

Tampa and Pasha Bulker

The challenge:

FCR's issues management expertise is grounded in managing communication through some of Australia's most high profile and complex crises.

One that dominated front pages and television news for weeks was the Tampa crisis, which erupted when Prime Minister John Howard refused to allow the Tampa container ship to land 438 survivors of the largest sea rescue on Australia's shores.

Another was the grounding of the Pasha Bulker bulk coal carrier on Newcastle beach during a cyclone. In both cases FCR advised the companies involved on communication strategy and managed all contact with media.

The solution:

Our goal in the Tampa situation was to communicate the humanitarian concern of Captain Arne Rinnan and shipowner, Wallenius Wilhelmsen, while ensuring the company remained politically neutral. Our aim was to maintain the long-term goodwill of customers, port authorities and others important to the company's Australian business. We aimed to retain public respect for the company and prevent it from becoming involved in an adversarial tussle with the government.

We did this through open information from the ship, with daily media briefings and a helpful approach to journalists, and by using non-emotive language (referring to "survivors" rather than "refugees" or "asylum seekers"). We refused to engage with radio 'shock jocks' in emotive debates, and released photographs from the ship's deck to media worldwide as the best way to humanize the survivors' plight and encourage public sympathy.

Our communication strategy with the Pasha Bulker grounding was to steer the spotlight away from the Japanese company that owned the ship by cooperating with other players in the drama and encouraging them to become the figureheads: the Newcastle Port Authority, Minister Joe Tripodi, and the salvor, Svitzer, that was attempting to refloat the vessel. We also advised the company on actions to maintain goodwill with the local community, including donations to the sea rescue helicopter group who winched seamen from the vessel during the cyclone and offering salvaged ship parts to Newcastle's museum.

The result:

We were completely successful in maintaining a low profile for the Pasha Bulker's owner, while the Tampa affair was a classic case of increasing a company's reputation by the way it managed communication during a crisis:

"Through all this the Wallenius Wilhelmsen Line conducted a carefully nuanced response to Canberra. There was never a public brawl with the Howard Government, nor did the shipping line feed the electoral controversy that ensued. Though the red-hulled ship sitting off Christmas Island was the image of the elections of 2001, the Line kept insisting only issues of search and rescue were at stake. It was masterful." – David Marr, Sydney Morning Herald, 22-23 December 2001

