

Risk & Compliance Journal.

Crisis of the Week: Williams, NBC Between Iraq and a Hard Place

By BEN DIPIETRO

NBC News, anchorman Brian Williams and NBC parent company Comcast Corp are the subject of this week's crisis. Mr. Williams first removed himself from the network's nightly newscast—and later was suspended without pay for six months—following his admission he may have “misremembered” whether a helicopter he was flying in during a reporting trip to Iraq was attacked by missile fire. The resulting criticism prompted the network to launch an internal investigation, still ongoing.

The experts were asked to evaluate both the statements of NBC and Mr. Williams. How effective was each in handling the crisis? Where did their statements fall short? What did they do well? What should they each do next?



NBC News' Brian Williams during an interview in July 2014.
Lloyd Bishop/NBC/Getty Images

Davia Temin, chief executive, Temin Co.: “NBC/Comcast was swift and perfectly on-point in their crisis response to Williams’ admission of lying. [NBCUniversal Chief Executive] Stephen Burke’s comments were textbook, and the six-month suspension without pay and Williams’ name taken off the program have demonstrated that NBC shares the public’s sense of outrage. This is only mitigated by the possibility that they knew of the lie beforehand.

“Regardless, NBC hit pause, imposed significant censure and created time for a full investigation. If other excesses of truth are found, they can easily ice Williams permanently. NBC has acted well to protect its own name and begin to restore its now-challenged trustworthy reputation.

“Not so for Williams. First, he was forced into the admission—he did not volunteer it. Second, he appeared so involved in his own damage control that his apology seemed grudging, limited and insincere, given the unfolding facts. And in this video age, where all his versions of the story can be shown, along with his ‘apology,’ he appears even more calculating. He has not let his true remorse—if it exists and is distinct from being caught—show. It would help him to win back some trust if he could do so.

“But the real ‘conflation’ is of news and entertainment. And with this loss of purity comes a loss of trust. While Williams may have been seeking to be a Hemingway-like character—the subject/hero of his own stories—that has backfired on him. The only way to come back is to express a deeper, more honest remorse for the hubris that seems to have caused his breach of journalistic standards.”

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Shannon Wilkinson, CEO, Reputation Communications: “Brian Williams is a master of appealing to an audience of millions. That’s why his weak apologies disappointed and surprised so many Americans.

“Williams’ first mistake was responding independently, without coordinating a response plan with NBC leadership. His apologies put him out there alone. Then he failed to deliver a convincing explanation of his confusion over the old war issue. That opened him up to widespread attack before people really knew the facts—which we still don’t.

“Williams stumbled again when he announced that he would take himself off the air for several days. That should have been NBC’s decision. The Internet has been raining criticisms, protests and parodies ever since. However, that does not necessarily mean his viewers—NBC News’ audience—agree. According to statistics, his largest audience is women aged 55 and up. That demographic may be more forgiving than the cascade of voices on Twitter. Williams has time to plan his appeal to them. This time, he needs a team.

“NBC News President Deborah Turness gets high marks for her management of this situation. She responded quickly and appropriately at the onset. Then she kept the public informed. Steve Burke, the CEO of NBCUniversal, hit the perfect balance when he said Williams’ actions “are inexcusable and this suspension is severe and appropriate” but that Williams deserves a second chance. NBC’s leaders have set a high tone for the organization—and provided much-needed time for a respite. Most crises don’t have that opportunity.”

Ira Kalb, assistant professor of clinical marketing at the USC Marshall School of Business: “Because of his ability to straddle the fine line between news and entertainment, Brian Williams became anchor of NBC Nightly News. He often exercised his comic chops ‘slow-jamming the news’ with Jimmy Fallon or hosting Saturday Night Live.

“The problem is the image of a news anchor is incompatible with that of a comedian. To earn the public’s trust, news anchors have to be credible. Comedians have to be funny. Much of the news is hardly funny. Even so, Mr. Williams successfully walked this line until news broke that seriously damaged his credibility.

“That’s when he admitted he ‘misremembered’ events related to a helicopter attack in Iraq after soldiers involved in the incident contradicted his story in social media. Now his Hurricane Katrina statements are also being called into question.

“His repeated apologies have not helped his case with the public. According to respected research firm, The Marketing Arm, his ‘trustworthiness’ ranking has plunged from 23rd to 835th. In released statements, NBC News President, Deborah Turness, and other Comcast bigwigs failed to come to Williams’ defense. Therefore, it’s no surprise that Turness turned his several-day self-imposed exile into a six-month suspension without pay.

“Where does everyone go from here? NBC can find another anchor, but exiting contractual obligations may be costly. Mr. Williams seems out of crisis management tools to recover his reputation as a credible news anchor. His only chance is to craft an ironclad, provable explanation that can satiate a skeptical public. Or, he can resort to comedy.”