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Best practices, case studies and strategy

Credible third party spokespeople can be pivotal in turning around a media campaign during a crisis

USING THIRD-PARTY ADVOCATES IN A CRISIS

When the SARS epidemic hit China, the fallout of inaccurate information and public hysteria led to the unfounded fear that domestic animals were responsible for spreading the disease. Here, Alistair Nicholas describes how third party advocates helped a pet food company in Beijing restore some rationality to the debate and help avert an escalating business crisis.

In April and May 2003, the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic in Asia led police and government authorities in China to initiate the slaughter of thousands of pets they feared were carrying and transmitting the disease.

In addition to the organized government actions around the country, local neighborhood committees and individuals also took action to deal with the risks they perceived were posed by dogs and cats.

Companies involved in the manufacture of pet food and other pet care products in China soon began to see their businesses threatened by the likelihood of the wholesale dumping and slaughter of pets. One such pet food company – a client of Edelman PR's Beijing office – took action to manage this crisis by seeking out and publicizing the opinions of independent third parties, in an attempt to restore a more rational debate about the issue.

Cultural sensitivities

From the outset, the cultural and political sensitivities surrounding the SARS and pet ownership issue demanded a careful approach.

Traditionally, Chinese culture has

not been open to pet ownership. Keeping household pets is perceived as being *bourgeois*, and modern Chinese people – including educated professionals – tend to look unfavorably on pets and their owners. There are also strict government ordinances on pet ownership and dog ownership in particular.

In this difficult environment, western companies manufacturing pet food and products have been subtly trying to build a culture that is more supportive of pet ownership. However, the rising hysteria around the SARS epidemic threatened to destroy the progress made over the last ten years.

Preparing a crisis strategy

Even before the full extent of the epidemic in China had become known, our client convened a Crisis Scenario Planning workshop involving both their own and Edelman's crisis management teams. The aim of the workshop was to identify the potential risks faced by the company as the SARS epidemic worsened, and to draft communication strategies and messages around each risk.

The risks identified included:

- A manufacturing site employee being suspected or confirmed as having SARS.
- A salesman or other non-manufacturing site employee being suspected or confirmed as having SARS.
- A family member of any employee being suspected or confirmed as having SARS.
- Confirmed infections in residential areas surrounding the company's manufacturing facility.
- Business partners (supply and distribution chains) suspected or confirmed as having SARS.

- Suspicion of products being contaminated with SARS.
- Concerns that SARS can be carried and transmitted by pets to humans.

Dealing with public hysteria

The possible ways in which each scenario might escalate were analyzed and rated accordingly, with each level requiring certain actions and protocols to be followed. Our client was ready to take the necessary steps should an employee become infected, but fortunately this worst-case scenario did not become a reality.

However, it soon became clear that a media storm was brewing over the possible association of dogs and cats with the transmission of the disease, and widespread panic could ensue.

There were two key issues to consider. First, the debate would in all likelihood be driven by public hysteria, fed by a sensationalist media and supported by social and political forces opposed to pet ownership. In other words, the factors that would drive such a crisis were external and our client would have very little control over the situation. The second challenge would be the sensitivities surrounding the pet ownership debate itself. It was at this stage that a decision was made to involve third party advocates as part of the company's crisis management plan.

Facing a skeptical audience

Our client already had a number of contacts in the pet ownership industry in China – including veterinarians and leading animal health and nutrition researchers. However, a question arose around who could provide a credible voice on this particular issue. A public already skeptical about pet



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ownership was unlikely to accept the views of veterinarians and others perceived to be from the animal welfare lobby.

Given that China has an authoritarian government, it was also necessary to find an advocate that would be acceptable to the authorities. This immediately ruled out a number of international non-government organizations (NGOs) that operate in China without appropriate government approval.

By the end of April, the Hong Kong authorities had become concerned about the implications of media stories linking pets to SARS. Statements were issued saying that there was no evidence implicating pets in the spread of SARS, and calling for a more reasonable approach to the argument.

In an attempt to promote this opinion throughout mainland China, we moved quickly to obtain statements from the Hong Kong government authorities and from Hong Kong's Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which were translated into simplified Chinese and distributed to the media through a national veterinarians' association. Unfortunately, despite the association's high profile it lacked credibility as the public perception was that it had vested interests.

Finding a credible advocate

The next step was to find a virologist prepared to state publicly that there was no evidence linking pets to the spread of SARS – someone who could call for rationality around the debate. The best place to find such an advocate would be the Chinese Academy of Sciences – China's leading research institute – but this is a large organization employing thousands of researchers and finding the right person would be difficult. It was also unlikely that many virologists would be prepared to place their

credibility on the line by joining the public debate around this issue.

In the meantime, the Chinese media continued to cover the possibility that SARS could be transmitted to humans by pets. Police in major cities began to set up animal shelters and veterinarians advertised that concerned pet owners could have their animals put-down for a small fee. For our client, the crisis was escalating.

Spotting an opportunity

Then, in mid-May, a press report appeared in the *People's Daily* – the government's flagship newspaper – focusing on the debate around pets and SARS. The article quoted a virologist from the prestigious Academy of Sciences saying that there was no evidence that pets transmitted the coronavirus that caused SARS. Professor Shen Rongxian had apparently been trying to get this message out for some time, but with little success.

Spotting an opportunity, we moved quickly to facilitate a meeting between Professor Rongxian, the veterinarian association and a Chinese government institute responsible for the study of disease transmission through animals.

Using "rooftop media"

Immediately after the meeting, a media statement summarizing the discussion was issued and distributed nationwide. Over the next few days, our staff urged every journalist and editor we knew at leading newspapers and Web sites to run the story. In particular, we pushed the "rooftop media" – China's leading newspapers that set the news agenda and tone for all other media throughout the country – to carry the story.

The most critical of these is the Xinhua News Agency – a wire service that sits directly under the State Council (the executive arm of

the Chinese government) and therefore acts very much as the voice of the government. Once Xinhua carried the story, other newspapers throughout the country soon followed suit. Balance had been restored to the debate and within a week, the number of pets being dumped in the streets or slaughtered began to decline.

By the end of May, researchers in Hong Kong had identified the civet cat, a wild rodent-like creature, as the primary carrier of the coronavirus that had caused SARS, which further eased the focus on domestic pets.

Lessons learned

Although this crisis took place in a developing market that required sensitive government relations, there are a number of lessons here that are relevant to all crisis situations. These are:

- Planning is critical to swift success – the more that can be planned and prepared in advance, the faster you will be able to react and respond.
- Having a credible advocate is important – even with the best laid plans and prepared materials, you have to leverage credible advocates if you are going to win a highly emotional debate such as the one our client faced over the SARS issue.
- Take the time to identify and build relationships with potential advocates long before a crisis hits. There was no reason for our client to think they would ever need to work with virologists, but in some cases, potential contacts can be identified early on.

Third party advocacy can be highly effective at restoring rational debate around an emotive issue. The key is finding credible spokespeople who will be perceived as trustworthy and objective.

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