



*How a Localized Community Relations Program Has Formed the Foundation of BP's
Image Restoration Campaign Following the 2010 Gulf Of Mexico Oil Spill*

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BP is one of the world's major players in the oil and gas industry, heavily invested in offshore drilling in the Gulf Coast region. BP had seen its share of public and environmental safety incidents prior to April 2010, but for the most part it had been spared from catastrophic events like the *Exxon Valdez* spill of 1989. The *Deepwater Horizon* disaster off Louisiana's coast, however, plunged BP into full-fledged crisis communication mode, and to date, the company continues to battle environmental factors and negative public opinion in an attempt to not only restore the affected areas, but also its image. BP has initiated a community relations campaign to complement its overall communication strategy and is showing progress in relieving the stings of initial communications failures.

Background

The April 20, 2010 explosion of the *Deepwater Horizon* deep-sea oil drilling rig and subsequent oil spill is now considered the worst disaster in American drilling history. *Deepwater Horizon* was a mobile deep-sea drilling rig operated by drilling contractor Transocean in the Macondo Prospect region of the Gulf of Mexico. Transocean owned the rig and was contracting for BP at the time of the explosion. To date, several reports place varying degrees of blame on many parties involved, including BP, Transocean, rig overseers, the government and the drilling industry in general.¹ Investigations have found that both BP and Transocean showed blatant negligence in sacrificing safety and precaution in favor of quick and cheap strategies to extract oil from the Gulf.²

The initial rig explosion took the lives of 11 men; the subsequent oil spill tainted hundreds of miles of shoreline, affected thousands of coastal and marine wildlife and, with President Barack Obama's implementation of an offshore drilling moratorium, totaled billions of dollars in environmental damage, recovery costs and economic impact. BP faced a disaster on two fronts: not only did the Gulf spill inflict extensive, long-term damage to the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem and the economies of the Gulf States, but the company's reputation in that area, the rest of the United States and the world was severely harmed. BP engaged in immediate crisis response communications following the spill but received widespread and pointed criticism for a series of perceived gaffes.

BP: Bad Publicity

Initially, BP went on the defensive, downplaying the extent of the spill and the projected environmental damage, which CEO Tony Hayward said would be "very, very modest."³ He later retracted these comments, and on multiple other occasions BP had to backtrack on initially low estimates of impact.⁴ Eventually, BP adopted apologetic messaging, acknowledging responsibility for the disaster and a promise to set things right. The message that the company would remain involved in rebuilding and cleanup efforts has been front and center since then, but the vehicle has not always been effective or ideal. The message was first iterated in a multi-faceted advertising

campaign featuring print and radio ads and a one-minute television ad featuring Hayward, several still photographs of cleanup efforts and beach sounds in the background. BP commissioned the ads from the firm Purple Strategies at what independent analysts estimate was a cost of nearly \$50 million.^{5,6}

Hayward also came under heavy fire for his seemingly insensitive handling of the disaster. In late May 2010, he apologized to Gulf residents and those affected by the spill through reporters, but his interview is most remembered for his comment, “I’d like my life back.” Many took offense to these remarks considering 11 men died in the rig explosion and left behind families and friends, and Hayward later apologized for his comments.⁷ However, less than a month later, Hayward took a personal vacation from disaster management to attend a yacht race—a decision that drew the ire of many, including the President’s then-chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel.⁸ President Obama himself criticized BP’s public handling of the situation on multiple occasions, pointing out that the money spent on the advertising campaign could be better suited for relief and compensation efforts, and that Hayward would not have lasted long under Obama’s supervision following his string of remarks and public miscues.⁹ Indeed, Hayward would be without a job before the end of the month.

If image is everything, then BP’s was as tainted as the Gulf water itself, and the Internet was a hotbed of negativity. In addition to negative coverage in traditional media and a swath of negative comments on news sites and blogs, a variety of warped versions of the BP sun-star logo, “dripping” with oil, began littering the Internet and still dominate Web image searches. A parody Twitter account, @BPGlobalPR, sprang into existence and entertained followers with irreverent comments lampooning Hayward and other company representatives for their public gaffes. To date, this is still an issue the company faces in its image campaign: @BPGlobalPR has nearly 165,000 followers, more than five times as many as the official BP Twitter feed, @BP_America.

