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## **Disneyland's Public Relations**

September 5, 2003 began like any other day...the Main Street gift shop opened early for the guests who wanted to browse. The aromas of fresh brewed coffee and warm baked goods satiated the morning air. Young voices were brimming with inquisitive anticipation. Cameras clicked in cadence as several characters entered the streets. Energies were high, children were anxious, and with themed music playing fantastically in the background, a large red ribbon extending across the far end of Main Street was loosened from the gas lamps to which it was tied. The smiling cast members stepped aside, and all the Disneyland guests scurried in different directions to begin their memorable day of imagination, fantasy, and enchantment.

Marcelo Torres, 22 was one of the many guests visiting Disneyland that morning. This day for him, however, would not be filled with imagination, fantasy and enchantment. This day would be tragic inside the Magic Kingdom.

Marcelo and his friend, Vicente Gutierrez were in line to ride the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad; which is a half-mile, 3-minute, 15-second, twisting, tumbling, roller coaster train ride that whips through dark tunnels at a ride speed of 41 feet per second. (1)

With approximately 22 other Disneyland guests, Marcelo and Vicente boarded the ride. Both men climbed into the front car located behind the locomotive, and sat in the first row.

A Disneyland cast member dispatched the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad train at 11:17 a.m.

Almost one-third into the length of the ride, the train experienced serious mechanical problems and the locomotive, which pulled the passenger cars, derailed from the track. Due to the derailment, the front of the locomotive collided with the safety brake, which caused the brake to shear from its mounts. This caused the failure of the locomotive's tow bar, which then drove the car that carried Marcelo Torres and Vicente Gutierrez underneath the derailed locomotive. The second passenger car's rear axle then derailed causing that car to jackknife upward in the rear. The train continued forward with the first car wedged underneath the locomotive and the second passenger car jackknifed in a nose down position. The remaining cars disconnected and coasted backwards down the incline until they finally stopped. (2)

Ten people, including Vicente Gutierrez were injured.

Marcelo Torres was killed on impact.

## Case Study Overview

This paper is a case study documenting an unequivocal contrast of public relations techniques used by one company in three separate crisis situations. In the first two events, the public relations methods utilized were not only ineffective, but also damaging.

After being the recipient of relentless negative press and public criticism in response to their handling of the Columbia Ship and Roger Rabbit accidents, Disney took appropriate steps to regain public trust and reinstate their renowned magical image.

This case study will provide evidence that Disney employed a significant transformation in their approach to the public and to the media in the most recent accident on Big Thunder Mountain. Prior to that occurrence, however, Disney achieved the strongest impact on their audience by implementing their first-ever public safety campaign. This case study will solidify that the public relations campaign Disney ran was deliberate, creative, clearly defined and well executed. It will verify the measures Disney implemented to show their audience that they were listening, and that they cared.

Finally, this case study will document that by implementing the public relations principles prescribed by Arthur W. Page, Disneyland was able to reposition their reputation so they could properly handle the terrible tragedy at Big Thunder Mountain.

## Disneyland

Walter Elias Disney was a man of tenacious conviction. Having no more than a tenth grade education, Walt's amazing talent extended well beyond his ability to draw animation. Walt Disney's true gift was his heart to entertain and his passion to inspire.

Walt created the first animated film, entitled *Steamboat Willie*, which featured the most recognized character in the world today, Mickey Mouse. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was not only Walt's first, but the industry's first feature-length cartoon.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Walt Disney continued to produce major films for television and theatre. Legendary creations such as *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, and *Bambi*, as well as live-action production films such as *Treasure Island* and *Mary Poppins* were only a few, among a long list of accomplishments. During his career as a filmmaker, Walt Disney received 26 Academy Awards. (3)

On July 17, 1955, despite the hefty price tag of \$17 million, Walt Disney followed his heart and opened Disneyland in Anaheim, California. He once said, "I think what I want Disneyland to be most of all is a happy place – where adults and children can experience together some of the wonders of life, of adventure, and feel better because of it." (4)

Deemed the "Happiest Place On Earth", Disneyland is open 365 days a year. Employing 21,000 cast members, offering more than 60 rides and attractions, Disneyland has welcomed more than 450 million visitors since it's historic opening 48 years ago. (5)

On December 15, 1966, Walt Disney died. (6) Walt Disney's dream and determination made an impact on the world in ways he never lived to realize.

