

## Is Breaking Up Hard to Do?: Strategic Communication Efforts Surrounding *American Idol*'s Loss of Paula Abdul

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### Abstract

The reality show *American Idol* has made its way to the top of television ratings in nearly all of its 11 seasons to date. However, a challenge came with the departure of original *Idol* judge Paula Abdul after unsuccessful contract negotiations in 2009. During the crisis, social media were filled with rumors and comments from disgruntled Abdul fans. This case study examines the strategic communication efforts of *American Idol* producers during this crisis. Image restoration methods by the producers are examined and suggestions are made for future similar crises.

**Keywords:** reality television; Fox; Paula Abdul; American Idol; Twitter; social media; image restoration; celebrity; strategic communication

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The boom of reality television is, for the most part, a product of the new millennium. These productions are unpredictable, providing enough intrigue to keep viewers watching for an entire season (Consoli, 2001). It is a market known for the outrageous, volatile, and unpredictable contestants typically chosen by producers to draw a mass audience. Producers, hosts, and even scriptwriters welcome any media attention toward the contestants, regardless of the negative light commonly shed on these unassuming participants. To producers and promoters, any publicity that gets people talking about the show is good publicity. But what

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happens when it is one of the show's permanent personalities, one who is supposed to be a calm and constant force, who becomes the center of a storm? How should organizational communicators respond when a major figure from the program becomes immersed in corporate politics? *American Idol* and its host network, Fox, had to address these questions when Paula Abdul, one of *Idol's* three original judges, announced that, because of a salary disagreement, Season 8 of *American Idol* would be her last (Finn, 2009). This case study examines the strategic communication efforts of Fox and *American Idol* in this incident and addresses the effectiveness of those efforts.

### Background

Since its first season in the U.S. in 2002, *American Idol* has been a nationwide hit and is typically the most watched show, or among the highest rated shows, each year (Herbert, 2010). Although the ratings decreased from its peak in the sixth season, "it's still one of the biggest TV audiences around" (Kerwin, 2010, para. 4). During the eighth season – Paula Abdul's last – an average of 26.3 million viewers tuned in per episode (Snyder, 2009).

*American Idol* is produced by multiple entities. Because the program airs on Fox's network, however, Fox is the most recognizable face of *American Idol* producers to U.S. viewers. Other production entities include London-based FremantleMedia, which describes itself as "one of the world's largest and most successful creators, producers, and distributors of outstanding entertainment brands" and responsible for placing an *Idol* show in more than 45 countries ("About Us," 2009). A third entity associated with the production of *American Idol* is 19 Entertainment, a television show and music production company. *Idol* contestants who are chosen to be in the Top 12 sign a contract with 19 Entertainment and have included notable artists such as Kelly Clarkson, Clay Aiken, and Carrie Underwood.

Like most reality television shows, *American Idol* has endured its share of controversy from racy past photos of contestants to phone voting problems (Morris, 2011; "Tech-savvy Viewers," 2002). In addition, Paula Abdul drew controversial, and sometimes negative, attention herself. Although she was generally known "as the show's consistently kindest judge" (Gliatto, 2009, para. 1), she was also known to be emotional, as

many contestant performances moved Abdul to tears (Wyatt, 2009a). Abdul also made some confusing statements both on the show and in interviews (Rocchio, 2008; Wilson, 2008; Wyatt, 2007), some of which included slurring and other behaviors which led to “widespread speculation” of possible drug or alcohol abuse (Wyatt, 2007, para. 1) that Abdul has consistently denied (Eng, 2009; “Paula Abdul Claims,” 2007; Soriano, 2005). To some, the bickering between Abdul and co-judge Simon Cowell branded her negatively; though for others, Cowell was seen as the villain (“Idol’s’ Cowell Voted,” 2008).

Abdul had a major controversial incident in 2005. Corey Clark alleged that he and Abdul had been romantically involved two years earlier when Clark was a contestant on the show. He told ABC reporters that Abdul also coached Clark on song and wardrobe choice, as well as other tips on how to advance. Abdul denied the relationship, and Fox, FremantleMedia and 19 Entertainment supported her. At the time, Fox reported that Abdul would remain a judge on *Idol* for the “foreseeable future” (Consoli, 2005, p. 5).

