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Tuesday, November 15, 2011

Top 5 College PR Crises

The last few years have seen a handful of PR case studies emerge as institutions of higher education were embroiled in scandal, tragedy and general bad behavior.

1. Virginia Tech Massacre - In 2007 a mentally disturbed student-gunner **opened fire on the Blacksburg, Va.**, campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute leaving 32 dead, including 25 students.

The school **was lambasted for its failure to react swiftly** and communicate the danger as the ordeal unfolded, including a two-hour meeting of school officials while the killer remained at large.

Response: Burson-Marsteller was hired to help with the crisis, which later spawned implementation of campus-wide alert systems throughout the country's institutions of higher learning.

2. Penn State Sex Crisis - Allegations of sexual contact between a former Penn State football coach and young children rocked the campus this month leading to the ouster of longtime football coach Joe Paterno and university president Graham Spanier.



Response: While Paterno has used PR counsel and the crisis is still playing out, but **Penn State is now relying**

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on Ketchum for outside PR advice. Student outrage (and rioting) over the media treatment of the school and Paterno was a national joke, but the emergence of US Steel CEO John Surma as the school's crisis voice **has drawn accolades.**

3. Duke University Lacrosse Scandal - The North Carolina campus suffered a reputation blow in 2006 when members of its lacrosse team were accused of raping a woman they hired as a stripper for a party. Although the case eventually fell apart **and the athletes were cleared**, the contrast of the alleged victim and many media outlets' portrayal of Duke athletes as privileged youth hurt the institutions image as the incident became, in the words of O'Dwyer **columnist Richard Nicolazzo**, a "Molotov cocktail of race, class, alcohol, sports, elitism and town-gown relations."

Response: Burson-Marsteller helped officials handle the crush of media requests during the scandal and Duke later hired Edelman for reputation work.

4. Ohio State University Tattoo-Gate - The midwest football powerhouse was hobbled amid a memorabilia-for-cash scandal in mid-2011 involving a local tattoo parlor which led to the suspension and later toppling of its **revered head coach Jim Tressel**.

Response: The school chalked **up an \$800K crisis response bill**, including nearly \$300K with Kekst and Company for PR counsel.

5. Rutgers University and Don Imus - The New Jersey institution's women's basketball team was on a dominating run led by coach C. Vivian Stringer in 2007 when Don Imus called the squad "nappy-headed hos," a remark which led to his firing after a ham-handed attempt to explain the inexcusable quip.

Response: While Imus has been exiled from mainstream radio, Stringer and Rutgers handled the situation with PR aplomb, showing grace and dignity in a situation where the coach and students had every reason to be angry. **As the NY Daily News noted:** "The defining image was of the Rutgers team at a press conference, exuding everything Stringer had tried to instill. The 'respect' message couldn't have come across more clearly if Aretha Franklin had dropped in to sing."

Posted by **Greg Hazley** in **higher education** at **11:02** | **Comments (0)** | **Trackbacks (0)**

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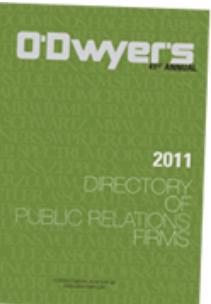
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January, *PR Buyer's Guide/Crisis Comms.*
 February, *Environmental PR & Public Affairs*
 March, *Food & Beverage PR*
 April, *Broadcast Media Services & Social Media PR*
 May, *PR Firm Rankings*
 June, *Multicultural/Diversity PR*
 July, *Travel & Tourism PR*
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2. APCO Worldwide, D.C. - \$113,400,000
3. Waggener Edstrom, Wash. - \$111,910,000
4. Ruder Finn, NY - \$97,059,000
5. Text 100, San Fran. - \$46,700,000
6. WCG, San Fran. - \$37,008,000
7. MWW Group, NJ - \$34,798,000
8. Qorvis Communications, DC - \$29,713,320
9. ICR, CT - \$26,514,0009.
10. Schwartz Comms., Mass. - \$25,210,803

[Ranking of 151 Top PR Firms and Agencies](#)

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- Entertainment
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- Financial PR/IR
- Food & Beverage
- Professional Svcs.
- Sports/Leisure
- Technology/Industrial
- Travel

Top PR Firms By Location:

- Atlanta
- Chicago
- Connecticut
- Florida
- Los Angeles
- Massachusetts
- Midwest Cities
- Minneapolis/St. Paul
- New Jersey
- New York
- Pennsylvania
- San Francisco
- Silicon Valley
- Southeast
- Texas
- Western Cities
- Washington, D.C.

*Source: Forbes.com, April 2011

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► What do 4 of the top 5 **most reputable companies in America*** have in common?

*Source: Forbes.com, April 2011

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