Porter Novelli



**MODERATOR:  
AYANNA ROBINSON**

Chief client officer, Porter Novelli

“When you know who you are and you know what you care about, it’s easy to make the right decision on how to act,” added Halley Knigge, divisional VP, communications, community and inclusion, REI.

## Falsehood of ‘go woke, go broke’

Sean Greenwood, director of PR and communications at Ben & Jerry’s, cited a recent story in *Forbes* detailing how brands that truly understand their purpose and are “willing to take to the streets” for their commitments are seeing higher returns on their business versus competitors.

“The real takeaway here is not ‘go woke, go broke,’” he shared.

That said, there are times brands choose to remain silent. Determining whether involvement allows the “business to be authentic to itself” and timing are key considerations for Greenwood.

“It’s all about consistency,” added

Knigge. “Our purpose is so much bigger than just what we sell.”

Panelists also spoke about connecting employees to the brand’s mission so they can be your best possible advocates during a crisis.

Knigge pointed out that REI’s mission to promote outdoor adventure and stewardship is part of everything the company does. The recent launch of its first non-gendered apparel assortment for adults is an example of that focus.

Keeping purpose front and center will become increasingly important.

“A company that does not know, articulate and operationalize its purpose will not be here in 50 years,” warned Skees. “We are going through a sea change in terms of what people expect from the companies they buy from, work for and invest in. Companies that don’t align to what this generation expects will lose.” •



## INTERACTIVE SESSION

# Ready. Set. Go. Navigating the First Moments of a Crisis

Words **Jess Ruderman**



**ADAM COLLINS**

Chief communications and corporate affairs officer,  
Molson Coors

**“The whole reason it’s a crisis is because it’s unforeseen, otherwise we would just know what to do. There is no ‘if this, then that’ model.”**

**Crisis is fluid, dynamic and changes, according to Molson Coors** chief communications and corporate affairs officer Adam Collins.

“The whole reason it’s a crisis is because it’s unforeseen, otherwise we would just know what to do,” he said as he led this interactive session at PRWeek’s 2024 Crisis Conference. “There is no ‘if this, then that’ model.”

Collins has learned many lessons across 20 years in communications and public affairs. While tasked with imparting some of his knowledge to the communicators in attendance, he warned the group they wouldn’t walk out with a grid detailing how to respond to every crisis.

He did set out to give them a solid foundation on crisis response from a general standpoint. And it started with an acronym: STATIC (Situation, Trajectory, Audience needs, Threshold to act, Convene).

Collins went on to emphasize a common misconception about crisis — that the CEO is your audience. He or she is one of many potential players impacted by a crisis, but the audience you often want to focus on is your employee base. And it’s crucial to have a plan that is simple, repeatable and that can be shared out in a variety of circumstances.

“The person who has the most influence is the one who’s calm, collected and strategic,” he underscored.

### The exercise

This session was designed to have the audience learn by doing. In that spirit, Collins presented a crisis scenario in which the group must respond to a deepfake video emerging of a senior leader announcing a merger with a competitor. Attendees needed to decide what to do in the first two hours following the news’ release. Lots of ideas emerged.

One audience member suggested contacting the competitor to make sure they were on the same page and to put out a unified statement.

A different attendee reported that she and some colleagues spent the first 15 minutes of their conversation creating a playbook that should have existed already, which is arguably part of the lesson itself.

Yet another noted that the fact-finding process of the actual deepfake would likely take time. As such, their initial move would be to put out a statement acknowledging the company is aware of the situation, but is in the early stages of the process, engaging with the proper groups.

“The speed at which information moves right now is critical,” Collins commented on that response, noting that in this specific scenario, the video was released after working hours.

“If you’re publicly traded, it’s not 11 in the morning when you can see a massive impact on the stock right away.”

Moving around the room, a different audience member said their group discussed what to do if there was truth to the announcement — albeit the actual video being a deepfake.

“Long story short, you must have [a comms representative] at the table” when it comes to decision making, asserted Collins. “If you’re not, you need to elbow your way to the table. If you can’t, find a different table.” •

# Meet in the Middle: A Bridge for Political Divides

Words **Barbara White-Sax**

The 2024 election will be contested in a volatile environment in which all brands and communicators will need to nuance their messaging.