A Pew study published in June 2010, less than two months after the rig explosion, indicated that the public trusted BP far less than both the media and the federal government regarding information on the spill (39 percent placed some trust in BP as opposed to 67 percent in the media and 51 percent in the government).¹⁰

Most importantly, BP needed to cap its leaking well, but it was critical to make several changes on the public relations front. BP had to find a way to get its information and messages through—a task made increasingly difficult by a lack of public trust and a corporate leader who had seemingly lost all credibility.

Stopping the Flow

Several efforts to stem the Macondo flow failed, but the well was finally capped and the oil leak stopped in September 2010, five months after the initial incident.¹¹ By this time, BP had also capped the flow of negativity surrounding Hayward by removing him from the equation and installing Mississippi native Robert Dudley as his replacement. This was a historic move for the former British Petroleum; in more than 100 years of existence, the company had never tabbed a foreigner as its CEO.¹² There now existed a perceived cultural and communication disconnect between the British corporation and its American audiences, so while Dudley had extensive background with BP and in the industry, being an American and a Gulf Coast native likely factored into his promotion.

Dudley had recently been named the president and CEO of the Gulf Coast Restoration Organization (GCRO), formed by BP in late June 2010. The GCRO was specifically charged with continuing cleanup efforts and implementation of its claims program, but it was also created as a public information vehicle.¹³ The group holds a presence in each of the four Gulf States affected by the spill (Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida) and comprises several personnel who had been on the ground in the area since containment and recovery efforts began.

Some of these experienced communication personnel are continuing their work under the umbrella of the GCRO. Curtis Thomas, director of media relations for GCRO in Louisiana, was working for BP in Colorado when he received a call at 1:40 a.m. on April 21, 2010, mere hours after the explosion. Within another few hours, he was on a plane to New Orleans, and he spent most of the next seven months working in Grand Isle, La. He and others would play key roles in establishing a much-needed community relations component of BP's crisis response campaign and solidifying BP's messaging of remorse, regret and reassurance that it would help rebuild.

Community Relations

BP moved swiftly to place representatives in affected areas following the rig explosion. Naomi Williams, BP's community relations manager (CRM) for Plaquemines Parish in Louisiana, was sent to Venice, La., a small fishing community on the southeastern tip of the state. Williams committed to a two-week volunteer position but remained in Plaquemines Parish until November 2010. Gerald Ford took the same position in nearby Lafourche Parish, La., with the goals of identifying local stakeholders and ensuring that they were part of BP's communication efforts. "We wanted to make sure key stakeholders in individual affected parishes had a specific point of contact they could go to if they had any concerns in the spill—a one-stop-shop type of individual," Thomas says.

According to Williams, BP had no presence in the area prior to the spill. Her initial tasks included finding office space and setting up shop, and she and others actually slept in the office building during their first few weeks in Plaquemines Parish. While Williams said she and other volunteer staff were told they would be the "faces of BP,"

they were not given a static communications plan. Their goals were to serve as sounding boards, to identify the communities' greatest needs and to report back to BP. They did not serve as media spokespeople; Thomas, his counterparts in the other states and BP headquarters in Houston controlled public commentary and messaging.¹⁸

Ford said that the scope of the disaster was so great that “everyone was in ‘uncharted waters,’” and that the community relations teams initially had to rely on instinct to effectively communicate with stakeholders, who themselves lacked a concise emergency plan. Christina Stephens, director of communication at Louisiana’s Disaster Recovery Unit, said in 2010 that, while the state has viable, tested crisis communications plans for hurricanes and other natural disasters, no such plan existed for an oil spill.²⁰ Ford and Williams say BP was very receptive to the needs they relayed back from the local stakeholders and provided the resources the teams on the ground requested.