Yet another situation presented itself in 2008 when the producers allowed Paula Goodspeed to audition. Abdul pleaded with producers not to let Goodspeed try out because the woman had been stalking Abdul for years. After her audition when she was denied a spot to advance on *Idol*, Goodspeed killed herself by drug overdose not far from Abdul’s home. Abdul later spoke to Barbara Walters about the incident, claiming that Goodspeed was allowed to audition because it would make for good television to see Abdul stressed about being near the contestant. According to Dumenco (2009), when Walters asked why she remained with a program that treated her in this regard, Abdul answered, “I’m under contract” (p. 18).

With these crises in the past, *American Idol* moved on to Season 8. Kara DioGuardi was hired as a fourth member of the *Idol* judging panel. There was speculation that her addition to the show was done in order to prevent Abdul from making larger salary demands (Rushfield & Collins, 2009), but everything seemed to go smoothly during Season 8.

After wrapping up the season in May, *Idol* producers and personalities went to work in preparation for Season 9. *American Idol* wished Abdul a happy birthday on the show’s website on June 19. Along with the birthday

message, the website included a three-paragraph biography of the judge (“Happy,” 2009). At this point in the summer, the media was focusing its attention on Season 8 runner-up Adam Lambert, until rumors emerged that Abdul was considering leaving the show.

On July 17, 2009, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Abdul was in negotiations concerning her contract. *Los Angeles Times* reporters Rushfield and Collins (2009) wrote that David Sonenberg, Abdul’s manager, said, “Very sadly, it does not appear that she’s going to be back on *Idol*” (para. 2). Rushfield and Collins (2009) said Sonenberg even declared that FremantleMedia and 19 Entertainment were being “unnecessarily hurtful...unconscionable and certainly rude and disrespectful” because they had not even presented Abdul with a proposal for a new contract (para. 4). This public statement by Sonenberg suggests a strategic effort on his part to spur the producers into cooperation with Abdul, and it began a communication crisis for the producers of *American Idol*. Simon Cowell responded to the claims made by Sonenberg by telling *Extra* that he hoped Abdul would choose to return for another season with him (Snyder, 2009). Sonenberg likely expected the timing to benefit him and Abdul by pressuring the producers just as Season 9 was scheduled to begin production.

At the same time, some of the other *American Idol* personalities were in contract negotiations. While Abdul earned \$2 million per year, Ryan Seacrest, the host of *American Idol*, had recently signed a \$45 million deal extending his contract for three more years (Rushfield & Collins, 2009). Seacrest would earn \$10 million per year plus an additional \$15 million for the rights to his image and other production deals (Wyatt, 2009a). Cowell had declined an offer for \$144 million to extend his contract, which would end after the ninth season wrapped. While DioGuardi had not yet confirmed a new contract at the time, she did renew her contract publicly on August 4. Jackson’s contract was already set to go through 2011.

Following the news that Abdul might not return, fans began blogging and tweeting their thoughts and predictions about her participation in *American Idol* for Season 9 (Hannah, 2009). Some even organized a “Save Paula” Twitter campaign. A reporter from *Time* wrote that this provoked a heartfelt response from Abdul thanking her fans for their “kindness, love, and undying support” (Snyder, 2009, para. 5).

Finally, on Tuesday, August 4, a message on Twitter confirmed what many fans and journalists had been sensing: Paula Abdul was leaving the show (Poniewozik, 2009). The news came only hours after Abdul told producers that she would be leaving (Wyatt, 2009a). Rob Silverstein, executive producer for *Access Hollywood*, described it as a “watershed moment” because on “the biggest show in the history of television, one of the biggest stars of the show decides to leave via Twitter” (Tanklefsky, 2009, p. 4).