### **The Company Today**

Walter Elias Disney's dream, remembered as a beloved production of memorable movies and creation of Disneyland, is identified today as, The Walt Disney Company; a diversified worldwide entertainment organization and currently the #2 media conglomerate in the world. (7)

Since its historic \$19 billion purchase of Capital Cities/ABC, Inc. in 1995, The Walt Disney Company has become one of the nation's largest broadcast powers with 226 television and 4600 radio affiliates. In addition to affiliated stations, Disney owns ten television stations, 62 radio stations, and has considerable cable network holdings, such as ESPN, the Disney Channel, A&E Network, and E! Entertainment Television.

Disney's expansion of Parks and Resorts now includes Disneyland, California Adventure, Disney World and Epcot Center-Florida, Tokyo Disney, Hong Kong Disneyland, Paris Disneyland, Disney Cruise Line, DisneyVacations.com, Disney Regional Entertainment and Anaheim Sports, Inc.

Other key businesses include DisneyHand, Imagineering, Internet Group, Studio Entertainment and Consumer Products. (8)

The Walt Disney Company has posted annual revenues exceeding \$25 billion for the past three years, although net income is not as consistent. (9) Publicly traded on the New York Stock Exchange under the symbol (DIS), share prices have consistently fallen since June 1998, with closing prices higher immediately after 9/11/01 than in recent years. (10)

The Walt Disney Company's corporate objective, as stated in their Annual Report, is to be one of the world's leading producers and providers of entertainment and information, using its portfolio of brands to differentiate its content, services and consumer products. The company's primary financial goals are to maximize earnings and cash flow from the existing businesses, and to allocate capital profitability toward growth initiatives that will drive long-term shareholder value. (11)

### **Fantasy Versus Reality**

Once upon a time, "The Happiest Place on Earth", was governed by rules and laws established and enforced only within the domain of the Magic Kingdom. The only public relations spokesperson was the monarch himself, Mickey Mouse. But today, since the rides are more exciting and thus safety is more of a concern, the drawbridge has had to be lowered and the castle gates opened wide to various governmental entities that now have an influence on the rules and laws within this magical park.

Before the Columbia Ship accident, seven ride-related deaths had occurred within the Disneyland theme park. All seven fatalities occurred solely because of guest-related misconduct or mischievous behavior. (12)

Disneyland's modus operandi in times of crisis was to perform internal investigations and maintain a tight lid on the incident, so as to not spoil the magical image of the park. In an interview conducted with Jennifer Floto, a crisis-communication expert at the University of Southern California, she summarized the situation. "In past years, Disneyland officials have been able to almost cover up any incident occurring at the park, almost adopting an, 'It's our problem, so we'll investigate' mentality. And since there have been so few incidents in a 30-year history at Disneyland, this strategy was never contested by the public. The incident that really changed everything was the Columbia debacle."

In a separate interview, Kimi Yoshino, a journalist for the Los Angeles Times, who has written dozens of articles about Disneyland stated, "The accident Disney handled the worst is Columbia. There's no comparison."

### **Columbia Ship Accident, 1998**

The accident occurred Christmas Eve, 1998, when a Disneyland cast member attempted to tether the Columbia sailing ship to the dock while still at a speed too fast to secure. An 8-pound metal mooring cleat snapped off the boat and forcefully struck a married couple from Washington. Luan Phi Dawson, 33 died of a brain hemorrhage and skull fracture. His wife, Lieu Thuy Vuong, 43, lived, but had serious facial disfigurement, and the Disneyland employee who attempted to tether the ship suffered a badly lacerated foot.(13)

Disney, in their quest to preserve image, attempted to keep a tight lid on this accident not only from the public, but also from the police. The entire accident scene, including any indication of blood, was completely washed away by Disneyland employees. Only Disneyland officials saw the true accident site. The Anaheim police were eventually notified, but were not allowed to inspect the modified accident site until almost five hours later. Police were held in a park security office and were permitted to interview witnesses that Disneyland management hand selected. The Disneyland employees involved in the accident were not checked for intoxication or sobriety, and at least five hours passed before any maintenance records were turned over to authorities.

