

# Beware the Fools of April 1!

It was all in good fun, but an April Fools' Day prank by a leading car manufacturer backfired when it was released early and taken seriously.

The AP [reported](#) on March 31 that Volkswagen of America sent out a press release announcing it was changing the name of its name U.S. operation to Voltswagen. It was an April Fools' joke, meant to promote the company's electric vehicles.

The result of this misfire was a brief upward bump in Volkswagen's stock prices and some interesting chatter about the "name change," but it came at a price: a loss of credibility for the company and confusion about its brand.

## Learn from Volkswagen's Mistake

There are several PR lessons here for professional firms. The first is to make sure your April Fools' Day jokes are released on April 1, which makes it less likely that a prank will be mistaken for reality. Crises rarely can be avoided, but this one easily could have been headed off simply by using better timing.

Another is to make it clear in the actual release or post that you're joking. Jaffe did that with our clever [April 1 post](#) about a law firm turning its office into a "live at work" space – we ended the post with "April Fools!" That might spoil the joke, but such straightforwardness will serve your reputation better than creating confusion. Also, if readers didn't make it to the last line of the post, another tipoff that it was a joke was the name of the law firm in question: Jest & Josh LLP.

A third lesson is never to lie to the press. When some reporters tried to confirm the announcement, Volkswagen apparently stuck to its guns. As AP reported, "Several news organizations, including The Associated Press, USA Today, CNBC and The Washington Post, had reported the original press release as real news, some after being assured specifically that it was no joke." You can bet that those reporters and media outlets will not welcome news from that company in the future.

Finally, protect your brand! PR professionals in service firms invest a lot of time, effort and money in creating and managing their brands to relay integrity, honesty, experience and reliability, among other important characteristics. A mistimed or misconceived prank can undo months, even years, of work just as quickly as news of a real problem.

## Responding to a Crisis

As with any crisis, communication is key to responding to a misfired prank, and to repair any damage it might cause.

As soon as it becomes clear that an April Fools' joke has failed or any other reputation-

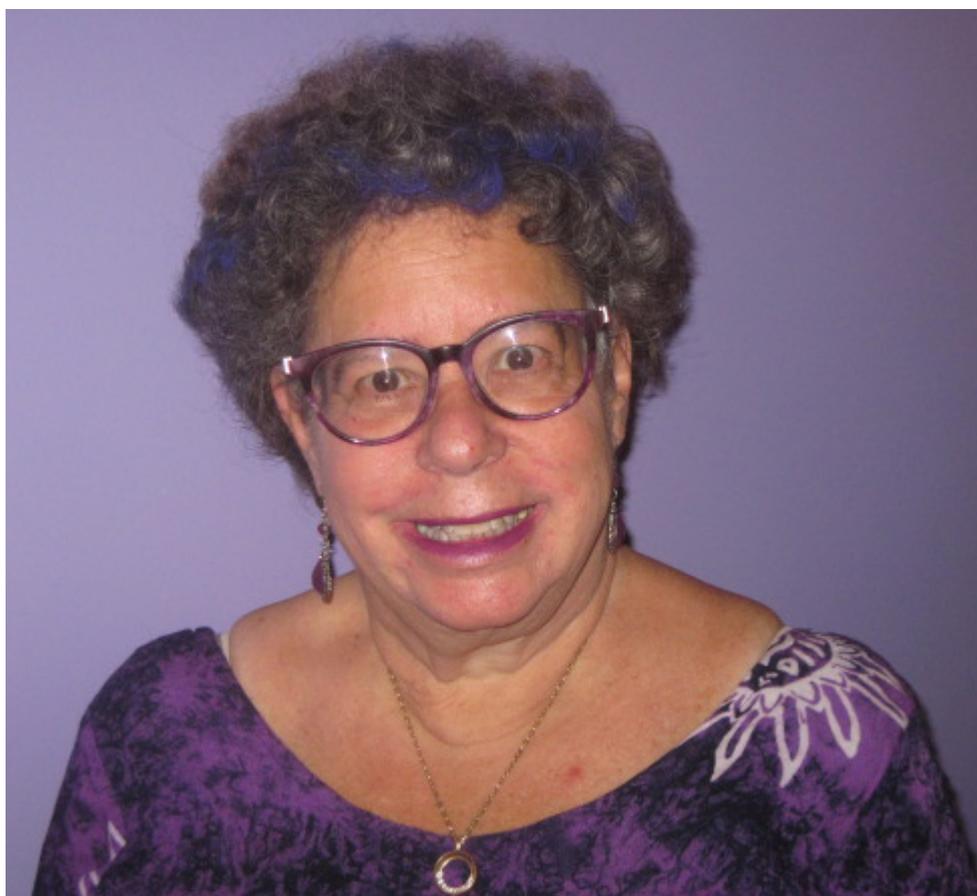


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threatening event has occurred, the firm's leadership must step up quickly and loudly, albeit professionally, to address the matter. The longer the issue sits there without a response, the worse its impact will be.

The "Volkswagen" prank is yet another reminder for firms to have a crisis communications plan in place before an issue occurs. Those plans must include regular processes for keeping everyone in the firm aware of the strategy, and ongoing monitoring of how the firm's name is used in the media to make prompt responses possible.

We hope your April Fools' Day was fun, rather than foolish or frightful. For more about creating and managing a PR crisis, large or small, view these articles. For help with creating a crisis communication plan or responding to a negative event, contact Vivian Hood at [vhood@jaffepr.com](mailto:vhood@jaffepr.com).



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