Initially, the information stakeholders requested was how to get involved in the recovery effort. The priority for BP’s community liaisons was gathering information, securing relationships and establishing a database to relay to the operations team, which coordinated recovery efforts. The key message for the BP campaign remained a promise that the company was committed to its response to the oil spill and to rebuilding the Gulf Coast. BP began running a series of advertisements featuring lower-level personnel working in affected areas in the Gulf, and many of these representatives were Gulf Coast residents. The ads established a common theme by reiterating that BP will “be here as long as it takes to make things right.”¹⁴

Thomas says the shift to a localized campaign was necessary to establish BP’s voice in the local restoration efforts and that the local workers were the best voices to relay that message. “We needed to have our voices out there to kind of cut through, or at least be represented, in the media,” he says. “If we couldn’t get a fair or accurate representation in the mainstream media, we had to use our own channels and devices to tell our own messages. We couldn’t count on third party media organizations to tell our messages for us.”¹⁷ Adopting local poster children for the recovery efforts contrasted starkly with Hayward’s positioning as the uncompassionate face of the organization.

Still, locals were angry at many involved parties—especially BP—for the slow disaster response, for initial difficulties in the claims awarding process and for the incident in general. Negative opinions were the norm in public conversations, letters to the editor, blogs and media coverage. However, Ford and Williams note that, though they did encounter negative comments and angry sentiments, they were never treated with disrespect, and for the most part, stakeholders were more focused on communicating and working with them than yelling at them.

Having a stake in the recovery of the region and an understanding of the disaster’s implications likely aided the local liaisons in overcoming the initial public anger toward BP, which was prevalent. Williams and Ford are both

Louisiana natives. They both have a legitimate stake in the recovery effort's success. Thomas, an Alaska native, has worked in various capacities in the oil and gas industry for several years and lived through the *Exxon Valdez* spill, so he says he understood how important the land and resources were to local residents. Instead of trying to deflect responsibility, he offered apologies at the outset. "At the very beginning there was a lot of anger, and I think that they were surprised when I told them I understood their anger," he says. "That took a little bit of the flame out of the process." Thomas then reiterated BP's commitment to rebuilding the region and outlined a plan for those goals without using flowery language and empty promises. Additionally, when things were not going as planned, he acknowledged as much and explained why.¹⁷ Transparency was critical to establishing credibility.

An obstacle to the success of the community relations program—and BP's effort as a whole—was negative media coverage, which Thomas says at times was riddled with misinformation (a predicament he largely credits to the open-source nature of the Internet, with bloggers, NGOs and other groups adding their information and perspectives to the media firestorm). Critical to stemming the media tide was having a successful, tangible operations plan. "What we needed to do was focus on what we were doing and the successes we were achieving. That started to turn the media around, because that was the truth."¹⁷

Another aspect of quelling negative media coverage was to placate local government leaders, two of whom had entered the national spotlight. Billy Nungesser and Charlotte Randolph, presidents of Plaquemines and Lafourche parishes, respectively, appeared frequently on major news outlets and provided Congressional testimony regarding the oil spill's effects on their constituencies. Nungesser in particular was staunch and passionate in his appearances and immediately became a go-to interview for media coverage of the affected region. It was important for BP to establish relationships with these figures and earn their trust, not only to work efficiently with local authorities in recovery efforts, but also to ensure that these opinion leaders did not compound on misinformation already propagating in the media. These relationships did not exist prior to BP's community relations efforts. Williams lamented that Nungesser did not reach out to her prior to taking his concerns to the media, but she took it upon herself to establish a transparent relationship, which she feels is better today. She also keeps BP honest when communicating with Nungesser by demanding thorough and convincing explanations from the operations team before relaying information along. "He's the leader of this community, and it's his intention to protect the best interests of this community at whatever cost," Williams says. "Some of his concerns are very valid, and there's a reason why we can't address them. I need information to explain why we do things a certain way. He doesn't have to like it, but he understands."¹⁸ To date, Ford also enjoys a positive working relationship with Randolph, whom he says has the same goals as BP—"restoring Lafourche Parish as quickly and safely as possible."¹⁹

Recent GCRO Efforts

BP closed the GCRO field offices in November 2010 and moved personnel to a headquarters in New Orleans, but the CRMs continue the work they began last summer, serving as a resource for their respective parishes and maintaining regular contact with the stakeholders they identified and worked with. Williams even takes initiative and travels to Venice herself if she does not hear from her contacts after a length of time.¹⁸ Thomas has become a trusted media source in Louisiana. For example, he was quick to respond to reports of tar balls and abandoned cleanup equipment surfacing in Port Fourchon, La., after Tropical Storm Lee entered the Gulf in September.¹⁵

