

Susan G. Komen vs Planned Parenthood

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On January 31, 2012, two iconic organizations, focusing on women's health Susan G. Komen for the Cure and Planned Parenthood became embroiled in a heated public relations controversy when Susan G. Komen (SGK) decided to defund Planned Parenthood (PP). The Associated Press broke the story that morning writing:

“The nation's leading breast-cancer charity, Susan G. Komen for the Cure, is halting its partnerships with Planned Parenthood affiliates creating a bitter rift, linked to the abortion debate, between two iconic organizations that have assisted millions of women. The change will mean a cutoff of hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants, mainly for breast exams” (Associated Press, 2012, para. 1).

The initial reasons given by SGK for the defunding was new granting criteria that prohibits funding to organizations who are currently under investigation. At the time PP was being investigated by Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Fla., who was seeking to determine whether public money was improperly spent on abortions. PP insisted immediately that the defunding was the result of SGK succumbing to bullying by anti-abortion politics (Associate Press, 2012).

Communication Plan Analysis

What followed the Associated Press story was four days of crisis and missteps for SGK and four days of well-executed communications by PP. There is much to learn from both SGK and PP in how both organizations handled the defunding of PP.

Susan G Komen for the Cure

SGK made several critical mistakes in handling the crisis that ensued when the decision to defund PP went public. The first mistake was jumping into a hot-topic social issue during an election cycle and not having an adequate plan to deal with the inevitable backlash. According to

Handel (2012), the only real plan was to issue an official statement about the defunding. When it became clear that simply issuing statements wasn't going to be enough, SGK had no other real plan for how it was going to communicate with the public. This lack of planning leads to SGK looking incompetent and tone-deaf to much of the public. This wasn't the first time SGK had received negative backlash from the public. SGK had recent issues by partnering with Kentucky Fried Chicken and for suing smaller charities for using "for the cure" (Miller, 2012). SGK should have been prepared for this story to go public given the explosiveness of the topic. When PP and the public reacted with the intensity that they did, SGK had no real plan to deal with any of it.

The next point of discussion regarding this issue is not knowing how decisions will affect and be perceived by stakeholders. SGK is a breast cancer organization which has supporters across the political spectrum. In deciding to defund PP over abortion services, one of the most politically charged issues of our time, SGK was caught unprepared for the backlash and pressure applied by many of its stakeholders (Miller, 2012). This issue of upsetting stakeholders and knowing when you are likely to do so is tied to having a communication plan in place that can be executed when the need arises. SGK had been in process for defunding PP for almost a year through exploratory subcommittees which resulted in a unanimous vote to defund three months before The Associate Press story in January of 2012 (Staff, 2012). SGK, its director, board and upper management should have predicted that this decision would be negatively received by many of its stakeholders and subsequently created an appropriate plan for communication.

When SGK entered the politically charged abortion issue, it did so to the cost of its original mission of breast cancer research. SGK strayed from its overarching mission and in doing so alienated many of its stakeholders and thus created a crisis that did not need to exist. If SGK wanted to defund or change funding for PP, they should have planned differently and stuck

to their core mission, particularly with government PP funding coming under fire (Handel, 2012). The mission of SGK should have informed not only the communication plan but also the decision to defund PP. SGK did not do this and thus entered an arena that they should not have been to the detriment of their core mission.

When the crisis did hit, SGK made a critical mistake of not appointing one spokesperson for the media, and they changed their messaging. Initially, the reasons for defunding were changes in granting policy that disqualified PP from receiving grants. According to SGK, the new granting policy guidelines prohibited granting to organizations who were currently under investigation. In the days that followed, Nancy Brinker, SGK founder went on record to state that the defunding of PP was due to PP only giving referrals for mammograms and not providing direct services (Sun & Aizenman, 2012). SGK changed their decision to reinstate funding for PP four days after the story broke stating that the new policies were for organizations who were under criminal investigations, and since PP was not, they were indeed eligible to receive funding (Staff, 2012).

When the story broke, SGK was slow to respond. The first few hours are critical. SGK was not prepared to handle the social media onslaught that followed. SGK began receiving calls the evening before The Associated Press released their story and the first tweet about the decision was tracked at 8:00 PM the night before. The most recent tweet on SGK's Twitter account for a day was a tweet about mummy's having prostate cancer. SGK's Head of Marketing alerted that the SGK Facebook page would likely receive posts, but no one was assigned to monitor the page, and in fact, the staff member assigned to handle SGK social media accounts was on vacation for the week (Handel, 2012). At the time of the decision, the most recent SGK Facebook activity was SGK welcoming Energizer as their newest sponsor, an act that resulted in SGK stakeholders threatening to boycott the battery company (Miller, 2012). SGK's first official

response did not come until the evening when the story broke. By the time SGK did respond, pro-PP and anti-SGK social media sentiments and activity were happening in high volumes across all social channels (Handel, 2012). SGK did not respond using social channels and were accused of deleting negative comments from its Facebook page to make the outrage seem less than it was. SGK denied that it deleted comments, but that claim was not believed by the public (Flock, 2012).

SGK lost control of its messaging and mission during the four days of this incident. SGK was not able to contain the situation with any effectiveness and resorted to reacting and responding. They were ill prepared for the onslaught of negative social media comments and posts from PP supporters. SGK did not react quickly and let PP take over this issue which promptly became about politics and not about the mission of SGK (Miller, 2012).

Planned Parenthood

While SGK was ill-prepared for dealing with their publics when the announcement to defund PP went public, PP was well prepared and executed a plan quickly and efficiently that ultimately caused SGK to reverse its decision to defund PP.

