



**GIBBS & SOELL**

# Insight

FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

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## Managing the Numbers: A Path Forward for Action

Science will prevail—or so many companies believe when a crisis strikes. But such crises often center on dueling data, with company scientists on one side and expert witnesses for the plaintiffs' attorney on the other side. This Pandora's Box of equal and opposite experts can unwittingly cause a company to get mired in defending minute data points and missing the bigger issue.

Getting a firm grasp on the numbers, putting them in the proper context, correcting false claims and touting your side's key points are essential to a company's crisis response. But, at the end of the day, success requires getting beyond the numbers and focusing on action.

As simple as this notion of "action" sounds, it is a very hard thing for most companies to do. This is especially true when "science" is a core factor of the crisis and the scientific findings are either inconclusive or suspect (or made so by the opposition). Cases in point: Johnson & Johnson wasted little time taking Tylenol products off the shelf; the apple industry's "Alar scare" in the late 1980s led to the decimation of many businesses because scientific results showing an extremely low risk level did not mitigate parents' concern for their children's safety.

### Science ≠ Public Trust

What makes "science" so powerful are the method and knowledge it is built upon. Implicit in this concept is that the findings are backed by data, able to be replicated and, hence, true. We live in a world where the men and women in the white lab coats with superior intellect and reason trump all, right? Wrong.

Defending science-based arguments in the court of public opinion can be a very difficult thing to do, unless the science in question is easy to understand and the findings bulletproof. The problem is that science, like many things in life, is not always clear-

cut. There are often differing scientific perspectives on the same issue. There are different ways to view the findings of the same study. And, if an antagonist wants to get under a company's skin, there is no better place to attack than the science itself.

This challenge is particularly vexing for science-based companies. After all, sound science is what they base their very existence on. How could they ever waver or cede any ground when it comes to science, even if the science neither proves nor disproves any causal linkages? What should they do if they have confidence that their science will stand up in a court of law? What should they do if public opinion discounts their science?



### Homes for our Troops: Remembering Those in Need

Gibbs & Soell would like to take this opportunity to say thanks to clients, employees and associates and to remind everyone of this special time of year – a time when we reflect, hope, dream and set new goals for the New Year.

Each year, Gibbs & Soell selects a charity and makes a holiday donation on behalf of its clients and employees. This year, we chose Homes for our Troops, an organization that helps build handicap accessible homes at no cost to our severely wounded veterans. For more information on Homes for our Troops, log onto [www.homesforourtroops.org](http://www.homesforourtroops.org).

Thank you and Happy Holidays!

Companies should sound the warning bells when their position rests on complex and somewhat insular science that is only meaningful to a handful of experts. Such companies need to make sure that they do not fall prey to a misplaced belief in a black-and-white world where “science will always and automatically prevail.” Such thinking may rule in the lab, but the outside world is not as one-dimensional. The distinction between black and white is rarely clear. All too often, the media, general public and employees fall somewhere in the gray area between the two ends of the spectrum.

## Beyond the Science: Evaluating the Risk

There can be comfort in using numbers and science to guide a response strategy. However, it is just as critical to look at the emotional and business sides of the issue. If these other factors are not evaluated and managed in tandem, the crisis response can become incremental, myopic, reactive, and painful.

The key “non-science” factors that need to be evaluated for their potential impact on a company’s reputation, profitability and survival include:

- Clarity of picture: Have the hard questions been asked? Is an outside perspective needed?
- Employee trust, morale and productivity: Will trust and morale erode based on the company’s action (or inaction)? Will company decisions impact productivity? Will the action (or inaction) cause some employees to leave the company and/or seek legal recourse?
- Escalation of lawsuits/lawyers: Are anger, dismay or opportunity likely to increase the num-

ber of potential “victims” willing to participate in legal action against the company? Will the company’s course of action (or inaction) bolster the opposition’s case and/or attract others into the situation? What are the realistic costs/benefits/risks of the legal situation?

- Escalation of media coverage: How have media covered the crisis, and company, to date? Will the company’s action (or inaction) attract more media looking for stories on “corporate malfeasance?” Is the organization prepared to withstand greater media and public visibility and scrutiny?
- Corporate reputation: How will the crisis impact the company’s overall business? Will it fuel doubts about corporate integrity and business practices? How must the company respond to protect its business interests?
- Shareholder value: Will a stubborn defense based on science alone affect shareholder value? Will an escalation of lawsuits and media coverage have a negative effect on shareholder value, at least in the short run?
- Gut check: Is this the time and place to make a stand?

## Action is King

Smart companies realize the best way to manage a crisis is having a clear path forward. They focus any and all related communications on defining, “Where we are going from here,” and “How our action reinforces our position, credibility, trust and brand.”

By their very nature, crises almost always have uncertain outcomes, a degree of “blame and accountability” and competing influences. There is a natural desire to want to ignore a crisis or to hunker

down behind the data. But doing so won’t make a crisis go away - it will only exacerbate the situation. There is a time and place for vigorously defending the science and the numbers. There is a need to balance the scientific, emotional and business aspects of the crisis. And there is the requirement of communicating in an open, honest and transparent manner. But one thing is certain. There is always a need for action. It truly trumps all. [G&S](#)

*This article was originally contributed for publication in the PR News Crisis Management Guidebook. It is reprinted with permission.*

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