

Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word, Even When It's the Right One

In this era of social media and a 24-hour news cycle, each day seems to bring a fresh story of PR missteps, whether it be a brand, organization or high-profile individual. Although you may feel you've read enough about these latest public relations nightmares, one area on which you might want to focus is the importance of an apology.

If your role at your firm includes serving as a communicator, then it is critical that you help your organization develop messages for all types of scenarios. This includes working with your firm to formulate a decent apology if a situation calls for it.

One example of a PR catastrophe that has lingered in the news most of this year is the case brought against actors Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman for their roles in the [college admissions cheating scheme](#). From a PR perspective, Loughlin's actions have diverged substantially from her fellow indicted actor Huffman. Their choices provide a lesson in crisis communications — one that illustrates when it's necessary to provide a public apology and the risk of not doing so in a timely fashion.

Loughlin vs. Huffman

Not long after she was indicted, Huffman admitted guilt and issued an [apology](#) to the students who work hard every day to get into college, and to their parents who make tremendous sacrifices to support their children and do so honestly. Many praised Huffman for taking responsibility and admitting her guilt. She ultimately received a prison sentence of two weeks but was granted an early release, serving only 10 days of her sentence.

Loughlin, on the other hand, has not admitted guilt and has not issued a public apology. She has already felt repercussions from her alleged role. Not long after charges were brought against the actress and her husband, the Hallmark Channel severed ties with Loughlin, who had starred on the network's series *When Calls the Heart*. This may have happened regardless of whether Loughlin had admitted guilt; however, based on the evidence against her, the perception among the public is that she hasn't taken responsibility for her actions.

Last month, the Justice Department announced that the couple, along with nine other parents, were indicted on federal charges related to bribery. According to reports, the charge of conspiracy to commit federal program bribery carries a maximum sentence of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000. The couple was previously charged with counts of money laundering and conspiracy that could land them behind bars for up to 40 years. Prosecutors are pressuring Loughlin and her husband to acknowledge their guilt.



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While Huffman issued an apology fairly quickly and began working to put this situation behind her, Loughlin has not. Since the public loves a good comeback story, Huffman has a better chance of salvaging her reputation and career, perhaps even in the near future. For Loughlin, the longer this matter drags out, and especially should she be found guilty and sentenced to a long prison term, the less likely that she may ever recover, at least professionally.

The Elements of an Apology

When it's clear your firm, or someone working on behalf of your firm, has done something wrong, it's best to apologize quickly to those affected. Recognize that it is not about just simply saying "I'm sorry" and moving on - a poor apology can be worse than no apology. The apology must include certain six key elements for the public to accept it, and to maintain your firm's good standing with clients.

1. Timing: In these days of social media, news - good or bad - spreads quickly. There is no longer the luxury of waiting days, or even hours, to respond to a PR crisis. The apology, assuming it's warranted, should be issued as soon as possible.

2. Sincerity: You must actually *be* sorry for people to believe you *are* sorry. There's nothing more meaningless than an insincere apology. Huffman was praised because her apology was perceived as heartfelt and genuine. Also, her tone and demeanor indicated she was humbled by the situation. And don't fall into the common trap where the apology is more regretful about how a situation has unfolded than about the actions that led to the crisis. Doing so reflects a lack of empathy for the person or group that was wronged.

3. Responsibility: If you've done something wrong, don't make excuses or try to shift the blame. You must own it. Avoid reverting to the "non-apology apology" so often employed by celebrities and other public figures whose actions have caused harm to others. For example, Huffman didn't distance herself from her actions by saying she was sorry "if other people were hurt." Instead, she directly apologized for hurting other people.

4. Plain talk: There's no need for fancy words. When it comes to an apology, simple language is best. Use words that your audience relates to. Make sure your apology is eloquent, straight-forward and honest. Avoid legalese or anything industry-speak that the general public will not understand.

5. An explanation: More often than not, people don't want to hear your excuses, but an explanation isn't an excuse. Listing the facts and telling your side of the story in a way that helps the wronged party truly understand can give perspective and potentially encourage forgiveness.

6. Make amends: If possible, take a tangible step to repair the situation. You have to demonstrate your sincerity and willingness to change through action. Do something that changes your firm's culture or the way you personally conduct business. Basically, do something that reflects you won't make the same mistake again.

Admittance Beats Denial

Quite often, in the aftermath of a tragedy or accident, lawyers will tell businesses not to apologize. They're risk-adverse and fear that an apology is an admission of liability but insisting on denial at all costs invariably leads to worse consequences than an apology. Besides, it's possible to appear apologetic by the simple expression of sorrow, even while an official investigation is under way. Just remember to be genuine and thoughtful when making an apology.

In the meantime, Huffman appears to have handled things the right way from a PR perspective, and the light at the end of the tunnel may come sooner for her because she apologized quickly and with sincerity. While her apology won't make the crisis magically disappear, it may be the first step on the road to rebuilding her reputation and salvaging her career.

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