

Datum Engineers

crisis communications effort

SITUATION

As one of a two-member PR team, I was one of the consultants for a crisis communications situation involving a \$125 million lawsuit against Datum Engineers, Austin, Texas. Datum and another company, a structural engineer, were being sued for constructing a high-rise luxury apartment complex on South Padre Island, Texas. Half way through the construction, the structure began to sink. This caused the main tower to break from a parking facility and start to lean in such a way as to be a danger of falling to one side. While the lawsuit would not go to trial for a few years, the building was set to be imploded in a few months (early December 2009), and so our overall mission was to protect Datum's reputation by closely tracking the media's interest and ensuring that any potentially negative or incomplete information was addressed prior to being printed or broadcast or that follow-up news would provide that balance.

STRATEGIC GOALS

- Know the "interested" media that would potentially follow the developments leading up to and including the highly visible implosion of the building. This included understanding their typical interest in issues, having contact information and understanding their deadlines.
- Over a four-week period, minimize any mention of Datum Engineers by name by the media, especially by discouraging the media from going into depth about the case unless the news services had the time and resources to adequately represent Datum's perspective.
- When further coverage of the circumstances of the lawsuit would be covered, ensure that the media understood the case from Datum's perspective and was offered an official quote from Datum. Request follow-up articles, if necessary, to ensure the entire news record was fair and balanced.

IMPLEMENTATION

We took the following steps:

- Identified any and all news services and online information vehicles (numbering 110) that would potentially cover this developing news story. These included local and regional general news agencies, as well as specialty industry services in real estate, engineering and architecture. Identify "citizen journalism" online sites and

determine their potential for affecting Datum's image. Monitor various blogs having periodic dialogues on news.

- Train the company's president in the event of requested interviews. Provide him with talking points and preferred quotes. Also provide the company with an operational plan if/when anyone including the media called the company's office seeking information. Additionally, we wrote website copy and a letter to be sent to existing or prospective customers, assuring them that Datum relied on the other plaintiff in the lawsuit, the structural engineer, to make decisions and, thus, should not be named in the lawsuit.
- Create helpful information (fact sheet and official quotes) so the media would get the facts straight and would also hear Datum's defense regarding the lawsuit. This included information about Datum's excellent record in customer satisfaction and receipt of industry awards, as well as useable quotes from Datum's CEO about the lawsuit.
- Contact all local and state media and any media of the building industry to determine their intent in covering the news and to provide our contact information if or when they wanted more information. This work included contact with Houston Chronicle, San Antonio Express News, Engineering News Record (ENR), the Associated Press and National Geographic's Discovery network.
- Contact all local and county authorities who might be asked to comment on the implosion so they could provide our PR contact information as Datum's representatives if so requested. This included contacting the district court clerk, the town and county's public information officers, the developer's PR firm, and others.
- Monitor and respond to any and all requests in the days and hours leading up to the implosion.
- Follow up with any news services after the implosion if the coverage put Datum in a negative light.

RESULTS

The structure's implosion came and went with no negative or even indepth coverage that mentioned Datum Engineers. The company was eventually completely dismissed from the lawsuit.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Client letter
Talking points

San Antonio Business Journal article
Engineering News Record article

PR TEAM

Lead consultant: Linda Mastaglio
Associate consultant: Steve Freeman