Posting during *American Idol*'s normal air-time on a Tuesday night (Snyder, 2009), Abdul's complete message came in several segments, according to *Time* reporter James Poniewozik (2009):

With sadness in my heart, I've decided not to return to #IDOL. I'll miss nurturing all the new talent, but most of all being a part of a show that I helped from day 1 become an international phenomenon. What I want to say most, is how much I appreciate the undying support and enormous love that you have showered upon me. It truly has been breathtaking, especially over the past month. I do without any doubt have the BEST fans in the entire world and I love you all. (para. 1)

Responses from fans began flooding social media, but there were also public comments made by her co-stars. According to Poniewozik (2009), Seacrest tweeted: “I can't imagine the panel without Paula” (para. 2).

Media outlets began reporting that Abdul's decision arose from salary negotiations. Abdul's representatives had asked Fox, FremantleMedia, and 19 Entertainment for a substantial raise. At the time, she earned \$2 million annually, while Cowell's salary was about \$30 million a year. Abdul wanted to be considered an equal to her co-judge. She requested \$20 million, and remained firm with that request, turning down a 30% raise (Poniewozik, 2009). The final offer she received was for \$5 million a year, far less than that of her co-hosts (Wyatt, 2009a).

Poniewozik (2009) quickly declared that both *American Idol* and Abdul would be worse off as a result of the departure. For the show, he said, ratings depend in part on the chemistry between Cowell, Abdul, and Randy Jackson, the original three *Idol* judges (Poniewozik, 2009). *Idol* producers were left with the task of how to communicate with key

stakeholders in order to maintain their viewers and help them move on from an eight-year tradition.

### Strategy

Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) define organizational crisis as a “specific, unexpected, and nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization’s high priority goals” (p. 233). The departure of a beloved host on a long-running program in a controversial manner so close to the beginning of the next season brought a crisis to Fox and the other producers of *American Idol*. Abdul and her agent claimed that the producers of *American Idol* were unfair and that there were unreasonable salary differences between the judges (Wyatt, 2009b). When producers failed to offer a new contract with an increased salary comparable to her co-judges, Abdul left and fans were incensed.

When a crisis like this occurs, those involved generally try to manage the crisis and protect the organization. As Coombs (1999) describes it, “[c]risis management seeks to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis and thereby protect the organization, stakeholders, and/or industry from damage” (p. 4). In this case, Fox’s key stakeholders were the fans, the media, and the program sponsors.

One of the advised approaches by public relations practitioners is for an organization to be transparent. This openness “allows the organization to be proactive in presenting its view of the crisis to the media” (Seeger, 1997, p. 245). Fox’s publicity department is used to dealing with thousands of calls and emails every week concerning *Idol* and the other shows it produces. While *American Idol* and Fox communicated often with the media and their publics, when it came to Abdul’s departure, they became quiet.

While various theories have been developed in the crisis communication field, this case study examines Fox and *American Idol*’s strategic communication response to the crisis with Paula Abdul using Benoit’s (1995) typology, which delineates five overarching image restoration strategies: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. The sub-strategies of denial include refuting any responsibility and shifting the blame to someone else. Silence

may also be considered a form of denial. Beneath evading responsibility, the more detailed categories are provocation, defeasibility (a “lack of information or ability”), accident, and good intentions (Benoit, 1995, p. 73). According to Benoit (1995), organizations often attempt to reduce offensiveness by bolstering (emphasizing positive acts/relationships), minimization, differentiation, transcendence (placing the situation in “a larger or broader and more favorable context”), attacking their accusers, and compensation (p. 12). Organizations may also choose to take corrective action to encourage their stakeholders that the same problem will not occur again. Finally, Benoit’s (1995) strategy describes mortification, in which the organization accepts responsibility and sincerely apologizes for the offensive act.

In handling the crisis faced by the sudden departure of longtime host Paula Abdul, *American Idol* producers appeared to use several image restoration strategies described by Benoit to repair their image, and certain strategies were obviously absent. In particular, Fox used transcendence, bolstering, corrective action, and denial. However, Fox made no apparent attempt to discredit Abdul. This shows that producers did not employ one very common type of crisis management—attacking the accuser (Benoit, 1995). Nowhere in any of its statements did Fox or *American Idol* representatives say a negative word about Abdul. Nor did they apologize to Abdul or to her fans for her sudden absence through the strategy of mortification. Overall, Fox and *American Idol* took a position of neutrality in the situation.

