

Mistakes Were Made: What to Take Away From the High-Profile Blunders of 2006

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You didn't publicly tell a botched joke about our troops in Iraq. You didn't drive drunk and then make anti-Semitic remarks to the police. You didn't come up with a scheme to put O.J. Simpson on national TV to chat about murder techniques. And you won't spend 2007 chasing Hank Aaron's home-run record with a cloud over your head because of alleged steroid use.



Mel Gibson in 'Braveheart': Now he's battling back from his own bad behavior.

Still, you can learn a great deal that might help you next year by analyzing blunders made by high-profile newsmakers in 2006. The examples above -- involving John Kerry, Mel Gibson, Judith Regan and Barry Bonds -- are just the short list. There are also lessons in the fall of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in Michael Richards's racial slurs, in James Frey's fabrications in "A Million Little Pieces" and in the options scandal enveloping corporate executives.

I asked crisis-management consultants to review the biggest public mistakes of 2006, with an eye toward helping the rest of us avoid trouble in 2007. Their advice:

Fear the Web. The Internet can thrust anyone into the spotlight. If someone posts, say, a cellphone video of your bad behavior -- that's what happened to Mr. Richards -- there's no deniability. "The Internet neutralizes redemption, because the original sin lives on," says Eric Dezenhall, a crisis consultant in Washington, D.C. "Your darkest side and greatest failures can be showcased forever."

"You can be from the smallest town in America and be international news by lunchtime," warns Jonathan Bernstein, a consultant in Los Angeles. "So conduct yourself as if you're on the air at all times."

"I'm sorry" doesn't cut it. "Everyone says, 'I'm sorry.' That's very '80s," says Karen Friedman, a communications coach in Blue Bell, Pa. "It's like saying to someone, 'I love you, now sleep with me.' It's empty, hollow and, quite frankly, pathetic: 'I'm sorry I cooked the books.' 'I'm sorry I beat my wife. I won't do it again.'" In 2007, Ms. Friedman says, nothing less than a full-out explanation, total candor and contrition will do. "You have to say, 'I made a terrible mistake. I offended people. I lied. I was stupid.'"

Mel Gibson's first apology, released by a spokesman, seemed cobbled together by lawyers. But his second statement "sounded like it came from his heart," says Mr. Bernstein. "He said what he did was despicable. He used words to describe himself that others might have used."

You're not always right. Mr. Rumsfeld would belittle reporters who asked him hard questions. He'd dismiss critics as ill-informed. His arrogant manner helped bring him down, the crisis managers say.

"Americans will forgive mistakes. We will not forgive arrogance," says Richard Levick, who runs a strategic communications firm in Washington, D.C.

Nurture your reputation. John Kerry joked that if you don't study hard, you'll end up in Iraq. He said he was referring to President Bush, but the joke was interpreted as a slur against U.S. soldiers.

One reason that incident blew up was because "it validated the worst that people suspected of him, which is that he represents the mega-elite," says Mr. Dezenhall.

The people who survive their missteps tend to have a reservoir of goodwill. If people like and respect you -- if you've treated them well in the past -- "they're more apt to reach out and pick you up if you've stumbled," says Steven Fink, who runs a California-based crisis-management firm.

Lose your sense of entitlement. Executives won massive payouts through the questionable backdating of options grants. They then tried to justify their windfalls. "They want everybody to understand that they're worth the money," says Mr. Dezenhall, "as if the method by which they acquired it was just a technicality." He sees this lesson: "Don't con yourself into believing that the means don't matter."

Know your audience. Fox TV executives and book publisher Judith Regan thought America would see nothing wrong with their O.J. project.

"All of us have audiences -- our bosses, colleagues, students, families, vendors, in-laws," says Mr. Levick. "You can't violate the trust with your audience." As Ms. Friedman asks: "Who is that family member, friend, co-worker? What will they put up with? What will offend each of them?"

If you misread the temperature of your "audience," you must apologize, even if you're late doing so. Crisis managers mention Oprah Winfrey. At first, she defended Mr. Frey after news broke that he'd fabricated parts of his book. After her initial efforts offended her audience, she admitted she had made a mistake.

Gut it out. When smart companies are enduring a public-relations crisis, "they try to get through a news cycle or two," says Steven Van Hook, who teaches marketing communications at University of California, Santa Barbara. "The same is true in your personal cycle. Can you wait it out a couple of days?" In other words, own up to what you did, make plans for restitution and hope your spouse eventually finds other news to dwell on.

Be good. By the time James Lukaszewski, a consultant in White Plains, N.Y., gets calls from high-profile people in trouble, "things are already leaking, foaming, stinking or flaming," he says. The best way to avoid having to call him, he says, is simple. "Live a life of integrity. When in doubt, lean toward the ethical decision."

Or as Mr. Levick tells clients: "Listen to your mother. If you can't justify what you're doing to her, then don't do it."