

Penn State, Herman Cain Top 2011 PR Blunders

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<http://www.mrmediatraining.com/index.php/2011/12/14/the-ten-worst-media-disasters-of-2011/>

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rich-robinson/the-top-10-pr-blunders-of_b_1163731.html

Hank Williams, Jr. Compares President Obama to Adolf Hitler

In October, country singer Hank Williams, Jr. was fired up [during an appearance](#) on *Fox and Friends*. While reflecting on a golf match between President Obama and House Speaker John Boehner, Mr. Williams quipped, "It would be like Hitler playing golf with Netanyahu." The Fox hosts looked shocked and distanced themselves from his statement; ESPN promptly dropped his theme song as its Monday Night Football opener.

Penn State, "Your Scandal Isn't Going Away"

The story of disgraced former Penn State assistant football coach [Jerry Sandusky's](#) arrest on charges of sexual abuse is a terrible one, but news of the university's lack of action over more than 10 years infuriated the public and media alike. University President Graham Spanier fanned the flames with a poorly planned initial statement featuring more support for two University officials alleged to have been covering up a 2002 incident than for the eight abuse victims. But that was just one of many stumbles in the eyes of prominent media and PR professionals, who urged Penn State to get organized, take responsibility, prioritize the victims and get all the bad news out as quickly as possible.

Poor crisis planning was an obvious issue, with *Advertising Age* reporting that "despite months of advance notice, Penn State's board didn't enact a communications plan, and waited until after the arrest ... was all over the news" before retaining crisis counsel. Even Penn State senior lecturer of public relations Steve Manuel agreed, telling [USA Today](#) that "this was a crisis in the making of at least three years. Penn State knew this shoe was going to drop and it was not prepared." Lynn Zinser of *The New York Times* urged University leaders to accept that "your [scandal](#) isn't going away," describing the "sorry spectacle" as "what appears to be an institution-wide moral collapse."

Cain Undeniably Unprepared

Republican presidential hopeful and former National Restaurant Association (NRA) head Herman Cain made a major mistake by not dealing with questions from Politico regarding accusations of past [sexual harassment](#) promptly and completely, leaving himself open for wave after wave of damaging speculation. According to John Cassidy of [The New Yorker](#), Cain had "ample time" to prepare for the crisis and should have "sat down his staff, explained that he was sitting on an unexploded landmine, and asked them to prepare a contingency plan" early on.

But despite being aware of media interest for at least 10 days, Cain and his staff appeared completely unprepared for scrutiny on the subject. According to numerous media sources, the candidate breathed audibly and glared at Politico's John Martin for several seconds when asked if he had ever been accused of harassment before evasively echoing the question. Cain's bizarre, reactionary responses incited his past accusers to come forward, prompting him to stumble further by dismissing their claims as "baseless" (despite five-figure NRA settlements with two women involved), suggesting race was a factor in the coverage and claiming that either rival candidate Rick Perry's camp or the "Democratic machine" was out to smear him.). Mr. Cain [changed his story](#) on an almost-hourly basis, even arguing that he didn't understand an

earlier question that had used the word “settlement” instead of “agreement.” *U.S. News and World Report* opinion editor Robert Schlesinger wrote that “*Cain left the presidential race* as he entered it—more a sideshow than a contender,” after he suspended his campaign.

Rick Perry’s “Oops” Moment

During a Republican presidential debate in November, Gov. Rick Perry (R-TX) confidently declared he would eliminate [three government agencies](#) – and promptly forgot what they were. For 47 painful seconds, Mr. Perry tried to recall the third agency he would eliminate. He finally gave up, shrugged his shoulders, and lamely said, “oops.” That one moment likely sank any remaining chances Mr. Perry had of winning the nomination.

Oakland Mayor Quan Plays Both Sides – Against Each Other

The Occupy Movement tested city officials nationwide, but none more than Oakland Mayor and former community activist Jean Quan, whose handling of the Occupy Oakland encampment was widely and critically covered. In the first two weeks of the tense situation Quan flip-flopped frequently, first attending the encampment as a supporting speaker, then eventually authorizing a police raid to clear the site, a reversal that provoked nationwide criticism of the violent confrontation.

