

# Reputation Management in The #MeToo Era

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Capitol Communicator



By **Huong Cao**

**Reputation crises in a social media driven world** can come from unpredictable directions at the most unexpected moments. This presents a challenge to today's communicators, who not only convey companies' messages but are able to turn themselves into crisis experts quickly when a scandal like #MeToo breaks. When it comes to reputation crisis management, real-world lessons become the best weapon of seasoned professionals, but for those who have never faced a reputation crisis before, what tools or knowledge do they need?

To prepare new professionals and students for the inherent challenges they will face in the workplace, the well-timed event “**Reputation Management Challenges: What Every New Professional Should Know,**” gathered communication students, educators, new professionals, and senior industry leaders at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on March 23 for a series of three panels discussing reputation management challenges, along with insights about managing reputation crises.

The event was organized by the communication departments of American University School of Communication, George Mason University and the University of Maryland University College Graduate School public relations program, and the PRSA Educators Academy.

In the opening remark, **Gemma Puglisi**, assistant professor in School of Communication at American University, shared that the idea of coordinating this event started from discussions on the topic of reputation management from similar events hosted by PRSA Mini Educators.

Puglisi also moderated the first panel discussing what college students want to see in the working environment after NBC's "Today," PBS, Harvey Weinstein, et.al.

The first panel consisted of **Katya Beisel**, a senior studying public relations and journalism at George Mason University; **Rikki Kyle**, a freshman public relations student at American University; **Philomena Gorenflo**, a student from University of Maryland University College; and **Ayana Fennel**, a senior public relations student at Howard University.

### **Panelists shared thoughts of #MeToo movement**

Puglisi started by asking student panelists whether they were surprised when they first heard about #MeToo. It was "disappointing and disheartening," according to Fennel, who said she had put herself in the position of the victims and realized how unsafe or vulnerable it was that these men knew very well who to target. "I am also glad that women are brave enough to come forward," Fennel added. Beisel, who was not surprised, said that we all had seen these things, but some of them were easier to spot than others. Kyle shared what stuck to her most was that women had the courage to speak out. Gorenflo added that "this kind of stuff has been going on, but what is unique is people have brought it to light."

### **Panelists gave their insights into the reputation management of companies involved in #MeToo movement**

When discussing how the companies involved in the movement managed their reputation crises, and what they should have done differently, Beisel said she was not totally impressed with any company. However, she approved of how Netflix handled the scandal involving **Kevin Spacey**. "Netflix resumed filming the show, so you still can watch it, but they also handled the issue."

Gorenflo said that the most important thing was what these companies did after their scandals broke.

Companies should accept responsibility, but there will never be an apology that is good enough, according to Beisel. Fennel suggested that companies do a better job of screening people at any level to make sure all employees are well aware of the impact of sexual harassment.

Regarding the impact of these scandals on innocent people, Kyle and Beisel agreed that having a policy or process protecting employees from these scandals was important. Fennel said, if someone was credible, he or she had the right to stay.

### **What can be done? Consent and education.**

In terms of ways to better working environment for women, Beisel emphasized the importance of talking about consent. "We need to have active discussions because without discussions, it would be difficult to talk about this," she added. Kyle said that it was not a matter of policy or

legislation but education. “They need to have more training sessions so that people can understand the issue or are more aware of the consequences when committing sexual harassment,” added Kyle.

The panel also addressed the future of gender equality. According to Beisel, while #MeToo helped spark a national conversation, which might help speed up gender equality, she believed that it would still take some time for women to achieve true equality. Gorenflo stressed that women needed to see themselves differently. “While men feel more confident when pursuing new opportunities, women tend to feel they have to fulfill extra ten qualifications when they want to apply for a new position,” she said.