### **Tactics**

According to Hannah (2009), hours after Abdul announced her final decision on Twitter, the production companies Fox, FremantleMedia, and 19 Entertainment verified the news with this statement:

Paula Abdul has been an important part of the “American Idol” family over the last eight seasons, and we are saddened that she has decided not to return to the show. While Paula will not be continuing with us, she’s a tremendous talent and we wish her the best. (para. 3)

This was one of the few statements the producers made concerning Abdul, and, by far the most detailed (Wyatt, 2009a). Earlier, when Sonenberg

released to the *Times* that Abdul may not be returning, Fox, FremantleMedia, and 19 Entertainment all separately declined to comment (Rushfeld & Collins, 2009).

### **Transcendence: It's a family**

By likening the show to a family, the analogy seems to point to Abdul as a wife who left her husband and children. Fox wanted to move away from the salary discussion into a different path; the producers wanted to portray themselves as better than this crisis. The producers attempted to transcend the reality program genre and the business of salaries and contracts and instead positioned *American Idol* as a family.

### **Bolstering: Focus on success**

*American Idol* producers also used the strategy of bolstering. This strategy is employed when a company wishes to remind the public of its positive qualities and connections, to distract from the crisis at hand (Benoit, 1995). Instead of mentioning Abdul's departure on its website, *American Idol* focused on posting stories of past *Idol* contestants' successes and news releases concerning the upcoming auditions for Season 9. The posts on the *American Idol* website, as well as *Idol*'s official Twitter feed, tried to create buzz for the new talent on the upcoming Season 9. In addition, the producers bolstered themselves by using the phrase "American Idol family." Fox projected the image that every member on the show loves the others, and that they work together as a tight-knit group.

### **Corrective action: A new judge**

All was relatively quiet at Fox until Wednesday, September 9, 2009. Then, Fox suddenly announced that the *American Idol* judging panel would be gaining a fourth judge, Ellen DeGeneres. On the *American Idol* website, under the same section that had two months earlier wished Abdul a happy birthday, a 12-page description of the newest panelist was released. DeGeneres said, "I'm thrilled to be the new judge on *American Idol*. I've watched since the beginning, and I've always been a huge fan" ("Ellen," 2009). The website also quoted *Idol* creator and producer Simon Fuller, who said, "I could not be more excited to have Ellen join the *American Idol* family." The remainder of the article addressed DeGeneres' professional and personal achievements. The website never alluded to Abdul's decision



to leave the show. In addition, the article does not mention that DeGeneres was chosen to *replace* Abdul, only that she would be the new fourth judge (“Ellen,” 2009). Fox also promoted DeGeneres by sending out pictures of her. By bringing in a celebrated star to replace Abdul, Fox attempted to take corrective action. The producers tried to restore the family unit and, in doing so, restore the supportive fan base.

In addition, Fox attempted further corrective action. The network proclaimed it would “turn up the star power” with a “rotating roster of great judges” (Kerwin, 2010, para. 2). Throughout their corrective action tactics, the producers shifted their attention to the new judge and the new season hoping the public would forget the Abdul crisis.

### **Denial: A subtle addition**

As mentioned above, silence is a form of denial. Declining to comment on Abdul’s manager’s allegations revealed Fox’s attempts to deny there was a problem. In fact, Fox never made any reference to the disparate salary between Abdul and Seacrest or Cowell. Fox apparently saw no problem with the contract differences. Thus, Abdul’s salary should not be an area of public concern.

By making one general statement to the public, Fox also demonstrated that it was not a decision worth dwelling on. Another way the producers denied any wrongdoing, and perhaps denied the existence of a controversy at all, was by never posting any story that Abdul was leaving on the *American Idol* website. All of the stories focused on contestants, both past and future. This exclusion, in effect, told fans there was no problem.

Besides a subtle suggestion that there was no real crisis, Fox also subtly shifted the blame to Abdul. In the official statement, the producers implied that this was completely Abdul’s decision, and they were mere bystanders who were “saddened” by her departure. By using the phrase that “she has decided,” they shift the blame to her. In addition, by saying “she’s a tremendous talent, and we wish her the best” (de Moraes, 2009, para. 4), they subtly deny ever being “unnecessarily hurtful,” as her manager had claimed (Rushfield & Collins, 2009, para. 4).