In this session, “Meet in the Middle: A Bridge for Political Divides,” voices from both sides of the political aisle shared their perspectives on how businesses can help foster an environment in which people can safely agree to disagree and rebuild trust in public institutions.

Sara Fagen, former White House political director under President George W. Bush; NBC News contributor; cofounder and CEO, Tunnl, noted that evidence suggests the middle is actually growing and people are “yearning for some of the noise to dissipate from their daily lives.”

“There’s plenty of middle,” added Stephanie Cutter, founding partner, Precision; Democratic strategist; executive producer of President Biden’s inauguration. “You just need to be careful when you hit a tripwire that makes that divide rise up.”

The best way for brands to avoid stepping on a landmine is to clearly identify causes that are appropriate for their brand to defend and avoid issues that don’t have relevance to the brand identity. Pinpointing issues that are authentic to a brand helps comms pros avoid “responding to every sort of political and social issue that pops up,” noted Fagen.

She said creating an employee resource group comprised of a wide variety of representatives that can help comms pros get a handle on what everybody at the company really thinks about issues should be considered an integral part of that approach.

“Sometimes the loudest voices in the room appear to represent everyone when in fact, they’re simply a minority,” she explained.

## Consider the consequences

Before taking a public position, Cutter cautioned brands to carefully weigh how important the issue is to stakeholders, consider how the position relates to the brand mission and determine if a stance will impact the bottom line.

“You should at least understand the consequences you’re going to face,” she advised. “Nobody should be surprised by blowback from something. If you can’t deal with the consequences, it’s not for you.”

Bud Light’s recent debacle is an example of a brand failing to understand its customer base, while Nike’s decision to support Colin Kaepernick proved to be the right move for that particular brand.

“[Nike] thoughtfully considered all the ramifications and did it

anyway,” noted Fagen. “And they benefited because their customer base strongly supported it.”

While DE&I and ESG have become political footballs, both panelists saw value in an enduring commitment to both.

“Despite all the blowback on ESG, companies are still doing it,” reported Cutter. “If you want to do any work in the global marketplace, it is a requirement. If a company is doing it right, it’s now built into the business plan.”

Fagen said DE&I initiatives must be viewed as “good long-term business decisions that are also reflective of societal needs.” To be truly effective, she added that those initiatives need to be baked into the business so brands aren’t caught playing catch-up with poorly conceived programs. •



### SPEAKERS:

Stephanie Cutter

Founding partner, Precision; Democratic strategist; executive producer of President Biden’s inauguration

Sara Fagen

Former White House political director under President George W. Bush; NBC News contributor; cofounder and CEO, Tunnl

MODERATOR: Frank Washkuch, executive editor, PRWeek

# The Biggest Issue in the Creator Economy that No One's Talking About

Words Barbara White-Sax

**Influencers and creators have become** integral components of brand marketing strategies. While the allure of reaching vast audiences through charismatic individuals is tempting, rigorous vetting of influencers is imperative. Failing to do so can spell disaster for a brand's reputation.

In this session, "The Biggest Issue in the Creator Economy That No One's Talking About," sponsored by Cision, Andrew Dawson, Social Networks Practice principal, executive contributor at Brandwatch (a Cision company), offered some tips on how to navigate the influencer landscape with confidence and integrity.

He noted that the creator economy has become essential for the way marketers do business. Some numbers: 90% of brands use influencer marketing, while 60% work with 10 or more influencers.

"When you're working with a creator, you are buying two things: authenticity and their community," explained Dawson. It's trust by association. He added that while 26% of millennials trust brands, 40% say they trust the brand because of an influencer.

"They have the power to impact brand perception," said Dawson.

At the same time, influencers also have the potential to inflict great damage on a brand. When working with an influencer, brands are entrusting their reputations to those individuals.

"Creators are the babysitters of our brands," he asserted. "We temporarily turn over our most important asset to them," Too often, though, continued Dawson, marketers "buy emotionally and rationalize afterwards."

"The juggernaut that is creator marketing right now is a chaotic tornado, a frenetic energy of people signing people up and moving really quickly," he said. "Nine out of 10 times it's a group of interns who are choosing these people."