The GCRO continues collaborative efforts with local stakeholders and trade groups. One component of the program is a pair of \$30 million marketing campaigns for Gulf Coast tourism and seafood.¹⁷ The tourism campaign includes a series of videos titled “My Gulf Coast,” featuring unique cultural experiences in communities across the affected region.¹⁶ Also in action are a \$500 million Gulf research initiative testing the long-term effects of the oil spill and the \$20 billion fund BP initially set up for awarding claims to those affected economically by the spill.¹⁷

Thomas, Williams and Ford all agree that the recovery process will take time, but each maintains a commitment, as BP has, to stay “until things are made right.” Each feels that progress has been made, that community stakeholders have opened up to the GCRO’s efforts on the ground and that community leaders acknowledge BP’s willingness and work to be a part of the eventual solution. The promotional aspects of the campaign, Thomas says, are evolving to tout progress already made. He says BP has made good on its promises, not just spouted empty words. “We didn’t say it was fine, that we didn’t make a mistake, [or] that it wasn’t someone else’s fault,” he says. “We told people what we were going to do. We have heard from science and other third-party endorsers that we have done it right and we continue to do it right.”¹⁷ While Thomas’ remarks conflict with BP’s initial *corporate* stance of downplaying the spill’s impact and shirking blame, he is accurate regarding message adoption by the community relations liaisons and the GCRO. BP has not left the Gulf Coast as was widely feared in the aftermath of the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster. It seems genuinely committed to the region’s recovery.

Analysis

BP has a long road ahead in reestablishing the trust of the American public and government, and it may be the case that the company never fully recovers. Its initial reactions were to downplay the scope of the incident, seemingly to protect its international profile, profit margins and share values. Repeated efforts to placate the public and the federal government by minimalizing the impact of the spill and providing underwhelming damage estimates were unsuccessful, and BP lost its audience before it finally tried to accept responsibility for the disaster.

It is understandable, given the immediate nature of the rig explosion and oil spill, that BP did not have time to do ample research—rarely do crisis situations allow for this—but the company has operated in the Gulf and in the United States for quite some time and should have had a better working knowledge of its stakeholders. BP failed to respect the importance of identifying *all* categories of potential stakeholders and maintaining transparent, two-way relationships with them. A capable spokesperson must be able to serve as the face of an organization and establish a rapport with a complex variety of publics. Tony Hayward may have had excellent credentials for leading an international energy conglomerate, but he was ill-suited for a communications role with the American public. His perceived lack of empathy and misunderstanding of the troubles local stakeholders were facing forged an impassable divide between Hayward and his American audiences. His failures cost him his job and cost BP the trust of its target audiences, making both the actual recovery efforts and rebuilding its image even more difficult.

It is unfortunate that BP did not choose to utilize on-the-ground personnel and local voices earlier in its crisis management campaign. The lack of a reliable on-camera source damaged BP's credibility to the point where seemingly nothing it said could sway public opinion or impact media coverage, and it suffered from widespread public distrust, as identified by the Pew report. The decision to move quickly to place representatives in the affected areas in Louisiana was wise and seemingly effective. Local stakeholders had mixed initial reactions but, for the most part, were more concerned with working hand-in-hand with BP representatives to mend their broken communities. With a more stable and credible public presence, media relations for BP in the Gulf has become more manageable, though BP spokespeople and liaisons must still combat skepticism and criticism on a daily basis.

Like the oil spill itself, the BP image restoration campaign will not enjoy a quick fix. As long as tar balls, dead marine life and debris wash up on the shoreline, or consumers question the safety of Gulf seafood or Gulf residents find themselves out of work, BP's reputation will suffer. For many Gulf residents, "BP" is now synonymous with "disaster," and the generations of Louisianians who so recently endured hurricanes Katrina and Rita well remember the offending parties in those instances. The same will be for BP, but there is a favorable case study for similar communications challenges in the region. Freeport McMoRan, a copper and gold producer formerly based in New Orleans, implemented a successful community relations campaign following backlash regarding chemical runoff into local waterways and, within two years, reestablished a positive attitude toward its brand.²¹ BP must continue mending relationships on the ground in the affected communities and serving as a partner in the rebuilding, and perhaps one day it may be mentioned positively for its role in the region's recovery. For now, however, there remains much work to do.

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