## Evaluation

### Social media uproar

Although official Fox representatives remained inconspicuous regarding Abdul's departure, *Idol* fans did not. The *American Idol* website allowed fans to create their own blogs and voice their opinions about the show. Following Abdul's announcement she would not be returning and Fox later declaring DeGeneres to be the new judge, a multitude of fans felt they needed a say in the matter. On [American Idol's own blogs](#), comments such as "shame on Fox," "the show cannot go on," and "no one can replace Paula," as well as more passionate comments such as "has American Idol lost its freakin' minds?"; "what's the matter with you people?"; and "I'm through with American Idol. They are traitors," all clearly expressed disappointment with Abdul's departure. According to an inside source, the strategy for maintaining user-generated content on the website was to let fans speak without restrictions: "We prefer to keep as loose of a control as possible on the bloggers. We feel that they should be freely allowed to express their opinions of the show" (personal communication, Feb. 21, 2010).

### Ratings drop

With the announcement that Cowell would not be returning for a tenth season, the future of the program became even more uncertain. Abdul was invited to the farewell episode for Cowell, where she told him "American Idol isn't going to be the same without you, but as only I can tell you, it will go on" (Stanley, 2010, p. A18), which it did. The following season, Cowell and DeGeneres left, and the producers filled the missing judges' seats with Steven Tyler and Jennifer Lopez. According to Crosbie (2011), the first episode of the tenth season had the "biggest ratings drop in Idol's history" (p. R1). According to Crosbie (2011), the program's "decline related to two years of overhauling the team of judges, starting with the endearingly distressed Paula Abdul. Abdul's exodus seemed to sour judge Simon Cowell for good" (p. R1).

After Paula Abdul left, *American Idol* experienced a loss of viewers, the key piece of evaluation data that concerns producers. At first, the ratings looked good. *Idol* managed to stay in first place in the ratings, beating NBC's coverage of the 2010 Winter Olympics by more than 3 million

viewers (Mansfield, 2010). It appeared maybe Abdul would not be missed as much as fans thought back in August. However, the numbers quickly shifted. One *USA Today* headline read “Idol ratings take a dip; Abdul’s departure could be a factor” (Keveney, 2010, p. 1D). The average number of viewers for Abdul’s last season finale was 28.86 million, while the following year slumped to 24.2 million. According to Seidman (2010), Nielsen ratings for the show were down 18% in the 18 to 49-age group on the 2010 finale, which was Cowell’s last episode. Since that time, the ratings have dropped even further. The 2012 season finale garnered 21.5 million viewers (“American Idol’ Ratings,” 2012) and an average episode viewership of 19.2 million, the lowest since 2003 (Stelter, 2012).

### **Parasocial trouble**

Not only were ratings down, but also the fan base had been angered. Viewers’ frantic reactions to the end of Abdul’s time on the program point to parasocial interaction, defined by Horton and Wohl (1956) as a “seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” (p. 215). A number of researchers have not only examined the parasocial relationships viewers have with television personalities and how similar they are to real relationships (though one-sided), but they have also studied the impact when that special TV character goes away. Researchers have found the end of that relationship to be a stress-inducing experience for the viewer (e.g., Eyal & Cohen, 2006). This is a factor television producers’ might want to consider when canceling a star’s contract. Tian and Hoffner (2010) found stronger parasocial relationships with television characters who were liked or whom the audience felt neutral toward, as opposed to those whom they disliked. Because of her gentler comments to contestants and general sweet nature portrayed on the program, this suggests Abdul’s absence would draw a greater reaction than Cowell’s departure, which seemed to be the case based on ratings.

### **Damaged relationships**

The successive instability of the judging table also suggests a failure by Fox and other *American Idol* producers to communicate well with their stakeholders. The change in judges, beginning with Abdul leaving, seemed to trigger a collapse of sorts with frequent turnover in the judges’ seats. The end result of poor communication efforts during this crisis was that

the relationship between the producers, cast, and fans was clearly damaged.