## Four key questions

Marketers need to carefully vet creators before they entrust them with their brand's reputation. To avoid brand/influencer misalignment, Dawson counseled marketers to ask themselves four key questions: What will my audience say about this creator? What would their audience say about my brand? What about their profile builds trust? What about their profile could erode trust?

"You must use social listening to understand what people are saying about an influencer that could harm your brand," he added. Red flags — such as excessive talk about alcohol use, violent comments, a criminal record — should be taken into account as a marketer "builds a scorecard relative to your brand and your tone of voice so you can be safe when wading in the world of creative marketing," explained Dawson.

Maintaining the trust of a brand's consumers should always be a marketer's foremost concern.

"Those are the communities that you need to honor," he concluded. "Building trust with them starts and ends with choosing conversations, spokespersons and creators that resonate and are authentic." •



**SPEAKER:**  
Andrew Dawson, Social Networks Practice principal, executive contributor, Brandwatch, a Cision company

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# A Playbook for Fixing Labor Strife

Words **Diana Bradley**

## SPEAKERS (R-L):

Malcolm Berkley, president, global network communications and reputation management, UPS

Pamela Greenwalt, chief marketing and comms officer, SAG-AFTRA

Gary Sheffer, Sandra A. Frazier professor of public relations, Boston University; former VP of comms and public affairs, GE

MODERATOR: Steve Barrett, VP, editorial director, PRWeek



“Internal communicators are imperative when it comes to labor relations,” asserted Gary Sheffer, PR professor at Boston University, who was formerly GE’s VP of comms and public affairs. “It’s a culture issue.”

During his 16 years at GE, the PRWeek Hall of Fame alum learned that labor negotiations would happen in cycles every four years, and in between there would be layoffs, hires and other issues.

“We would get together every four years in a New York City hotel and hammer out a deal,” Sheffer recalled. And the comms team was a key strategic partner in determining what was in the deal and how and where GE talked about it.

He also noted that it’s important to have comms staffers with institutional knowledge who stay through those cycles and understand what happens on the factory floors, as well as benefits and pensions.

“Keep a talented team around you who knows how to run a negotiation,” Sheffer advised.

## Elsewhere on the labor front

Similar to GE, UPS’ labor negotiations also happen on a cycle, usually every five years with Teamsters.

In August 2023, UPS workers ratified the Teamsters-negotiated labor deal, allowing the next five-year contract covering 340,000 employees to take effect.

This was the fifth Teamster contract with UPS for Malcolm Berkley, president of global network communications and reputation management.

“It’s managing risk and reputation on an ongoing basis so that as we get into the flashpoint of those cycles, we don’t have to turn the

volume up so high because we’ve been maintaining and building understanding as we go along,” he counseled.

When communicating externally about labor deals, earned media is critically important, added Berkley, noting that he spends a lot of time with beat reporters who follow UPS and know its issues.

By building that relationship, “when we come to these flashpoints, they have the context, understand the dynamics and don’t leap to conclusions,” he shared.

Berkley emphasized the pride UPS has in being a unionized organization that cares about its employees.

“The notion that this is a fight every four or five years is actually pretty funny to me,” he asserted, noting that the company and its staffers have a shared goal: servicing customers and getting home safely. As such, helping reporters understand the facts “despite the noise you might hear when things get heated at the table” is critical.

SAG-AFTRA’s members went on strike for nearly four months in 2023. Pam Greenwalt, the organization’s chief marketing and comms officer, was in the heart of it.

She explained that SAG-AFTRA negotiates with the major TV and motion picture studios and then negotiates through a multi-employer bargaining group.

“It’s about risk management [and] understanding what is driving our membership,” she said. “We invite them in to tell us what they care about [when it comes to wages and working conditions].”

That way, she continued, when negotiations begin, SAG-AFTRA knows it is representing the members’ interests.

Echoing Sheffer, Greenwalt underscored that “nothing takes the place of internal expertise” when it comes to who is at the bargaining table. •

# Pendulum Whiplash — How Companies Maneuver through Political Uncertainty

Words **Barbara White-Sax**



#### SPEAKERS (R-L):

Steve Rochlin, CEO, Impact ROI

Ron Bonjean, cofounder and partner, Rokk Solutions

Lisa Hanna, GM, head of policy and public affairs communications, Delta Air Lines

MODERATOR: Steve Clemons, founding editor at large, Semafor

A charged political environment, the lack of certainty from government institutions and ever-changing societal expectations. All have eroded the boundaries between corporate communications and public affairs.

