

Nov 04, 2016 by [APDS Bloggers](#)

Celebrity spokespeople are doubled-edged swords ^[1]

APDS Blogger: Michael Duffin

“There comes a point in every man’s life when he has to say, ‘Enough is enough.’ For me, that time is now.”

“Now every one of you has good reason to be critical of me. I want to say to each of you, simply and directly, I am deeply sorry for my irresponsible and selfish behavior I engaged in.”

The statements made by Lance Armstrong and Tiger Woods, respectively, were attempts to mitigate the damage caused by scandal. For Armstrong, he confirmed in January years of rumors that he took Performance Enhancing Drugs to achieve cycling stardom. For Woods, it was a domestic disturbance at his home in 2009 that exposed his numerous extramarital affairs.

In both cases, the scandals damaged the credibility of the organizations associated with them. Such examples are not rare, either. Oscar Pistorius was the feel-good story of the London 2012 Olympics and a symbol of the adversity South Africa has overcome since apartheid, but all that went away with his arrest on Valentine’s Day for the murder of his girlfriend. Greg Mortenson promoted education in Afghanistan and Pakistan with the book *Three Cups of Tea* and the Central Asia Institute, but allegations that he fabricated events in his book and misused funds destroyed his reputation and that of his organization. Two days before these allegations came to light the University Louisville announced that Mortenson was receiving a prestigious award that included \$100,000.

While they can be demanding—brown M&M’s and all—these people can provide a cause with instant exposure. Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore, for example, rallied against sex trafficking and millions of their fans listened. Even if they stay free of scandal, sometimes the spotlight unintentionally shifts towards them and away from the cause. Proceed with caution!

For five years I taught broadcasting at Benedictine University in suburban Chicago. Two weeks each semester were devoted to public affairs and crisis mitigation. For one exercise I randomly assigned each student a unique crisis scenario. Acting as a university spokesperson, they had 10 minutes to prepare for a press conference to answer questions about a hypothetical football coach landing himself in hot water. With scandals impacting NGOs and nonprofits on a seemingly regular basis I decided to share three tips from my lecture notes.

Don’t rely on one person

High-profile endorsers and spokespeople may get in trouble, die suddenly, or simply become irrelevant. Michael Jordan turned Nike into a global phenomenon, but the longevity of the

Jordan Brand offshoot depends on other athletes wearing his sneakers. The success of the book Half the Sky by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn led to a documentary and a Facebook game that supports humanitarian efforts. The PBS documentary featured six celebrities (America Ferrera, Diane Lane, Eva Mendes, Meg Ryan, Gabrielle Union, and Olivia Wilde), none of whom overshadowed the project with their stardom. If any of them become embroiled in scandal, it would be possible to mitigate the negative press.

Vet your spokespeople and leaders

A friend of a friend puts you in touch with a celebrity who supports your cause and wants to act on behalf of your organization. Sound perfect, right? Even in such a scenario thorough research is required. Detractors will use anything in that celebrity's past as cannon fodder against you. Notre Dame hired George O'Leary in 2001 as their football coach, but he lasted only a few days when school officials learned of gross exaggerations on his résumé. Critics of Notre Dame never would have relented had they kept him.

Keep your spokespeople and leaders grounded

This applies to the non-celebrities who become the face of their organizations such as Mortenson and Invisible Children co-founder Jason Russell, whose very public nervous breakdown spoiled the success of the "Kony 2012" campaign. It is important to offer leaders support and put them in a position to succeed. Russell was overexposed and could not handle the scrutiny. He ended up naked on a street corner in San Diego making lewd gestures to motorists. At that point no publicist could help, especially with TMZ obtaining footage. To keep leaders grounded it is important to let them read the good press and the bad press (just not too much of it). Building up your leader's mythos can quickly turn them into a media darling, but that can also lead to an equally fast fall. Once in the public eye cut back on press access and let others handle media inquiries. Elizabeth Warren's Senate campaign put her in the national spotlight, but once she took office she stepped out of it. She still engages with her constituents through social media, public engagements, and media outlets in Massachusetts. If the Washington Post or the New York Times wants a quote they have to talk to her spokespeople.

One can argue that this is all common sense, but if that was true media consultants and publicists would be irrelevant. Even with such people, though, organizations still fall into the same trap. Leaders who don't delegate bring their organization down with them.

Michael Duffin is a graduate student concluding a Master's degree in Public Diplomacy from USC's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism. He has extensive experience as a journalist and educator.