### Discussion

The first point to discuss in this *American Idol* incident is why Abdul's departure was controversial and offensive to publics. On the Fox side, producers might see Abdul's absence as a simple disagreement over salary; therefore, her departure was logical, the producers were justified, and the issue was resolved. However, Benoit (1995) reminds us that it is not the reality of the act itself that is important, but the way that act is *perceived* by the audience. Benoit (1995) explains that image is ultimately how an individual or group is perceived by an audience. The actions and speech of that person or group, as well as others related to them, contribute to the overall image. If an image is damaged, then there is an adverse relationship with the public involved.

The main interest following an incident should be to restore relations with the publics that were affected. For *Idol*, this key public was the fan base, the group that gives *Idol* its ratings. Thus, it may have been more beneficial for the producers to target particular messages to various publics, rather than using one official statement generally aimed at all publics. A more specific message posted on *Idol's* website and Twitter feed could have served to alleviate concerns about the split. This message could have been directed at fans, addressing the questions Fox perceived would be asked the most. After all, it was the fans who were the most upset that Abdul was leaving and who had expressed their outrage on the *American Idol* blogs. Targeting its key stakeholders, the viewers, early and pointedly could have helped eliminate doubt about the controversy. By addressing and satisfying the fans, Fox would also help maintain its program sponsors, another key stakeholder group.

Fox used the strategies of transcendence, bolstering, corrective action, and denial to address the situation. Yet, it could have used these more effectively. The show's producers should have been more proactive. Rather than only using bolstering indirectly through posts about contestants and the upcoming show, *Idol* producers could have been much more intentional to highlight the show's positive qualities, utilizing the bolstering technique more thoroughly.

Another way to bolster *American Idol* and create further coverage for the show would have been to utilize *Idol's* relationships with sponsors Coca-Cola and Ford. Fox might have gained favorable coverage by working with these two corporations in a cooperative campaign. This could have been the perfect time for cause-related marketing along with those sponsors – the support of music programs in schools, for example.

Scheduling more talk show appearances with past contestants would have been another beneficial bolstering opportunity. Additional media interviews with contestants and judges may have also been a good route, as it would have allowed the audience to observe the impact *Idol* has made on the lives of past contestants. One drawback to scheduling interviews may have been that journalists, radio personalities, and talk show hosts would keep asking questions about Abdul's departure, generating even more coverage of the incident and furthering the newsworthiness of the decision. However, doing so would have also been an opportunity for contestants and judges to speak openly about their feelings, giving fans more information. By making a simple statement in an interview to the effect of, "Paula was a tremendous gift to the show, and we'll miss her," fans could have put a face to Fox's statement, perhaps gaining closure over the ordeal.

Research, such as that of Gallagher, Fontenot, and Boyle (2007), confirms that an organization will do best in a crisis when it is open and absorbs responsibility for its role in the situation. In addition, the organization should possess the readiness to defend itself against attacks following the incident. Staying silent is not recommended by most public relations practitioners, nor is "no comment," because of its implication of guilt, yet for the most part, that was the route *American Idol* producers selected. Although Fox regularly updates its Twitter feed and blogs, a better use of social media would have been helpful. There is no doubt that *Idol* had a number of stories generated by the split. What remains surprising is that there were hardly any stories coming directly from Fox or the other production units. One of the main benefits of social media is that a company has the luxury of getting its message to stakeholders quicker and without having to filter it through traditional media. It does not need to depend on journalistic or editorial gatekeepers seeing the story as newsworthy or have to worry about them altering the content. Social media provides a direct channel to fans who have already opted in by following the show or its producers via Twitter or on the organization's

blog. Social media also allows organizations the opportunity to become part of the conversation, which is why monitoring social media is so vital. Fox representatives could have replied to social media posts about Abdul's departure with a simple, "We'll miss her, too." Fox should have engaged with the show's fans rather than trying to ignore the problem in the hopes it would disappear.

