

# Crisis, crisis everywhere and, yes, you are all invited

 By [Sarah Gooding-Kobus](#)

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A construction bridge collapses over a busy Johannesburg highway with disastrous consequences. Social media explodes with pictures, videos and commentary?—perhaps before the construction company's communications team even knows about the crisis...

This age of people constantly talking, sharing and criticising has turned the traditional crisis communications response model on its head. Brands do not have the luxury of time to respond?—the longer they wait, the bigger the assumptions get and the more damage is done. Even if they don't have all the answers, honesty is better than silence.

Part and parcel of working in the communications industry is our voracious appetite to keep up to date and constantly in the know. It is unavoidable?—by consuming any form of news in the moment and every way we turn, we're bound to see brands (be they corporate, consumer or individual) blundering in some way or another.



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## Judgement days are here

We are more judgmental today than ever before, purely because we have the tools to make ourselves heard. Strong opinions are encouraged and people are not at all shy to share them. We have platforms available to us 24/7 that let us chime in and add to the discussion. All of our voices can be heard, all of the time.

If one reviews the way we used to advise clients regarding crisis communications, containment was a lot more feasible. In the event of a crisis, just like today, you could have the very best 'step by step' plans in place? scenario planning would be done in advance and messaging and statements prepared. Dedicated teams were ready to roll if a crisis struck. Ultimately, it was all about controlling and managing the message internally, to key stakeholders and, of course, to the media.

Fast forward to 2015 and reputation management is a whole new ball game.

Everyone is invited? we all have opinions and we love voicing them; it's an interesting social study when one delves into the impact and satisfaction one gets from engaging on social media. We get a definite sense of 'belonging' and acceptance when our comments and opinions are affirmed by others.

However, in this age where we pride ourselves on being open-minded, are we not at risk of being more judgemental than ever before? This 'rubbernecking' over scandals becomes a precarious phenomenon. People are quick to point fingers, assign blame and make assumptions? often before they have the full picture.

## **Our role as an industry**

We, as communications and PR professionals, more than anyone, should know to reserve judgement until we have the full picture. What is the context? We have the benefit of understanding what cogs are put in motion in the background when a crisis afflicts a brand and have probably managed a brand that has been on the receiving end of criticism in the past or likely will in the future.

I'm not saying one should sit on the fence, or reserve any point of view. Similarly, it is not our responsibility to go out there and actively diffuse the flames. But we ask the question? what is our role as an industry? As communications consultants, what responsibility do we have in setting an example of being rational and refraining from the hype?

Exercising a little discretion and caution before we jump onto the discussion trail could go a long way, as who knows who will be next in the firing line of 360-degree scrutiny?

## **ABOUT SARAH GOODING-KOBUS**

Sarah is passionate about the organisational structure of the growing team at WE in Johannesburg and maintaining an open, integrated culture that is geared for long-term success.

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