



Product #: 6BW-0911A05

Format: Campaign Profile-A two-page summary of a Silver-Anvil Award winner, addressing research, planning, execution and evaluation.

Title: Crystallizing a Response to a Crisis
Silver-Anvil Award Winner
Imperial Sugar, Edelman, 2009

Summary: 2009 Silver Anvil Award Winner – Crisis Communications – Business

When the Imperial Sugar plant exploded in Port Wentworth, Georgia, the company in partnership with Edelman, launched a public engagement program to disclose information in a methodical and timely manner, to reassure a host of audiences, including employees, stakeholders, investors, elected officials and the media, and to engage the public in helping the company support the Imperial Sugar employee family. The effort launched by Imperial, supported by Edelman and largely executed by the community of Port Wentworth and Savannah, fortified Imperial's relationships and facilitated its short term goal of rebuilding and long-term business needs.

Full Text: SITUATION ANALYSIS

On February 7, nine days after CEO John Sheptor assumed the top position at Imperial Sugar, a massive explosion occurred killing 14 people and injuring 32. Sheptor was conducting his first meeting with employees at the time and watched as first responders and media arrived on the scene to chronicle the company's response, which he knew would have broad implications. The board would have to determine if they would rebuild; investors would have to hold or devalue Imperial's stock; regulators and legislators would react to public sentiments; and employees would take measure of his leadership. Lacking a corporate communication team, Imperial turned to Edelman. While over 300 media inquiries were logged in three weeks, the public exposure was less important, ultimately, than how the narrative itself was told: Would Imperial be seen as the helpless victim of a disaster or as a company poised to rebuild? Sheptor's ultimate test would be how quickly he could marshal resources to get the company back on track while tending to the emotional needs of employees and the community.

RESEARCH

The Georgia Department of Labor released data making it clear the success of the company's response and recovery went beyond Imperial. For every job inside the plant, seven jobs within the community were dependent upon that employee. If Imperial Sugar failed to rebuild, the community of Port Wentworth would be crippled. The futures of Imperial and the community of Port Wentworth were inextricably tied.

In addition, Edelman's 2008 Trust Barometer found that "people like me" were the most trusted source of information – meaning community members' voices and responses to the tragedy would prove to be equally critical to the company's overall ability to recover.

On-the-ground primary research was conducted with 27 in-home visits, daily employee meetings, six hospital visits, 13 meetings with elected officials both in Savannah and Atlanta, and coordination with 37 investigative government agencies. These helped to identify immediate needs and community offerings. This quantitative and qualitative research became the basis for Imperial's public engagement program to recover and rebuild.

PLANNING & EXECUTION

In an immediate crisis, planning and execution occur simultaneously, but are guided with insights from research, which in this case indicated a symbiotic relationship between company and community, a need to build trust through engagement and a need to heal emotional wounds through integrated communications. With no internal communications department at Imperial Sugar, Edelman had to assume communication management of a multi-million dollar corporation. In addition to the incredible emotional challenges posed by the crisis itself, the communication infrastructure at the rural, damaged plant meant sporadic cell phone coverage, no Internet access or working power. The disaster's scale posed very real challenges in a small community, such as limited venue space for the memorial service. The team had to meet tight deadlines for creation and dissemination of materials, and pay particular attention to legal and corporate review due to potential implications of all public statements.

Once engaged, Edelman created a protocol plan that outlined the approval and dissemination process for all written communications. The families of employees who were missing in the still burning plant (many of whom waited days before learning the status of their loved ones) became a primary audience. Employees became a second-tier audience with media and other stakeholders a timely third. This tiered system for sharing information ensured that Imperial Sugar employees and their families were never surprised by news reports, kept rumors to a minimum and established a working trust. Edelman worked with Imperial to coordinate key messages and talking points with more than 37 different first responders and local, state and federal agencies.

While no media relationships existed at the local level prior to the event, regular phone calls, daily briefings, in-depth one-on-one conversations and responsiveness helped build and nurture now long-term positive media relationships. Edelman also helped Imperial handle high-level media inquiries from outlets such as 60 Minutes, the Los Angeles Times, Bloomberg and the Wall Street Journal. "A Community Remembers" memorial service was created, managed and conducted to help the Imperial employee family and Port Wentworth community experience closure, which also allowed individual families the dignity of privacy so they could grieve without distraction from the media at visitations and funerals.

EVALUATION

Edelman corrected more than 50 media and wire reports with accurate information within hours of being engaged. Twice-daily press conferences and turn-on-dime responsiveness built a foundation of trust between Imperial and the public and created opportunities to showcase the community's involvement in more than 91.2 million media impressions in six weeks, which captured a company clearly embraced by the community, with headlines like: "Definition of Community" and "They Were Our Friends." The facts behind the headlines were impressive:

- o Financial relief efforts totaled more than \$1.4 million in a partnership with United Way.
- o The Georgia Red Cross collected a record amount of blood, 2,700 units, in just a month's time in Savannah, Augusta and Port Wentworth.
- o Big and small contributions were featured and showcased in local media, including a retiree organizing a "Sugar Ball" relief benefit, a local dress-maker donating dresses to daughters of victims, a local restaurant sponsoring an employee barbeque to improve morale, and a quilting bee campaign, which provided thirty specialized blankets for burn victims.

Positive coverage, including a headline heralding, "Imperial Sugar Rising" only months after the explosion, highlighted the company maintaining full-employment, sponsoring an employee training program and ground-breakings for the new facility. These sentiments were replicated in East Coast investment papers like the Wall Street Journal to West Coast human interest stories in the Los Angeles Times.

The standard of success in crisis response is how quickly an entity can get back to business. After the public engagement program was executed:

- o Imperial's board approved a motion to rebuild.
- o The plant restarted production nine months after the explosion, with full employment.
- o CEO Sheptor was offered a coveted speaking slot to share best practices at the International Sweetener Colloquium.
- o Imperial Sugar's stock stabilized, which while initially paralyzed after the explosion, grew by 38% in the months of October and November, while the rest of the market tumbled into a recession -- outperforming both the S&P and NASDAQ.

Public relations and public engagement helped Imperial Sugar not only exceed stated communication objectives, but set a course for the company to emerge and reclaim its market status.