Disney did not initiate a press conference, nor did they make any immediate statements. It wasn't until two days after the accident that Disneyland officials finally issued a brief statement saying that they were checking Columbia's mechanical and structural components.

As the news of the fatal accident began to leak, Disney, still trying to preserve their perfect image, kept a tight lid on the details and provided very few comments. They did, however publicly pass blame on the employee who caused the incident. What Disney did not share in this public incrimination was that due to a 1997 financial evaluation, Disneyland had made substantial budget cutbacks, one of which affected the amount of

proper training given to the employee who caused this accident. This important finding was documented in the state's final report. (14)

### **The Press Was Relentless**

When the additional information regarding the apparent manipulation of the accident scene and the obvious control over the Anaheim police department surfaced, the press had a field day. Allegations regarding Disneyland's unethical behavior, the hiding of evidence, perceived foul play, and not playing by the rules made their way into local newspaper headlines. "*Play by the Rules, Disneyland*" and "*Stonewalling: the Worst PR*" are just a few examples of the printed defamation Disney received from the Los Angeles Times. (15) (16)

Editorial comments emerged, as well. The Orange County Register printed a public opinion stating, "It seems that the execs at Disney are once again trying to shift blame onto less fortunate employees." (17)

Michael Sitrick, head of Sitrick & Co., a Los Angeles crisis-public relations consulting company felt that Disneyland should have handled the initial news of the accident better. In a Los Angeles Times article, Sitrick was quoted as saying, "You have to ask yourself what's most important to the people who are learning of this. And the answer to that is the peace of mind that this won't happen again. Disneyland should have said that it was checking every piece of equipment, every operation and every procedure in the park to make sure there was no chance of another accident. And then Disneyland could have talked about its phenomenal safety record and finished up saying that it wished to provide more information but did not yet know enough to say anything more." (18)

After months of negative press and public opinion, Disney still did not apologize or make any empathetic statements regarding the death. And the officials at Disneyland would only refer to the situation as an "incident" never using the words death, fatality or accident.

John Van Maanen, a former Disneyland employee and professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management in Cambridge, Massachusetts has written about Disney's corporate culture. He was quoted in the Los Angeles Times, as well. "They have been known for crisis-intervention and providing minimal information that is very sanitized to fit their need, and not the need of their public. The spin always has been that there are no 'accidents' at Disneyland, only 'incidents'." Van Maanen said Disneyland's decision to provide almost no details of the accident amounts to "standard operating procedure" at the theme park. (19)

Disney opted to maintain their silence; the press chose the opposite. More interviews were conducted and the quotes and opinions about Disneyland's decision continued.

Henry Giroux, a Penn State University professor and author of "The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence," was quoted, "Disney's strategy is to contain, suppress and smother any criticism of the organization. Some people would call that good

business. I would call it unethical. Disney is not just about shareholder value. It has a tremendous hold on the public's eye and it influences millions of children daily.” (20) David Koenig, the author of two books about Disneyland had an opinion as well. “The Columbia tragedy was like the rock-bottom,” he said. “As I try to show in the book, a pretty strong case could be made for the accident being a direct result of changes in training, new policies and failing maintenance.” Koenig's second book about Disneyland implies that the bottom line is just that, the bottom line. He asserts that the change in management philosophy over the last five years – a dramatic increase in the pursuit of profits – has come at the expense of Disneyland's traditional quest for providing the perfect theme park environment. “Disneyland is no longer trying to be as perfect as possible, it's trying to be as profitable as possible. That perfection was what sold Disneyland to people in the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s – that theirs is the best theme park in the whole world. It was. And sometimes it still is, but they're sort of jeopardizing that reputation.” Koenig finished his interview by stating that this has transformed Disneyland into a “less magical, more dangerous environment.” (21)

The final Cal-OSHA investigation report on the Columbia ship accident indicated that Disneyland was clearly at fault for inadequate employee training. After paying out \$12,500 in fines to Cal-OSHA for the mishandling of the accident scene, and after a settlement in excess of \$20 million was awarded to the family of the deceased, Disneyland officials still made no public apology or empathy statement, nor did they take responsibility for the decisions they made, which attributed to the accident. (22) More importantly, Disneyland did not defend their almost perfect accident record nor did they instill confidence in their audience that the park was still safe, despite the most recent tragedy. This left Disneyland wide open for public concern.