At first, Quan tried distancing herself from the raid, saying she did not know when it was going to take place, but City Hall sources indicated she “was fully informed about the size and scope of the operation hours before it started” and had ample opportunity to prevent the raid, according to [San Francisco Chronicle](#) columnists Phillip Matier and Andrew Ross. Quan invited protesters back the very next day – *after spending more than \$1 million to clear them out* – and later encouraged city employees to join an Occupy-sanctioned general strike against the “establishment,” causing the Oakland Police Officer’s Association to release a statement asking: “is it [Oakland’s] intention to have city employees on both sides of a skirmish line?” The [San Jose Mercury News](#) joined the Association, other media and residents in blasting Quan’s handling of the situation, noting that “real leaders think through challenges, make tough calls and take responsibility if things go wrong. Quan has been all over the map – an icon of what *not* to do.”

Bank of America Nickels and Dimes

[Bank of America](#) wasn’t the only bank planning on bolstering revenue through new debit card fees, but it suffered significant reputational damage for being the last to abandon its plans to do so after severe public outrage in what *The Wall Street Journal* termed “the latest publicity nightmare for an industry that is already under fire.” J.P. Morgan Chase, Wells Fargo & Co. and several regional banks dropped similar plans after widespread outcry, but being last out made Bank of America, the nation’s second-largest bank, the situational whipping boy in the media, the public eye and even in Congress, where Sen. Richard Durbin (D, Ill.) urged consumers to “vote with your feet.” Consumers nationwide did just that, pulling out of major banks en masse to join local credit unions. The Huffington Post reported that at least “650,000 customers joined [credit unions](#) [in about five weeks after] Bank of America announced it would charge customers \$5 to use their debit cards for purchases.”

Sarah Palin’s “Blood Libel”

Months before Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ) was almost killed in Tucson, Former Gov. Sarah Palin (R-AK) released an infamous “[crosshairs map](#),” which placed a target over Ms. Giffords’ congressional district. In the days after the shooting, Ms. Palin was blamed, in part, for the shooting.

Ms. Palin was upset by media stories connecting her to the crime; she was right that there was no evidence that the shooter had even seen her map. But she over-reacted, taking [to the](#)

[airwaves](#) to blame the media for committing "blood libel." That term is most commonly used as an anti-Semitic slur referring to Jews murdering Christians.

Her poll numbers immediately plummeted with Independents and Republicans (Fox News head Roger Ailes was also said to be infuriated by her response). Instead of using the moment to expand her base by issuing a gracious statement, Ms. Palin narrowed it, leading many political prognosticators to declare her 2012 hopes dead.

NPR Fundraiser Ron Schiller Blasts the Tea Party

National Public Radio's chief fundraiser, Ron Schiller, [went to lunch](#) with a couple of men claiming to be Muslim donors in March. It turned out they were Republican activists with a hidden camera. During the lunch, Mr. Schiller called members of the Tea Party, "seriously racist, racist people," among other things.

That he made those comments was bad enough; that he made them while NPR was already in the midst of a heated debate about its public funding was flabbergasting. His comments not only led to his immediate resignation, but the resignation of NPR's CEO, as well. The House of Representatives voted to strip NPR of its federal funding. Fortunately for NPR, the Senate prevented that from happening – for now.

Qwikster Just a Flash in the Netflix Pan

How should management handle customer discontent over, say ... a controversial 60 percent price increase that led to hundreds of thousands of lost customers and a drop of nearly half of a company's stock value? [Netflix](#) CEO Reed Hastings remained silent for two months, then released a seemingly reluctant blog statement apologizing for the increase... and announcing plans to split off DVD-by-mail operations "in the same breath," according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

But the *Chronicle* also reported that "customers ripped that plan" as seriously inconvenient because it entailed zero coordination between Netflix and proposed new unit Qwikster. Netflix backpedaled in the face of consumer backlash, abandoning plans for [Qwikster](#) three weeks later, but its stock value remained severely depressed.

President Obama Jokes About Joblessness

With the nation's unemployment rate above nine percent and millions of Americans desperate to find work, President Obama cracked a joke in June that few people found funny.