By not taking advantage of opportunities to control its version of the story and to improve its image, Fox and *American Idol* were dependent on what journalists and bloggers had to say on the topic. The production companies involved did not leverage social media as best they could have. This dependency on outside media contradicts what Martin and Boynton (2005) suggest in their "five criteria for successful crisis communications" (p. 254). First, a prompt response is needed to re-assure the public that the corporation is in control of the situation. Constant flows of information, as well as the impression that the company is accessible, are key factors in successful communication. Because Fox only released one statement regarding the break, it did not appear accessible to the media or to disgruntled fans, leaving these parties to speculate on the producers' reasoning.

Because so much of the success of *American Idol* is connected with the number and interaction with viewers, Fox should have paid closer attention to answering the questions posed by its key stakeholder. *Idol* asks the American population to audition for the show, and then asks viewers to vote for their favorite contestant. Although most reality shows search across the country for new talent, *Idol* airs these auditions for several weeks, unlike most other shows. In a situation where the public is so closely tied to the outcome of the show, Fox should continually do everything it can to ensure viewer satisfaction to ensure long-term viewer loyalty (Kjus, 2009).

While Fox bolstered well and emphasized past contestant successes, the use of corrective action (the quick replacement of Abdul with DeGeneres) and transcendence (the emphasis on the *American Idol* family) did not seem to appease fans. DeGeneres' departure after one season suggests that this replacement was unacceptable to viewers. Perhaps the producers' corrective action would have been better received if they had been open about the fact that it *was* a replacement. DeGeneres could have commented that though she was filling the vacancy left by Abdul, she

could never truly replace her. As *American Idol* producers made positive comments about Abdul in their official statement (“she’s a tremendous talent, and we wish her the best”), they could have promoted DeGeneres saying similar well-wishes to Paula.

With regard to transcendence, the portrayal of the program as a family likely did not resonate with fans. There is also no evidence that the additional subtle shift of blame to Abdul was ever accepted as truth by the fans. In a battle between a David and a Goliath, people generally will not believe David is to blame for the crisis. In this case where a judge is paid \$2 million for doing the same amount of work as another judge who is paid \$30 million, people will naturally recognize the injustice. The argument of being a family and transcending the business of television does not work. The strategy of saying “we are saddened that she has decided not to return to the show” does not ring true. It was about money.

Abdul’s failed contract negotiations and ultimate departure drew an enormous amount of media attention, and the crisis was one of the first of its kind in reality television in terms of the use of social media to make an official announcement about contracts (Kinon & Huff, 2009; Ostrow, 2009). Nigel Lythgoe, producer of *So You Think You Can Dance*, said, “I thought it was very strange that she tweeted that she was leaving, and that what came back from Fox and *Idol* was an official statement...I’ve got to be very careful with my own tweets now” (Wyatt, 2009a, para. 19). The use of social media also allowed fans to have a voice. Because of these factors, the crisis stands as an example of how social media have changed strategic communication.

This case suggests specific takeaways for practitioners. It reinforces the need for communication with stakeholders rather than silence. When a client has fans, those fans should be addressed in any crisis. Because of social media developments, those fans are theoretically easier and cheaper to reach than ever before. This situation reinforces the need for social media monitoring and appropriate responses to user-generated comments. A few simple statements from the producers to the fans may have quieted this storm much sooner and may have saved the ratings for the upcoming season. An effort at reconciliation with the fan base may have helped restore that relationship as well as the image of the show and its production units.

### Discussion Questions

1. If you were a Fox executive, what would have been your first tweet related to Abdul's departure?
2. What alternative methods could Fox and *American Idol* have used to maintain a good relationship with the fans when Abdul's departure was announced?
3. Are there other image restoration techniques that might have been appropriate to add to the mix? Or are there others that should have been substituted for those used?
4. Were there other stakeholders not addressed in this case? If so, how should they have been addressed?
5. How should social media be used during a crisis?
6. Besides a media crisis such as this one, how might social media use differ for other organizations? Would fans of a *product* feel the same ownership and expectations as fans of celebrities? How might this impact your use of social media when communicating on behalf of a corporation?
7. What were the ethical implications of the decisions made by the key players in this situation? Were their communication strategies ethical?
8. What impact does a crisis like this have on sponsors?

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