### **Roger Rabbit Accident – 2000**

On the evening of September 22, 2000, 4 year-old Brandon Zucker was left with permanent brain damage after falling out of Disneyland's Roger Rabbit's Car Toon Spin ride. Brandon's body, folded forward at the waist was dragged with the weight of the vehicle on his back. After being trapped for over ten minutes with little to no oxygen, Brandon was rushed to the hospital unconscious, with a torn liver, spleen and diaphragm, a collapsed left lung, and a fractured pelvis. (23)

After being slapped with a fine from Cal-OHSA for the mishandling of the Columbia ship incident, and having new safety laws for amusement parks passed in legislature, Disneyland officials found themselves in a more cooperative mood with this investigation. The Roger Rabbit accident scene was left in its original condition, and full disclosure was made to the appropriate authorities.

Because this accident occurred only 21 months after the Columbia ship fatality, Disneyland was still under stringent public and media surveillance. In an attempt to stay below the radar screen, Disneyland officials again, said very little. They did, however, manage to point a few more fingers; this time in the direction of the victim and the victim's family. The Los Angeles Times reported that in taped interviews, Disneyland

employees told investigators that though they do not specifically remember loading the Zucker family into the Roger Rabbit ride on September 22, and did not witness the accident, they believe the family was at fault. Alan Mendez, a Disneyland ride operator told investigators, “I believe it was, you know, unfortunately guest error. Parents sometimes take them out behind the lap bar and sit them on the parent’s lap...so the child is kind of free.” (24) Even Disneyland Resort President, Cynthia Harriss would not implicate Disneyland or accept corporate responsibility for the accident. Her generic statement read, “It is a mystery how Brandon fell out of the ride.” (25)

The state’s investigation confirmed that Disneyland ride operators seated 4-year old Brandon improperly.(26) Disneyland emphatically disputed the findings and publicly denied fault. “The injury to Brandon was not the result of any negligence or wrongdoing on our part,” said Jeffrey Paule, general counsel for Disneyland Resort. In a letter, Paule also wrote, “We do not feel that any changes in the attraction are warranted. Nevertheless, without admitting liability, wrongdoing or violation of any law or regulation, or that the Roger Rabbit attraction is unsafe or potentially unsafe, we are prepared to cooperate fully with DOSH.” (27)

Again, Disneyland made no public comment or apology.

### **The Count: Two Strikes**

Disneyland’s reputation endured a tremendous amount of public scrutiny and media exposure because of the improper handling and deliberate suppression of information in the 1998 Columbia ship fatal accident. Less than two years later, the amusement park was again under fire when a 4-year old boy was brain damaged after falling out of a car on the Roger Rabbit ride in Toon Town. Although not conducted with as much indiscretion, the alleged mishandling of this incident captured additional criticism for the already disillusioned Magic Kingdom.

In both situations, Disney’s public relations performance was clearly not acceptable to its public. The following characteristics were evident in both scenarios:

- Apparent hiding of the truth from the public in an attempt to maintain image,
- Alleged blame directed to employees and/or accident victims and family members,
- Lack of accountability taken as a company for accidents occurring on park property,
- Lack of responsibility for the accidents, as well as contention with government findings indicating Disney’s culpability,
- Lack of anticipating public/media reaction to the accidents.

## **Disneyland's Public Relations Campaign**

The amusement park industry as a whole, had been resistant to state and federal regulation, especially its leader, Disneyland. But relentless critique from the media that permeated public doubt regarding Disneyland's improper attention to safety standards and employee training, motivated this huge industry leader to make changes.

To implement this transformation, Disney hired heavy-hitter, Leslie Goodman as the Senior Vice President of Strategic Communications. Goodman's 20-year career boasts such positions as deputy chief of staff for communications for the former governor of California, Pete Wilson; vice president of media relations for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; media consultant for Burson-Marsteller public relations firm; deputy director of communications for the 1992 Bush-Quayle campaign; director of communications and public liaison at the United States Information Agency; press secretary for the Republican National Committee; and associate commissioner for governmental affairs at the Social Security Administration. (28)

Disney also appointed a Chief Safety Officer by promoting Greg Hale, who was formerly Vice President of Design & Engineering and Regulatory Compliance for the Walt Disney World Resort. (29)

By touting the hiring of Mr. Hale and publicly describing his role and commitment to theme park best practices, industry disciplines and safety protocols, and the support of state inspection efforts, Disney was positioning itself to change the public's perception of an enchanted kingdom gone.