When a questioner asked a serious question about the nation's inefficient permitting process, Mr. Obama cracked wise about his two-year-old pledge to create shovel-ready jobs, joking, "Shovel-ready was not as shovel-ready as we expected." Many people blasted the President for his political tin ear, which has gotten him in trouble before.

Dodger Owner's Words "Very, Very Unfair" to Coma Victim, Family

Los Angeles Dodgers owner Frank McCourt took a year-long pounding in the press for his handling of numerous issues, including the team's bankruptcy proceeding and his very public divorce. But for many McCourt's biggest blunder was his insensitive reaction to the horrific, coma-inducing beating received by San Francisco [Giants fan](#) Bryan Stow in the parking lot of Dodger Stadium after the March 31st opening day game. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that McCourt described the assault as "tragic" but also that he was "very, very satisfied" with his organization's effort to "make [Dodger Stadium] the safest venue in sports" and that it was "very, very unfair to take what was otherwise a fantastic day ... and to have a few individuals mar that."

McCourt spent much of the year defending his organization instead of taking responsibility and prioritizing the victim, creating an appearance of callousness and widespread media outrage. McCourt's problems peaked when his attorney sought to place blame on Stow for the

incident. As the *Times* commented, "one of McCourt's problems has been his consistent cluelessness about the public relations effects of his decisions. Neither he nor Dodgers fans need to see his lawyers making a similar blunder."

"Tweeting Teen" Teaches Kansas Gov. Brownback about Social Media

Kansas [Gov. Sam Brownback](#) and his staff should have considered the source before trying "to police a teenager's Internet musings," according to the Associated Press, when 18-year-old Emma Sullivan sent a tweet to her 61 followers claiming to have "told him he sucked." Brownback's communications team contacted Sullivan's principal with news of her online claim, who, in turn, demanded that Sullivan write an apology.

But according to the [Kansas City Star](#), Sullivan never wrote the apology. The incident gained rapid national recognition, with Sullivan's Twitter following exploding to more than 12,000 followers. Brownback eventually apologized for the incident, and according to [Gawker](#), noted that his "staff over-reacted." [PRNewser](#) called the actions of his communication staff "an example of how little some people know about how this whole social media thing works."

Anthony Weiner's Twitter Scandal

Self-immolations rarely come in more spectacular fashion than when Rep. [Anthony Weiner](#) (D-NY) was caught tweeting naughty photos to strangers in June. His approach to crisis management was to:

1. Deny the charges and claim his Twitter account had been hacked.
2. Call a reporter a crude name.
3. Say that although he hadn't sent the photos, he couldn't rule out "with certitude" that the private shot was of him.
4. Hold a tearful press conference to admit he had tweeted the photos himself but refusing to resign.
5. Watch helplessly as an even more revealing photo was released.
6. See his private news about his wife's early-term pregnancy announced to the world.
7. See yet another batch of "gym" photos released.
8. Resign in shame.

One of Mr. Weiner's worst moments (there were many) was captured during a CNN interview, in which he sanctimoniously blasted reporters. After Mr. Weiner resigned, a Republican won his seat, costing Democrats a critical seat in the House of Representatives.

Rupert Murdoch Channels Tony Hayward

Alleged phone hacking by people on the payroll of British newspaper *News of the World* turned out to be a major scandal for media mogul and News Corp CEO Rupert Murdoch, his son James, and other officials. Reporters and editors at NOTW were accused of bribing police, hacking the private voicemails of everyone from the parents of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan to the Royal Family, and [paying](#) more than \$2 million in gag settlements to victims. After numerous investigations and government hearings (including one where Rupert got a cream pie in the face), the fallout was far and wide. The sackings and resignations affected journalists and law enforcement officials alike.

While testifying before the British Parliament in July, [Rupert Murdoch](#) was asked whether he accepted the ultimate responsibility for his company's phone hacking scandal. Not only did he say "no," but he delivered his answer without even a hint of humility. So much for Harry Truman's axiom, "The buck stops here."

By delivering such an indifferent answer, he gave former BP Executive Tony "I'd like my life back" Hayward competition as the world's most clueless corporate executive. The scandal cost Murdoch his bid for British Sky Broadcasting and even the *News of the World* itself, which was shuttered in July.