After the first panel ended with a Q&A session, **Sergei Samoilenko**, a communication instructor at George Mason University, led a discussion on reputation management in the digital domain with panelists **Shawn Turner**, a national security analyst at CNN; **Neely Dockins**, a senior account supervisor at Edelman; **Anthony Shop**, co-founder and chief strategy officer of Social Driver; and **Lesley Swiger**, a client staff assistant at Burson-Marsteller. The panel provided student participants with real-world lessons on how to manage reputation in a time of crisis.

**“Use data as much as you can in crises,”** Dockins said. According to her, people are often emotional and overreact when they are in a crisis, but if professionals can bring data and insights to the table, it will improve the situation. She also addressed that social volume can be scary or seem like a big deal, but their business impact may be smaller than we think.

**“Focus on what you can do,”** is the lesson that Swiger learned six months ago. When a young girl’s family was frustrated because of the high cost of insulin and took it on social media, her company faced a crisis in dealing with people who could not afford insulin. She shared that the company then chose to focus on what they could do, such as finding someone to talk to the family and decreasing the cost. However, even though the company made efforts in resolving the situation, it decided not to promote what had been done because during the time of the reputation defense, the public might still not believe the company.

**“Develop good strategies on both traditional and modern media,”** was a suggestion from Turner, who used to face a significant reputation management issue regarding an information leak. To handle the crisis, “I have to have a strategy that shows the public that we do not violate privacy and security of people.” Specifically, he explained what the company did was create a process in which messages to the public came from him and other subject matter experts, showing that everything they did was authorized.

**“Create content that is snackable,”** is Shop’s suggestion for creating messages. According to Shop, people who are skeptical do not trust professional sources which they cannot understand. As attention spans decrease, bite-sized messages are the best delivery to audiences. Shop also added that companies should act quickly in a time of crisis and avoid responses that are too cold and formal.

**“Be patient and consistent,”** is what Dockins suggested having in mind the long road of rebuilding trust. Dockins shared that some clients handled a crisis very well, but then they did not follow through, went silent, and lost public trust as a result. “Clients and companies often think that they have completely gone through a crisis, but that may be a dangerous thought or misunderstanding,” she said.

Samoilenko concluded the second panel by asking the panelists for their thoughts on the top skills that newcommunicators need to succeed in crisis management. The panelists responded: Listening skills, curiosity, confidence and knowing the subject matter.

The third panel was comprised of senior leaders who focused on identifying risks to reputations and solving them quickly and ethically. Moderated by **Mitchell Marovitz**, chair of public relations program in the Graduate School at the University of Maryland University College, the panel featured **Susan Finco**, President and Owner of Leonard and Finco Public Relations and member of the executive committee and board member of the National Football League’s Green Bay Packers; **Mari Eder**, President and CEO of Benson’s Review and retired U.S. Army Maj. Gen.; and **Jacqueline Strayer**, President of the Sound Advisory Group and a member of the NYU and Columbia faculty. Using examples from their storied careers, the panelists offered students valuable insight into crisis management and ethical behavior in our fast-paced digital age.

### **Think about potential pitfalls**

“Always think about what is out there and what things may come at you,” according to Finco, who also links this to curiosity. “You do not want to be affected whenever something has occurred, but thinking about what may happen brings you value.”

### **Have believable values**

In addition, Strayer emphasized the importance of having believable values and having a game plan in place. “It is value that is important in crisis.”

### **Understand your stakeholders**

Eder suggested professionals understand who their stakeholders are and remember that “it is the same message for all stakeholders.” Another thing that Eder considered important was being humble. “If you are wrong, admit it.”

### **Simplicity is key**

Strayer emphasized “simplicity,” which is similar to what Shop had suggested in the second panel – having snackable content. “This is not the time for corporate speeches or spinning messages. You want everyone to understand every word you say.” Finco added that communicators needed to craft simple messages that simply included what happened, why it happened, what you were doing about it, and “do this in an authentic manner.”

The event proved to be useful for both student participants and professionals. In addition to a better understanding of reputation management, attendees learned valuable suggestions from seasoned professionals who are expert at dealing with issues in reputation management.

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