### **Disney's Safety Campaign - Phase I**

With Ms. Goodman and Mr. Hale leading the charge, Disney launched a widely publicized **Safety Campaign** in June 2002. (30)

Press releases, campaign fact sheets, posted Web site information, and collectable safety trading pins were all part of the intent to publicly appear proactive and committed to guest safety. The public relations plan initiated by Disney to regain the public trust and re-establish the pure image once held by the "Happiest Place On Earth" began with an inaugural **Report on Safety**, which provided a 30-page, behind-the-scenes look at park safety measures.

The **Report on Safety** included:

- An extensive list of the regulatory agencies that govern theme park operations.
- An overview of safety measures such as lifeguard training, CPR training, food safety programs and on-site emergency response capabilities. (Disneyland now has two paramedic teams within the park, as well as a police sub-station for the Anaheim police department),

- A detailed explanation of safety measures at each stage in the attraction “lifecycle” including design standards, testing, training, maintenance and inspection,
- Information regarding extensive efforts to provide guests with the information they need to make safe decisions while at Disneyland, such as:
  - 10,000 new signs with standardized language and pictographs at attraction entrances, in queues and in ride vehicles
  - Standardized yellow and black warning stripes to alert guests to platform edges wherever they load and unload
  - Safety announcements immediately prior to vehicle dispatch
  - Station gates, fencing or yellow “wait” lines where guests assemble before boarding vehicles.<sup>(31)</sup>

The next step Disney took was a **Public Awareness Campaign** designed to inform guests about the new safety measures created for them:

- Universal signage
- Audio messages
- Ground markings and barriers <sup>(32)</sup>

Disney also published a **Fun Facts Safety Sheet**, which listed positive data about Disneyland.

- Disneyland and Walt Disney World train more than 1200 lifeguards a year,
- Disneyland and Walt Disney World employ more than 1500 engineers, mechanics and electricians to work on ride safety and maintenance,
- Disney parks hold more than 30,000 Cast Member operational training sessions for attractions,
- Guests at Disneyland consumed 4 million hamburgers, 1.6 million hot dogs, 3.4 million orders of French fries, 1.5 million servings of popcorn, 3.2 million servings of ice cream, 1.2 million gallons of soft drinks and 2.8 million churros.  
<sup>(33)</sup>

As part of the safety campaign, Disney also publicized their **Employee Slogan** for the public to view; showing that safety is first.<sup>(34)</sup>

### **Disney Quality Standards**

Safety  
Courtesy  
Show  
Efficiency

## Disney's Safety Campaign - Phase II

May 2003, just in time for summer vacation, Disney launched another public relations safety initiative entitled, “**Wild About Safety.**” The fact sheet posted for the media read, Disney’s *Wild About Safety* Education Campaign: Historic Commitment and Campaign Overview. The term, ‘Historic Commitment’ stood out in glaring fashion. The message went on to imply that the safety campaign continues Disney’s long tradition of safety education by engaging guests in a partnership to enhance their safety and safety of their families and loved ones during their stay. (35)

“As Resort operators, keeping our properties safe has always been our top priority,” said Jay Rasulo, president of Walt Disney Parks and Resorts. “But even with a cast of thousands working around the clock, we can’t do it alone. This program is a fun and effective way to give guests the information they need to partner with us and take an active role in their own safety.” (36)

This campaign was presented as an entertaining, yet educational program using two popular Lion King characters, Pumbaa and Timon. The focus was to educate guests about safety rules without detracting from the fun and fantasy of the Disneyland experience.

Twelve messages, entitled “12 Good Ways to Safer Days” depicted Pumbaa and Timon’s “misadventures” and unsafe behavior throughout Disneyland. Safety themes were accompanied by darling taglines – such as, “Keep Arms, Hooves, Tusks and Tails Inside the Vehicle.”