Faced with the prospect of losing precious funding, PP went into action immediately. Shortly after the story broke, PP had already engaged their Twitter followers with a tweet that said, "ALERT: Susan G. Komen caves under anti-choice pressure, ends funding for breast cancer screenings at PP health centers" (Action, 2012). This single tweet started PP crisis communication plan which lasted four days when SGK reversed its decision to defund the women's health organization. Within hours, an email was sent to PP supporters from their president Cecile Richards explaining the defunding and asking for donations to PP which sent Twitter and Facebook into overdrive with negative comments and posts about SG (Miller, 2012).

It is important to note that the tone of the email was not negative towards SGK, but instead let PP's constituency know of the situation and ask for money to help fill in the gap.

PP's strength in this communication campaign was their ability to engage their supporters and to be able to adapt and add as necessary. Their general planning for such a crisis also allowed PP to be quick and adaptable in executing this plan. PP maintained a database of stories from women about how the organization had helped them, so when this crisis hit, PP already had positive stories about women accessing breast health and breast cancer support from PP to deploy. PP did not need to waste precious time soliciting stories from its followers (Ward, 2012). "When the Komen news hit we were able to go into the story bank and pull real stories...If we had to call around and look for stories, it would have taken days" (Sklar, 2012).

PP used social media throughout this campaign to engage its followers. They went a step further in creating content and content blocks that their users could remix and subsequently share with their followers. This action produced an abundance of user-generated content created with PP material. PP digital strategy, even before the crisis was to use social channels to engage their followers so when the crisis hit, they had social capital and engaged followers willing to create and share pertinent content. "When the crisis happened, we already had education and information available on all of our channels in multiple languages, so there was information to point people to." Social channels were used to build up the community and create a consistent space for engagement between the organization and individuals as well as amongst the community. "We weren't asking for things on a daily basis, but just maintaining an open dialogue," said Lazzaro. "It's all about building the relationship and meeting them where they are, whichever channel, etc. So when you do need them, they are ready" (Ward, 2012, para. 2). When the crisis hit PP, they and their followers were ready to engage. The instinct is to wait and

get your message straight: get everyone together and decide what the message is, et cetera. But now, our supporters are asking us what to say right away. Even if you just post that you know it happened and you are working on it, that is better than nothing." As Bryant explained, PPFA's "abc" is Always Be Communicating. "We needed to be on the phone with each other to work on integration and coordination of the messages across channels" (Ward, 2012, para.3).

PP also took control of the messaging throughout this campaign. PP did not rely on bashing SGK but rather created an "I Stand with Planned Parenthood" advocacy campaign which included a petition and supporters and celebrities posting images and messages showing their support for the organization. PP "decided it needed to play several roles for angry supporters: uniting them, giving them regular updates, and offering them "something constructive and meaningful to do. For us, that was standing with Planned Parenthood; it was not criticizing Komen" (Perry, 2012, para. 14). In looking at that data, most of the messages about PP were focused on women's health, while SGK's messages were associated with abortion (Harrison, 2013). This data shows how PP took control of the messaging and focused on the more significant issues of women's health, while SGK did not and this campaign became about the abortion debate for them.

PP adapted quickly in this campaign through monitoring activity across its channels and making additions and changes to its campaign.

One, it was announcing and educating supporters that this was happening... The second piece which in the advocacy role you say what can you ask your supporters to do that's meaningful and in this case asking for money made sense because we were trying to replace the funds that were lost. What happened after that was completely and utterly unknown to us. We did not have a campaign for Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. We

didn't know that a day later we were going to launch a petition. We didn't know that two days later we were going to be working with Mayor Bloomberg and the Lance Armstrong Foundation. We just knew that we had many supporters who were going to be upset.

What we found out when we were getting feedback from Facebook and Twitter was that people weren't upset sad, they were upset outraged. (Yahoo! Business & Human Rights, 2012)

This nimble approach allowed PP to monitor the conversations that were taking place and adapt their campaign accordingly. PP states that they "didn't have a game plan after that email because we didn't know what the response was going to be. You have to be nimble, and prepared...we have never seen that kind of activity on our Facebook page – we couldn't refresh the page fast enough even to read and respond to the number of messages we were getting...that calls for more than just the digital or social media staff to get together and get online to help respond because of the number of messages. More people in your organization need to be able to get involved and engage when it is an all-hands-on-deck situation" (Ward, 2012, para.9).

PP had already been using the available monitoring tools and search engine optimization (SEO) to drive search queries to their website. This strategy allowed PP to disseminate their content and messaging to people who did not go directly to their Facebook page and proved useful in this crisis. "We created a page that had pictures from celebrities and the community with signs that they 'stood with us', links to our social channels and links to actions, easy bullet points that recapped the issues and what is going on, and call-outs for journalists to get more background (Ward, 2012, para 5).

Conclusion

When SGK defunded PP, they had no plan in place to deal with the inevitable backlash that would follow. They failed to understand the implications of their decision and the type of communication plan that decision would require. SGK had hoped to release the information about defunding quietly (Miller, 2012), but instead started a firestorm that SGK was never able to get control over and eventually reversed its defunding decision. SGK was slow to respond, and when they did, it was the classic example of "too little, too late." SGK lost control of messaging and allowed PP to dictate the conversations that were happening online and in the media.

In contrast, PP went into action immediately following the announcement. They are the ones who broke The Associated Press' story to social media. PP took control of the story and the messaging so that the thrust was about women's health and not the abortion debate. PP engaged its followers, who through good social media practices were ready to take action. PP devoted available resources to deal with the onslaught of messages coming in and to drive their message forward. Their president was visible, engaged, and consistent throughout the four-day campaign. The result was favorable for PP as they gained not only the funding lost by SGK, but also tens of thousands of new advocates for their cause.

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