The panelists on this session, “Pendulum Whiplash — How Companies Maneuver through Political Uncertainty,” sponsored by Rokk Solutions, discussed strategies companies can employ to make sound decisions on how and when to engage in issues during these increasingly uncertain times.

To help companies better navigate issues, Rokk Solutions developed a service called STAR (social threat assessment and response).

“The approach brings together different departments so companies can make decisions faster about whether or not a company really should respond to an issue,” explained Ron Bonjean, cofounder and partner, Rokk Solutions.

Lisa Hanna, GM, head of policy and public affairs communications at Delta Air Lines, praises the STAR process for bringing different functions of the business together to “take the emotion out of the moment.”

She noted that when senior leaders from all different functions have an opportunity to weigh in on a response and how it will affect all aspects of the company, decisions are made more thoughtfully.

#### Flexibility and rigor

Dealing with complex political issues requires a flexible yet rigorous approach. Complicated issues, such as energy and climate, which both have many different facets and a

variety of stakeholders, create an environment in which consequences are high and emotions are charged. In these situations, leadership must be engaged and issues need to be contextualized as a business challenge, not just as a communications challenge, noted Impact ROI CEO Steve Rochlin.

“This approach takes the emotion out, makes it more analytical, still brings multiple important voices to the table and doesn’t exclude anyone,” he suggested. “We have to adopt some of the business techniques that are valued by legal, the COO and enterprise risk management. Tie [a response strategy] in with tried-and-true mechanisms that are seen to be solid and substantive on the business side.”

Rochlin added that employing a true enterprise risk management strategy helps companies decide when they need to take action, just monitor the situation, communicate with only their employees or the larger public and adjust or adapt their policies.

Panelists agreed that companies with large workforces contend with the unique challenges of communicating with employees who have a variety of opinions and attitudes.

Business resource groups are one way to “allow people to talk about change within the company,” advised Hanna, who added that Delta’s commitment to the Get Out the Vote program helps redirect attention on hot-button issues to encouraging employees to vote as a way to make their voices heard.

Rochlin highlighted Rokk research that indicates the “difference in views on controversial issues between right and left voters is not as massive as you think.”

“A lot of constituencies are looking to your companies to step into the states-person gap,” he noted. “There’s so much polarization right now. They’re looking for companies to help solve that, not to take major stands on one side of the extreme or the other.” •

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# Safeguarding Against an Unknowable Outcome

Words **Barbara White-Sax**

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## SPEAKERS (L-R):

Ethan Bauley, senior principal, Myriant by United Minds

Errol Cockfield, head of North America crisis and issues, Weber Shandwick

Jim VandeHei, CEO, Axios

**MODERATOR:** Alexi McCammond, opinion editor, *The Washington Post*

Business has become a favorite punching bag for both the right and left as demonstrated by continuing labor challenges and the “wokelash” movement. With campaigns making full use of social platforms and communicating instantly with voters, brands must be mindful that every advertising campaign, political contribution, round of layoffs or store closure can be weaponized and used as campaign fodder.

In this session, “Safeguarding Against an Unknowable Outcome,” sponsored by The Weber Shandwick Collective, panelists offered strategies and best practices for protecting and defending business and brands against campaign-related issues and crises in the face of an election year that promises to be contentious.

“The good news for communicators is your job will be much more important than it ever has been,” opined Axios CEO Jim VandeHei. “The bad news: It’s going

to be a lot harder and most people are ill-equipped for it.”

His fellow panelists agreed that communications pros need to use all the tools at their disposal to navigate this perilous environment.

“There’s a lot of great data out there,” noted Ethan Bauley, senior principal at Myriant by United Minds. “In this media ecosystem, consistent actors who have certain agendas and work in predictable patterns are knowable. Media teams must get really clued into that data.”

He counseled comms pros to widen the aperture on relevant media.