The “Wild About Safety” campaign was designed to be rolled out over a 12-18 month period at Disneyland. The communication vehicles being used in the park included,

- Children’s activity books with safety-themed activities such as connect-the-dots, word games and coloring,
- Theme park guide maps
- Brochures summarizing all twelve safety messages – distributed throughout Disneyland at guest services locations,
- Personal translation units for guests with limited English fluency that feature audio safety reminders from Timon and Pumbaa in five different languages,
- Twelve different trading pins featuring Timon and Pumbaa’s safety messages that are not for sale, but can be acquired through trading with cast members at the park,
- Twelve safety tip cards that cast members will distribute to children,
- Menus for guests under the age of 12 at Disneyland restaurants. (37)

Disney’s commitment to safety for their guests was obvious. The message was clear – Disney cared. .

## **All Was Well Within The Kingdom**

Disneyland's Safety Program had been in full implementation for over a year and phase two had begun. The newspapers didn't murmur a word about Disneyland. All was quiet since the Roger Rabbit accident...until Big Thunder Mountain.

## **Big Thunder Mountain Accident, 2003**

September 5, 2003 began like any other day...but unfortunately ended in tragedy on Big Thunder Mountain. On the heels of a well-orchestrated safety campaign, yet another accident transpired at Disneyland, resulting in the park's ninth ride-related death since inception.

This time, Disneyland made an unprecedented change in their reaction to the accident.

This time, Disneyland made an unprecedented change in their approach to the public and the media.

This time... Disneyland did it right.

As if the performance were well rehearsed, Disneyland cast members and officials went into action. As soon as the ride operator realized the Big Thunder Mountain train had derailed, the central command center was contacted. They, then immediately placed the 911 call for help. Within minutes, paramedics and Anaheim police arrived on the scene. State investigators arrived shortly after. And for the first time in the park's history, Disneyland officials released control and allowed the Anaheim police department and Cal-OSHA investigators full and uncensored access to any and all information. (38)

Disneyland officials answered very few questions about the accident, indicating that they had relinquished control of the scene until proper authorities had finished their investigation. "As a result of the Columbia accident, law enforcement now takes over the scene of a serious accident," said Bob Tucker, a Disney spokesman. "We've shared everything we know publicly," Tucker said. "We're not trying to hide anything. In today's fast-moving world, with cell phones and instant communication, word travels fast. We want to tell people what happened." (39)

President Cynthia Harriss called it a "tragic accident." She referred investigation-related questions to the public agencies involved. And most importantly, she offered her sympathy and condolences to the victims and their families. (40)

Disney set up a toll-free number for people to call and obtain information about the victims. (41)

As investigators released additional details of the accident, Disneyland and Anaheim city officials worked together conducting media briefings throughout the day.

Then in an extraordinary move, Disney Chairman and CEO Michael Eisner, who had remained silent during the other accidents, drove to Disneyland from the Burbank headquarters to speak at an afternoon press conference. “On behalf of the Disney organization, we are deeply saddened by today’s accident,” he said. “Our hearts and prayers go out to those injured and the family of the deceased. For the last 50 years, the safety and well being of our people, our guests and employees has been and continues to be our top priority. We are working very closely with local and state authorities to gather the facts and determine the cause of this accident as quickly as possible. I came to Disneyland specifically to lend my support to our cast, to express condolences to those people that are injured and the family of the deceased.” (42)

### **The Measured Result**

The dramatic change in Disneyland’s performance did not go ignored by the media. The skeptical surveyors of this colossal corporation clearly altered their tune with this 180-degree change. There was no criticism, no backlash, and the media printed quotes regarding change rather than scrutiny.

Support surfaced in response to Disneyland’s behavior. The Los Angeles Times ran headlines such as, “Disney Changes Its Attitude” and “A Safer Magic Kingdom.” (43) (44)

Kimi Yoshino, who is the Los Angeles Times’ primary reporter on Disneyland affairs wrote, “It was a dramatic turnaround from Disneyland’s handling of previous accidents and a near-textbook example of crisis management.” (45)

Also quoted was Carl Winston, a San Diego State University director. He said, “As I watched it unfold, they did it perfectly, saying the right things and giving out as many facts as were available.” (46)

Disney’s new Senior Vice President, Leslie Goodman summed it up well. “Disney has always felt the need to guard the magic, and effort that can sometimes run contrary to letting the public in or behind-the-scenes operations at its parks. But with the news traveling so rapidly and heightened concerns about safety and security, it’s even more important to get accurate information out – and to get it out fast.” (47)

By the time the final Cal-OSHA report was published, Disneyland had already begun making the appropriate safety changes to the Big Thunder Mountain ride. Knowing that the accident was caused by a mechanical failure, which occurred as the result of an omission during a maintenance procedure; Disneyland has already admitted accountability and accepted blame.

