



James F. Haggerty

EDITORS' NOTE Called “a powerhouse” of PR and communications in Chambers & Partners’ international legal directory, James F. Haggerty is President and CEO of PRCG | Haggerty LLC, an internationally known public relations firm, and PRCG | Sports, a sports marketing and public relations brand. An attorney, author and consultant with more than 25 years of experience representing corporations, nonprofits, celebrities, athletes and high-net worth individuals, Haggerty is frequently called upon as a trusted advisor in sensitive reputation management issues. In the area of crisis communications and litigation communications, he is considered among the foremost experts worldwide, and is the founder and CEO of CrisisResponsePro, Inc., a crisis communications software firm. His first book, *In the Court of Public Opinion*, recently released in an updated third edition by ABA Publishing, has been called “the perfect handbook for this age” by Financial Times, while PR trade publication Holmes Report said that Haggerty “literally wrote the book on litigation public relations.” His most recent book, *Chief Crisis Officer: Structure and Leadership for Effective Communications Response*, has been featured in the Harvard Business Review, Fortune, and Entrepreneur magazines, among others. A revised paperback edition of *Chief Crisis Officer*, with a new introduction, has just been released. In 2017, Haggerty was named as one of “50 Gamechangers” of public relations by PR News.

FIRM BRIEF PRCG | Haggerty, LLC (prcg.com) is a boutique public relations consultancy with an international reputation for meeting sophisticated communications challenges worldwide. With offices in New York, Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles, the firm has affiliations worldwide and is also a member of the Crisis Protection Network, a global network of affiliated firms equipped to offer comprehensive communications services specially tailored to the needs of each individual client. In 2019, the firm launched PRCG | Sports, a practice dedicated to representing sports owners, brands, media companies and individual athletes.

Reputation Management and Mitigating Risk

An Interview with James F. Haggerty, President and CEO, PRCG | Haggerty LLC

Will you discuss PRCG | Haggerty’s work in managing high-level, sensitive reputation issues?

We have been at this for more than 20 years, working with companies and nonprofits, as well as high-profile and high-net worth individuals, many of whom are brands unto themselves. One of the foundations of our success lies in the senior attention we bring to our clients’ issues and needs. I tend to be obsessive by nature and, likewise, everyone at our firm develops a laser-like focus on the communication issues our clients face. Whether in crisis and litigation communications, general reputational work and proactive publicity, or sports public relations and other specialties, clients appreciate the fact that their success is as important to us as it is to them. They know we aren’t just selling them cookie-cutter PR programs; we’re trusted advisors who take what we do very seriously.

Will you highlight your books?

New editions of both of my books just hit the market at the same time, both published by ABA Books, the publishing arm of the American Bar Association. The first is a totally revised Third Edition of my 2003 book *In The Court of Public Opinion: Winning Strategies for Litigation Communications*, which is considered the premier book on the management of perceptions during litigation. I also wrote, in 2017, a book called *Chief Crisis Officer: Structure and Leadership for Effective Communications Response*, which deals more generally with crisis communications planning and execution. In *Chief Crisis Officer*, I argue that, in this age of instantaneous communications, everyone needs a plan in place and a team ready to respond immediately when the inevitable crisis hits. The hardcover version of the book did so well that we just released a paperback edition with a new preface highlighting how the big-name crises of the past two years – Boeing, Equifax, United Airlines and the NFL – prove our central premise.

You discuss in the books the importance of clients building a balance in the “Credibility Bank” as a reputational risk management technique. How does this work?

In a crisis, the first thing media, customers, regulators and other stakeholders do is Google you to see what kind of person or organization this is. If your Google search results produce a string of negatives – lawsuits, other crises, product issues or scandals – the impressions they form are going to negatively affect the way they view you and your actions every step of the way going forward. In that situation, your balance in the “Credibility Bank” is low. Conversely, if you’ve been steadily filling

the Google pipeline with positives – about your products or services, the way you treat employees, the good works you do in philanthropy or in your community – then when a crisis hits, stakeholders are going to be far more understanding. You’ve inoculated against negatives and your balance in the “Credibility Bank” is high.

Why is crisis planning so important?

Remember the old AAMCO auto repair commercials: “You can pay me now... or pay me later!” Crisis communications planning is a risk management technique. If you’ve invested the resources up front to respond effectively and efficiently when a crisis hits, you’re going to save a lot of money in the long run. For my book *Chief Crisis Officer*, we looked at more than 12,000 public statements issued by companies in crisis using our own proprietary software. In every case where an event became a front-page crisis, there was one common thread: the initial public response to the crisis was screwed up, since they didn’t have the proper plan in place. Not 50 percent of the time, or 80 percent, but 100 percent. Thus, without an actionable plan, you inevitably raise the likelihood that a negative event becomes a crisis. We do a fair amount of work in sports-related fields these days, and I would equate this to sending your football team onto the field, and only then making up the plays. You may win the game, but I wouldn’t bet on it.

You’ve worked with a range of high profile and high-net worth individuals and business owners over the years. How do their needs differ from corporations?

It’s very important to understand that some of the largest businesses in the country are privately-held, family-owned enterprises. Most wealthy and high-net worth families have most of their wealth in private operating companies. Moreover, if you are a sports franchise owner, a celebrity, or an athlete, your business operations are very often intertwined with your personal brand. This makes proactively planning for negative news, rather than retroactively reacting to it, of critical importance. Over the years, my company has had considerable success working with large businesses run by wealthy individuals and families, and I can tell you two things: there’s usually a very successful, strong-willed individual at the top, and the company’s internal communications departments are smaller than you would expect. This can be a volatile mix when ensuring that an organization, family or brand has built up their balance in the “Credibility Bank” and has properly planned for the inevitable negative reputational event. ●