

Talent Crisis Playbook for Brands—From Vetting to Recovery

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Brands such as American Eagle, e.l.f. Cosmetics and Astronomer have experienced talent-based crises (AD AGE COMPOSITE: AMERICAN EAGLE, E.L.F., BLOOMBERG)

This guide is part of Ad Age's Crisis Marketing Toolkit. See more resources for responding to and recovering from common brand crises [here](#).

As brands increasingly turn to new partners, including celebrities, influencers and creators, they open the door to more possible conflict. Some backlash is impossible to plan for; other times it is intentional. For example, [American Eagle marketing executives](#) hinted at knowing the potential controversy the brand's [Sydney Sweeney campaign](#) would elicit by referencing a "double meaning behind the campaign." That campaign ultimately resulted in more sales for the retailer, executives said. However, the majority of brands are caught unaware when a partnership goes south.

This guide chronicles takeaways from brands that have faced trouble, such as [Peloton's Mr. Big scandal](#), [Solo Stove's Snoop Dogg work](#), and Lululemon's handling of [controversial statements](#) by founder Chip Wilson. It will offer step-by-step advice on how to handle different scenarios and partner relationships.

Expert Advice for Talent Crisis Management

Vet Celebrity Partners

- A creator's reputation must be evaluated through the lens of current social and political climates. Understanding what matters to a brand's audience in the moment ensures talent choices resonate rather than alienate.
- Be careful when selecting a brand spokesperson: if they become controversial, erasing them from your brand can be difficult, from removing social posts to re-designing and printing promotional materials and signage.
- Selecting a celebrity for their popularity rather than their alignment with brand values can yield short-term attention at the expense of long-term trust. Fit and shared purpose should outweigh fame or virality.

- High-profile partnerships can deliver massive reach—but also expose brands to backlash if the talent's image or creative execution clashes with audience expectations. Risk assessment should be as robust as the amplification strategy.
- Every casting or endorsement decision signals a brand's values to the public. Marketers should anticipate how those choices might be culturally interpreted—and vet them through diverse perspectives before launch.
- Vetting should include examining a creator's full online history, reputation and audience sentiment—not just follower demographics or engagement rates.
- When speed is prioritized over scrutiny, brands risk partnering with problematic figures or releasing tone-deaf campaigns. Allowing adequate time for research, review and testing is essential for safeguarding brand integrity.
- When a spokesperson's misconduct becomes public, the fallout can disrupt multiple aspects of the business—from sales to internal operations to agency relationships. Brands should anticipate a need for structural and strategic recalibration, not just PR damage control.

Surviving a Spokesperson Crisis

- Depending too heavily on one spokesperson makes a brand vulnerable if that individual's image is compromised. Future marketing strategies should diversify representation and emphasize brand values over individual personalities.
- When a talent's actions become indefensible, brands must act decisively and uniformly to remove their likeness from all marketing materials. Delays or uneven compliance across locations can prolong public scrutiny and signal internal disorganization.

"Brands no longer own the narrative—audiences do. So, while you can carefully script the story you want to tell, the public will remix, reframe, and reinterpret it through their own cultural lens."

— Sunny Bonnell, founder and CEO, Motto (Aug. 1, 2025)

- When addressing a rogue collaborator, stay professional and unemotional. Deliver a clear position, then disengage—arguing prolongs visibility for the controversy.

Managing Executive Missteps

- Executives should view communication as central to their role—what leaders say publicly or internally shapes brand perception as much as business performance. Misaligned language can signal cultural or ethical dissonance within the company.
- When a company already carries reputational baggage, an executive's controversial comments can reignite public distrust. A prior history of misconduct magnifies the impact of leadership missteps and makes

recovery slower and more difficult.

- Brands should recognize that public audiences hold executives accountable for their words, regardless of intent. Attempts to excuse harmful remarks risk deepening backlash and eroding credibility.
- When executive comments expose cultural blind spots, they can directly hinder recruitment and retention. Repairing internal culture must accompany any external apology to rebuild trust among underrepresented groups.
- When a former executive's comments contradict brand values, respond immediately and clarify their lack of current authority. Quick, factual distancing limits public confusion about who represents the brand's voice.

"When you're solely dependent on [an executive] as the representation of your brand ... if anything goes wrong, you've tied everything to this one person ... The backlash of having everything tied to this one person who might no longer speak favorably about your company could be really damaging for the company."

— Lia Haberman, social media and influencer marketing instructor, UCLA (Aug. 16, 2023)

- Employees need reassurance that leadership represents shared values. Include internal messaging in the crisis plan—transparency builds loyalty and helps retain talent during reputational turbulence.

How to Utilize Leaders in a Crisis

- When executives disable feedback or disappear from view during a controversy, it signals defensiveness. Transparent, accountable communication from leadership is crucial to maintaining public trust.
- Acting quickly to produce a strategic, culturally relevant response can help a brand shift conversation from scandal to creativity. Timeliness demonstrates control, confidence and adaptability.
- Handled skillfully, a crisis response can transform a brand from reactive to inventive. When audiences perceive authenticity and wit, viral engagement can become an unexpected source of goodwill.
- Founders' authenticity can drive loyalty—but over-reliance on their persona creates vulnerability if they leave or are disgraced. Build brand equity that can stand apart from a single individual.
- Founder content should enhance—not replace—traditional brand marketing. A balanced strategy ensures campaigns can continue unaffected by individual crises.

Recovering from a Talent Crisis

- A statement is not the end of crisis management. Brands must track ongoing commentary to gauge whether the narrative is stabilizing or reigniting, and be ready to re-engage if misinformation or boycotts persist.
- When handled thoughtfully, humor can help reframe a negative situation and show self-awareness. However, brands should ensure the levity doesn't trivialize the issue—tone must balance accountability

with relatability. Enlisting a high-profile, culturally resonant figure can help redirect media focus from the controversy itself to a fresh narrative—provided the collaboration feels aligned with brand tone and audience sensibility.

- Though damaging, a talent-related scandal can also catalyze overdue innovation. Brands can use the disruption as an opportunity to refresh positioning, clarify values and shift messaging away from overreliance on a single face or campaign.
- After leadership missteps, brands should align follow-up initiatives with the communities harmed, demonstrating tangible commitment through authentic partnerships or programs rather than surface-level messaging.
- Crisis response requires strong internal systems to ensure that directives—such as distancing from a controversial figure—are consistently executed across the organization. Lapses in compliance can undermine public efforts to demonstrate accountability.
- Deleting or pausing controversial content can stop immediate harm, but silence afterward leaves a vacuum for speculation. Brands must pair content removal with open acknowledgment and a plan for dialogue or redress.

Further Reading

- [Inside Tylenol's autism controversy](#)
- [Campbell's reels after exec's food for 'poor people' rant goes viral—experts weigh in on crisis](#)
- [Takeaways from Cracker Barrel's logo drama](#)
- [Recapping American Eagle's controversial Sydney Sweeney partnership](#)
- [What e.l.f. got wrong in its creator partnership](#)
- [How Astronomer pivoted reaction to its CEO scandal](#)
- [Inside backlash to Wells Fargo CEO's remarks](#)
- [Subway's post-Jared strategy pivot](#)

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