### **Implementing the Page Principles**

**Tell the truth:** When the Big Thunder Mountain accident occurred, Disneyland clearly told the truth about the accident, which gained more credibility for their image than when they tried to hide the truth in previous incidents to protect their image.

**Prove it with action:** Disneyland also proved it with action by following the safety procedures they so publicly touted. They also showed that they cared about guest safety in their reaction to the Big Thunder Mountain accident by backing down and allowing investigators to do their jobs first.

**Listen to the customer:** Disneyland's customer is the public. Their comments and concerns were read and heard by Disney officials. By implementing the Safety and Public Awareness Campaign, it was evident that Disney clearly listened to their customer and acknowledged that safety and accountability was what the public wanted.

**Manage for tomorrow:** The safety education program, whereby making the guest a safety partner while in the park was managing for tomorrow. Also by conducting the Public Awareness Campaign, Disneyland began to manage for tomorrow by eliminating old practices that no longer worked or were accepted, and created new ones that established trust and goodwill.

**Conduct public relations as if the whole company depends on it:** It is apparent that the safety campaign was designed as a public relations strategy to regain the public's trust in response to the Columbia ship and Roger Rabbit accidents. In this situation, Disney certainly conducted this public relations campaign as if the whole company did depend on it.

**Remain calm, patient and good-humored:** During the crisis, the Disneyland spokespersons remained calm and patient. They handled the media well and answered as many questions as possible, while referring all investigative questions to the proper authorities. Disney did not attempt to call the shots, make accusations, jump to conclusions or create excuses. Instead they remained calm and patient in this crisis situation.

## **Conclusion**

Once again, Disney has overwhelmed its public with a spectacular performance. They rebounded from a crisis situation and overcame the challenge by executing strong, ethical public relations. The brilliance of hiring a top corporate communications executive to implement change was Disney's first step in positioning themselves. The implementation of a chief safety officer and then the public announcement of the role he was to play, literally told the public that he was hired solely for their safety – what a statement!

The two-phase safety awareness campaign they ran solidified the fact that Disney did care about guest safety. And only Disney could present such a mundane subject such as safety, with appropriate humor and fun, and still effectively display the serious message. The wisdom behind using characters such as Timon and Pumbaa to show Disney guests how to be safe, and still have fun at Disneyland, couldn't have been a better choice. And though unknown at the time, Disney's timing could not have been better to focus on guest safety.

Although Disneyland certainly did not expect another accident, much less a fatal one, they responded appropriately. The truthful statements about the accident, the public apologies, the empathy statements, the toll-free number given for concerned families, the cooperation with city officials and investigators, and the press conference given by Michael Eisner put Disneyland back on top. Disney did everything right!

Walt Disney said it best:

“To all who come to this happy place; welcome.

Disneyland is your land. Here age relives fond memories of the past...and here youth may savor the challenge and promise of the future. Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, the dreams and the hard facts that have created America...with the hope that it will be a source of joy and inspiration to all the world.” (51)

Fortunately for many, the Magic Kingdom appears to still be “The Happiest Place on Earth.”

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## Questions

1. If Disney had not implemented such a strong safety awareness campaign to the public, would their change in crisis-management procedures have been received as well in the Big Thunder Mountain accident?
2. Is a company as large and as renowned as Disney held to a higher standard of public expectation? Why is that important in the area of public relations?
3. Disneyland had three substantial accidents within a five-year period of time - two of which were fatal,. What additional measures would you put in place today if you were in charge of their public relations department?
4. If Disneyland had not run the safety campaign prior to the Big Thunder Mountain accident, describe the damage control techniques they would have had to implement.
5. As a Disneyland guest, what is more important to you – the magic and amazement within the park or knowing that you are safe, even if that means giving up some of the fantasy to deal with reality?