“Social is upstream of the news,” explained Bauley. “If you’re not looking at multiple data sources to make consequential business decisions, you’re going to be off course.” To boost situational awareness, comms pros must “look at the fringe to see what tomorrow’s news might bring.”

## All in on AI

VandeHei urged comms pros to get familiar with AI tools.

“Download Perplexity and ChatGPT. Start playing with these large language models,” he stressed. “Be eyes-wide-open because it is going to revolutionize what you do.”

PR practitioners must also become more targeted and deliberate when deciding which issues require a response and avoid the temptation to comment on irrelevant issues.

“Seven out of 10 employees and consumers want their workplaces and the brands they’re engaging with to be neutral,” added Errol Cockfield, head of North America crisis and issues at Weber Shandwick. “Political exhaustion has taken its toll on people. We need to be reflective of this change.”

Companies also need to understand who they are and what they stand for before issues hit.


“If you don’t have a clarity of purpose and know issues are relevant to your company, you get dragged into issues that have nothing to do with you,” advised VandeHei.

Cockfield noted that adopting a “military mindset” and developing decision trees and playbooks around responding to issues allows teams to bring speed to a situation. He also emphasized the merits of thorough and continuing media training for C-suite execs well in advance of any immediate issue.

“At the end of the day, all CEOs do is communicate to customers, employees or any people thinking about our brand,” concluded VandeHei. “If you don’t know how to communicate internally and externally, you’re screwed.” •

# USA Gymnastics: The Road to Recovery

Words Frank Washkuch



**MODERATOR:**  
Jess Ruderman  
Senior reporter,  
PRWeek

**SPEAKER:**  
Jill Geer  
Chief communications  
and marketing officer,  
USA Gymnastics

**Good communications has helped countless organizations** out of a crisis. However, for Jill Geer, chief communications and marketing officer at USA Gymnastics, it was doing, not communicating, that lifted the nonprofit out of the Larry Nassar crisis.

Nassar is serving up to 175 years in federal prison after more than 150 women and girls accused him of sexual abuse over a period of two decades. Nassar was convicted and then sentenced in 2018. Three years later, victims reached a \$380 million settlement with USA Gymnastics and the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee.

In March 2024, the Justice Department agreed to pay nearly \$140 million to Nassar's victims in response to accusations that the FBI mishandled complaints related to the case.

In late 2021, the most famous gymnast in America, Simone Biles, called the organizations supporting her and her fellow athletes a “dumpster fire.” Geer doesn't disagree with that characterization, but she made the case that USA Gymnastics has turned the corner from its association with the Nassar scandal, which she deems to be a “cultural crisis.”

The organization first had to fix itself and its culture before it could talk with the public and stakeholders at large.

“I cannot state enough that the people who work for this organization did not do enough to protect athletes. It is unconscionable,” admitted Geer, adding that USA Gymnastics “had to fix the culture.”

“First, you don't communicate it, you do it,” she emphasized. “It was always ‘show me, don't tell me.’ That first win [would be] when people stop talking about USA Gymnastics.”

Geer, who joined USA Gymnastics in September 2021, explained that most of the organization's staff is now made up of employees who did not work there during the scandal. It has also put in place policies focused on employee health and safety.

## Winning over the athletes

Of course, the organization had to earn the respect of one vital stakeholder group — American gymnasts — before it could talk about its own progress. Until then, noted Geer, “Who wants to hear Voldemort talk about all the good stuff he's doing?”

“Once we had athletes and partners coming back to the sport [it started making progress],” she said. “When athletes and sexual-assault survivors started staying, ‘Wow, I see a new USA Gymnastics,’ that's when it turned around.”

Another major moment in the organization's recovery was when Nike partnered with it in 2023 to become the exclusive apparel and footwear provider for both the men's and women's teams. This was a figurative — albeit crucial — seal of approval.

“Once we signed with Nike,” reported Geer, “that would be a signal that we were safe enough to work with — brands are notoriously risk-averse,” said Geer. “The most important one was when athletes would say nice things about USA Gymnastics, even talking about how the team doctor makes them feel safe.”

