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**PUBLIC RELATIONS: CRISIS MANAGEMENT  
HANDLING IT HONESTLY & ETHICALLY**

By David Wyatt @WyattBrand #TXarts15

# Where does my opinion come from?

- Studio art degree
- 7 years at the Austin Symphony and Austin Museum of Art
- Founded WB in 2006
- Worked with over 275 brands since, including:



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



Consulate General of Israel  
to the Southeast



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**IFCFilms**



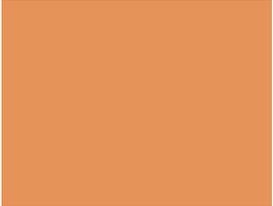
# What are we talking about today?

- **Crisis PR:** media coverage, et al.
- **Ethics in nonprofit communication**
- **Considerations**
  - ▣ **Brand:** public image
  - ▣ **Touchpoints:** all the ways people encounter your organization
  - ▣ **Social Media:** Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, et al.
- **Case Study: a PR Crisis**



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# Your brand is as your brand does

As it turns out, what you do and how you do it are more important than what you say you are...

*In other words, your mission is no stronger than the organization in its worst moment.*

# Nonprofit crisis PR principles

- Ethical Behavior

- Transparency
- Integrity
- Honesty
- Conflicts of Interest

- Responsible Stewardship

- Staff, volunteers, donors, corporate partners, et al.

- Measured divulging of information

THERE IS  
NO RIGHT WAY  
TO DO  
A WRONG THING.



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# Communications to Consider

