



## Lessons in Crisis Communication from The World Cultural Festival

*"With public opinion nothing can fail, without it nothing can succeed"*  
Abraham Lincoln

How is that The World Cultural Festival billed as a celebration of "The Art of Living's 35 years of service, humanity, spirituality and human values and one that celebrates the diversity in cultures from across the world while simultaneously highlighting our unity as a human family" turn into a PR nightmare?

Before I commence, a disclaimer. I am neither expressing any opinion for or against the event or organization, nor is this a criticism of any institution or person. It is a simple reflection of what we all saw play out in the public domain. I have no access to the actual actions taken by the institution or its communication approach. My observations are purely based on what is available in the public domain: online and the media coverage.

As a student of Reputation Management, and public opinion, I am using the event as a learning opportunity to understand the following:

- Why this celebration turned into a PR nightmare?
- Why such a respected organization became a target?
- What could the organizers have done to mitigate the potential crisis?
- What could they have done during the crisis to minimize the damage to reputation?
- What should they be doing post the crisis to burnish the reputation?

What are the lessons to be learnt by practitioners of Reputation Management?  
How could have science played a role to protect the reputation?

## What is The Art of Living?

According to its website, The Art of Living is a non-profit, educational, and humanitarian organization founded in 1981 by the world-renowned philanthropist and spiritual leader, Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. It operates in over 150 countries. It has been in existence for over three decades and has legion of dedicated followers. Clearly, this is an organization with heritage, history, and recognition.

## So what was the controversy?

I am appending two articles, which will give you a good sense of the issues.

<http://www.firstpost.com/india/the-clout-of-living-sri-sri-ravi-shankars-controversial-world-culture-festival-kicks-off-in-new-delhi-2669612.html>

<http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/randomaccess/the-art-of-livings-world-culture-festival-controversies-galore/>

In short, the festival faced charges ranging from environmental degradation of the Yamuna, a INR 50 million fine by the National Green Tribunal, the 'VIP privilege' accorded to the festival: use of the state machinery for a private event, the patronage by various government agencies and the mega scale extravaganza and not to mention the inconvenience caused to the citizens in nearby establishments. Last but not the least the politics of the various political dispensations.

Having been involved in several mega events involving global celebrities, some controversial to other not so much, I have first hand experience of these situations. So I am basing my observations on the lessons I have learnt over the years.

We can divide the discussion into three phases:

The Pre Event  
The Event  
The Post Event

### The Pre Event

Whilst organizers usually focus on the promotion of the event to attract public admiration, most fail to look at the possible 'risk factors' and prepare for it.

**First**, it does not take rocket science to figure that an event of this nature will attract activists, driven by a particular ideology (in this case environment protection) and/or those simply seeking their '15 minutes'.

**Second**, given the political alignments at the center, state and local bodies, politicians would seek to exploit it to their advantage and some of the activism could even have political dimensions.

**Third**, the recognition that whilst social media is a great tool to promote the event, it can also be used to harness public opinion against it; tapping into the emotion and feelings of those impacted, affected and ignored.

**Lastly**, the recognition that media thrives on controversies providing great content for content starved stations and pages. A good controversy is a blessing!

Given that the controversy became a national debate overnight, leads me to assume that the organizers were caught off-guard and perhaps did not lay the ground strongly enough to allay some of the fears that the event may arise.

**Lesson 1.** Scenario Planning is the key to mitigating risk and damage to reputation.

This is where science could have played an effective role. Understanding the public mood and crafting the narrative accordingly would have helped prepare the right story line delivered by the most appropriate messenger and through the most effective platforms of information and influence.

**Lesson 2.** Use science to develop a persuasive storyline to channelize public mood.

So how do you execute effectively?

The key is to ensure that public acceptance is generated in the right way, not just by hype. Getting your stakeholders co-opted and engaged in the progress is an important part of addressing their concerns. Show and Tells, Open Houses, Community Meets, Online updates, and so on are some of the tools that can be used to build acceptance and advocates.

E.g. Fact: Volunteers remove 500 tonnes of garbage from the site.

E.g. Plan for Future: We will leave the Yamuna better than we got it. Here is how?

**Lesson 3.** Involve the stakeholders. Keep them engaged.

## **The Event**

They say 'speech is silver and silence is golden.' True most times but NOT in the middle of a raging controversy with a 24X7-news cycle. Someone else will fill the vacuum your silence creates. By initially, remaining silent, the organization allowed its message to be lost in the noise and lost the initiative to lead the story. By the time it did decide, it was already fighting a losing battle of public opinion.

It was surprising that the usually erudite and soft-spoken Gurujji's (as his followers call him) calming voice was missing as the controversy broke. If this would have happened perhaps, day zero onwards, the court of public opinion would have been different. Research has shown that the CEO is the alter ego of the corporation, especially the first generation founders. As the founder, Gurujji's face and voice represented AOL and his presence perhaps could have helped shape the debate differently.

When he did speak, the world expected to see the consummate peacemaker and promoter of harmony. A spiritual guru that he truly is, Instead the world heard him say “I will not pay the fine and choose to go to jail instead”, to Barkha Dutta on News Television. Experience has shown that even the most accomplished CEOs get flustered with an unforeseen public controversy and often react instinctively rather than respond in a considered manner with good reputation management counsel.

**Lesson 4.** Don't be silent. Get your best spokespersons to spread your message.

In this case, having missed the proper stage setting in the build up to the event, the delayed response to the emerging situation, compounded the problem further and even the massive push in later stages to get the story out, failed as the court of public opinion had already delivered its verdict. It did not help that even the Supreme Court appointed NGT, imposed a fine, reinforcing the perception that something was done wrong.

Adding fuel to the fire, was the Parliament of the nation on the excesses and the patronage by the government to the event and the opposition did not lose the opportunity to attack the Government for its support to the event. E.g. Using the Indian Army soldiers to build a Pontoon Bridge across the Yamuna River.

## Post Event

The event was a grand success, barring the rain (which some would say was a good omen and the blessing of Indra, the God of thunder and rain), some cancelations and early departures of VIPs. Now the process of re building needs to commence. Here are some thoughts:

First, deliver the promise of leaving the Yamuna better than we got it. Share the plan.

Second, while you are at it, give updates, show and tell people, involve them. Do not let others fill the vacuum your silence will create. Control your narrative.

Third, Let the experts speak. Let them tell the world what a good job you have done at the Yamuna.

Last, focus on your core, get back to your core proposition.

Having lived and survived through several crises, I have come to adopt some principles that have helped me guide my clients through a crisis. They are: Transparency, Empathy, Action and Context.

Be **Transparent.**

Demonstrate **Empathy**

Ensure **Context** to communication

**Actions** make communication credible.

There are some simple DO and DON'T that when followed ensure that risk to reputation is minimized and recovery is swift and the come back stronger than ever before.

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