## **Exhibit I – The Walt Disney Company Corporate Timeline**

### **The Early Years**

- 1901 - Walter Elias Disney is born
- 1928 - Mickey Mouse is presented in the short animation film, Steamboat Willie
- 1937 - Disney's first full-length animation film is released – Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs
- 1940 - Walt Disney Productions offers stock as the company goes public
- 1954 - Disneyland, the first weekly television series debuts on television via ABC

### **1955 - Disneyland is opened in Anaheim, California**

- 1966 - Walt Disney dies
- 1971 - Walt Disney World opens in Orlando, Florida
- 1979 - ESPN is launched
- 1983 - Tokyo Disneyland is opened. The Disney Channel makes its debut on cable television

### **The New Disney Era**

- 1984 - Michael Eisner becomes the new CEO for Walt Disney Productions
- 1986 - Company changes name to the Walt Disney Company
- 1992 - Disney is awarded The Mighty Ducks of Anaheim – a National Hockey League expansion team
- 1993 - Disney acquires Miramax Films
- 1995 - Disney announces its intent to purchase Capital Cities/ABC for \$19 billion
- 1996 - Capital Cities/ABC officially becomes part of the Disney Company. Disney.com is launched. Disney gains ownership in Major League Baseball's California Angels – later changes name to Anaheim Angels. Radio Disney is launched
- 2001 - News Corp. sells Fox Family Worldwide to Disney. Cable channel later becomes known as ABC Family
- 2003 - Anaheim Angels sold for just over \$180 million

Source: Columbia Journal Review (48)

## **Exhibit II – Disneyland ride-related fatal accidents**

**1964** – Mark Maples, 15

Matterhorn

A friend removed his seatbelt and he fell out of the bobsled - died.

**1966** – Guy Cleveland, 19

Monorail

Hit after sneaking into the park – died.

**1967** – Rick Yarna, 17

People Mover

Jumped from car to car – died.

**1973** – Bogden De Laurot, 18

Rivers of America – Tom Sawyer Island

Tried to swim to shore – drowned.

**1980** – Gerardo Gonzales, 18

People Mover

Tried to climb from one car to the next – died.

**1983** – Philip Staughan, 18

Rivers of America – Tom Sawyer Island

Thrown from a maintenance boat while joy riding – drowned.

**1984** – Dolly Young, 47

Matterhorn

Thrown from her bobsled while not wearing a seat belt – died.

**1998** – Luan Phi Dawson, 33

**Columbia Sailing Ship**

Struck in the head by a cast iron cleat – died.

**1<sup>st</sup> fatality where Disneyland was found at fault.**

**2003** – Marcelo Torres, 22

**Big Thunder Mountain Railroad**

Train derails and crashes into locomotive – died.

**2<sup>nd</sup> fatality where Disneyland was found at fault.**

Source: Los Angeles Times, November 9, 2003 (49)

### **Exhibit III- Timon and Pumbaa’s – “12 Good Ways to Safer Days”**

12 trading pins and 12 safety tip cards included these sayings:

<b><u>Tagline</u></b>	<b><u>Explanation</u></b>
Hold on to your gear!	Secure your belongings while on rides
Stay seated at all times	Remain seated while in rides vehicles
No Stampeding!	Walk, don't run
Keep arms, hooves, tusks and tails inside the vehicle	Keep arms, hands, legs and feet inside the vehicle
Be aware, it's a jungle out there!	Be aware of your surroundings to avoid collisions, tripping, etc.
Let the cubs decide if they want to ride	Don't pressure kids to take rides that may be too scary for them
Block the sun, not the fun	Take responsible precautions to avoid excessive sun exposure
Follow the rules of the jungle	Comply with written, verbal and audio instructions
Stay on your feet, it's not a seat	Don't sit on ropes, chains and railings
Make sure you are well enough to ride	Don't take rides if you are not feeling well or do not satisfy posted health requirements or recommendations
Paws behind the line	Stay behind yellow safety lines until instructed to board a ride
Watch over your herd	Supervise your children

Source: Disneyland Fact Sheet. [www.DLRNews.com](http://www.DLRNews.com) (50)

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