## **Stakeholder\***

- E-mail messages
- E-Newsletters
- Social Media
- Calls
- Conversations

## **Public\***

- Web site
- Press Releases
- News Statements
- Social Media

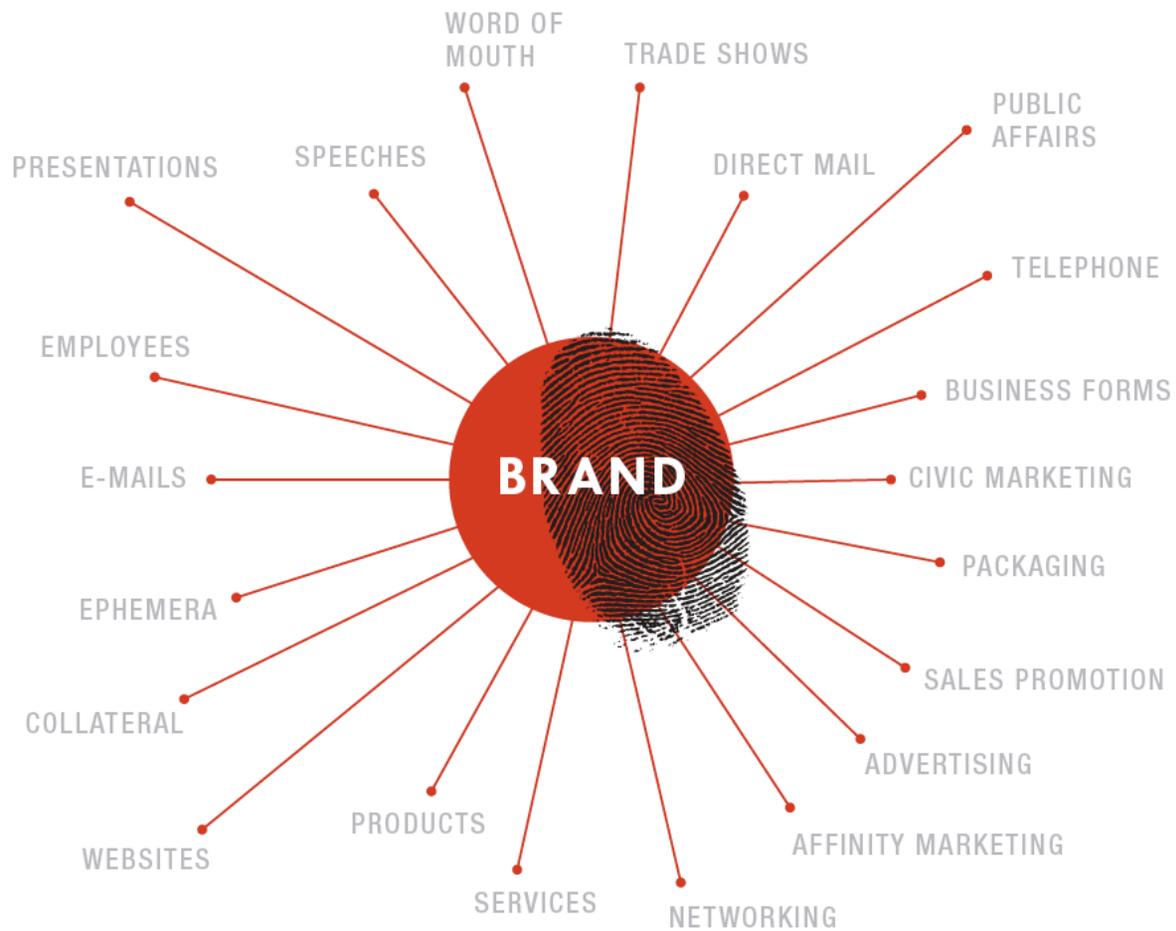
## **\*Media**



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# ...as your brand does



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“It takes a lifetime to build a reputation  
and only a few seconds to destroy one.”

– Unknown



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“If it’s going to come out eventually,  
better have it come out immediately.”  
– Henry A. Kissinger



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**“Always acknowledge a fault frankly.  
This will throw those in authority off their guard  
and give you opportunity to commit more.”  
– Mark Twain**



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# Components of Crisis PR

## You can Google all of this:

- ❑ The Crisis Communication Team
- ❑ Positioning
- ❑ Designated Spokesperson
- ❑ Media Policies and Procedures
- ❑ Practicing Tough Questions
- ❑ Prepared Statements
- ❑ News Release
- ❑ Key Audiences
- ❑ Handling Media Interviews

## What's missing:

- ❑ Ethics
- ❑ Honesty
- ❑ Sequence of your Stakeholders
- ❑ Media as Stakeholders
- ❑ Timeliness
- ❑ Social Media



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# Sequence of Stakeholders

## **Be intentional about how and when stakeholders learn of a crisis:**

1. Staff Leadership + social media mgr.
2. Board of Directors
3. PR Firm (if applicable)
4. Staff
5. Donors and pertinent partners
6. Media Stakeholders
7. Audience, members, volunteers  
(eve of announcement, where possible)



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# Make a plan

**If you do nothing else before a crisis, make sure you:**

- ❑ Have a basic protocol/plan for what to do when an crisis PR issue arises.
- ❑ A shared understanding of what a crisis PR issue is to your organization.
- ❑ Identify someone whose job it is to spot a crisis and drive the plan.



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# Adapt the plan

**As things unfold rapidly, it is important to:**

- Always let ethics and the mission be your north star.
- Change the approach based on the atmosphere and momentum of a crisis.
- Not assume the plan is working.



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# Assess the plan

## **After the dust settles, you should always:**

- Reflect in a group on how things went.
- Discuss where the organization messed up re: ethics, the mission, and communications.
- Make an earnest change in the audience of internal/external stakeholders, incl. media!



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# A Crisis PR Case Study

Strange Fruit PR



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# What was Strange Fruit PR?

- A two-person food/lifestyle PR firm founded in Austin in 2012.
- "Strange Fruit" is a song performed by Billie Holiday in 1939—it protested American racism, particularly the lynching of African-Americans.



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# What was Strange Fruit PR?



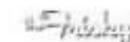
StrangeFruitPR @StrangeFruitPR · 6m

We thought the term "strange fruit" really could stand for someone who stood out in a crowd, a talent that was different and remarkable—



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# What was their crisis?

- Apparently called out on the name numerous times in 2 years, although overlooked by some media and clients.
- In early December 2014, a handful of Twitter users began lambasting them with #StrangeFruitPR
- Assault went past @StrangeFruitPR to client accounts then media including Washington Post, Newsweek, New York Daily News, Texas Monthly, MTV, et al.



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# Who were their stakeholders?

- Clients, prospective clients, local media.
- Culturally sensitive Twitter users.
- National media.
- Armchair pundits.



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# What did they do wrong?

- Thought they knew better than the community.
- Ignored early opportunities to make a change.
- Resisted a full apology until too late.
- Didn't atone for missteps, leapt to a fix.
- Did not adapt their plan well.
  - @PerennialPR parody account



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# What was the outcome?

- Were the target of widespread criticism and claims of ineptitude locally, nationally, among colleagues.
- Forced to rebrand.
- Lost clients.
- Reputation damaged, perhaps irreparably.



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# What can we learn from #StrangeFruitPR?

- Listen to your constituency—especially in times of dissenting opinions.
- Set aside ego and hubris.
- Consider all stakeholders.
- Be thoughtful and swift about the content/order of communications around missteps.
- Heed the power of social media.
- **APOLOGIZE!**



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# PAY ATTENTION, BE ETHICAL

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