“We had to shut down for years. We couldn't have a personality as a brand,” she concluded. “We couldn't even wish athletes a happy birthday on social media. That's how bad it was.” •

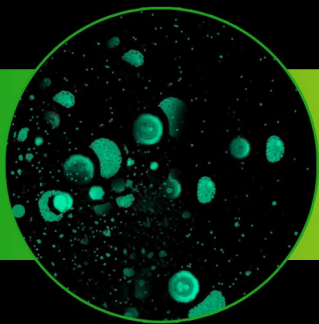


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LOST DUE TO MISINFORMATION  
AND DISINFORMATION.**

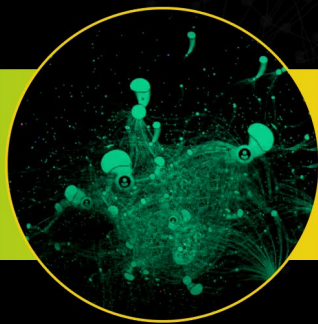
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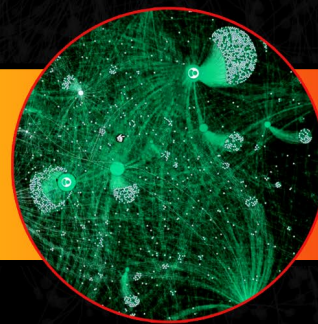
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LOW



MODERATE



HIGH

# The Misinformation and Disinformation Emergency

Words **Barbara White-Sax**

Outside forces have tremendous sway over brand messages in the age of misinformation and disinformation. That problem is exacerbated by the use of AI, which empowers human and machine-based bad actors to spread falsehoods on a constant basis.

In this session, “The Misinformation and Disinformation Emergency,” PR leaders describe how they navigate this crisis day to day — analytically, tactically and philosophically.

Pallavi Kumar, Hurst senior professorial lecturer, American University School of Communication, is concerned that in the current media environment, it’s become more difficult than ever for people to separate fact from fiction.

“I don’t think that filter exists anymore,” she lamented.

“It’s not really about fact or fiction, true or false anymore. It’s about narratives,” stated Wasim Khaled, CEO and cofounder of Blackbird.AI. He says online mechanisms can create narrative attacks that spread quickly and are absorbed into the offline world to cause significant reputational and financial harm for organizations.

“It’s never been more important to confirm and verify [information] and it’s never been more difficult,” pointed out Scott MacFarlane, CBS News congressional correspondent. To help weed out disinformation, the network recently launched CBS News Confirmed, a cross-platform unit of specialists who rigorously fact-check information.

Turning to the experts is one way to build credibility. Rebecca Spicer, SVP of communications at Airlines for America, noted that to help restore public confidence in flying after the pandemic, the airline industry partnered with authorities, including the Harvard School of Public Health, to assess the air quality inside airplanes.

“It’s important to share research and data at every turn,” she insisted.

When combating the spread of a false or skewed narrative, it also helps to have relationships with mainstream media outlets that will provide an opportunity to set the record straight.

“It’s important to have relationships with the people who cover us so that we can have an honest two-way conversation,” said Spicer.

## A new age for virality

It’s harder to contain a narrative in an environment in which trained threat actors are using media platforms to polarize large portions of society against each other.

“Virality doesn’t just happen anymore,” noted Khaled. “Sometimes it’s engineered. Taking out our financial stability is a way for our adversaries to impact society at large.

And they can do that through something as simple as co-opting our communication networks and social media platforms.”

“Some of these things which seem so trivial, can have massive impact,” he continued. “But there are signals that you can look for to help you understand what’s going on. It’s critical that you are able to detect and defend against these attacks.”

Comms pros must take particular care in ensuring that the next generation of communicators maintains a healthy skepticism when it comes to information channels.

“Just because they are digital natives doesn’t mean they are experts at battling misinformation,” urged Kumar. “They have grown up getting their information from different places other than trusted media sources. We have to do our part to train this next generation.” •



### SPEAKERS (R-L):

Scott MacFarlane, congressional correspondent, CBS News

Rebecca Spicer, SVP of communications, Airlines for America

Pallavi Kumar, Hurst senior professorial lecturer, American University School of Communication

Wasim Khaled, CEO and cofounder, Blackbird.AI

MODERATOR: Steve Barrett, VP, editorial director, PRWeek