

## “The Community is Speaking Loud and Clear”: Susan G. Komen for the Cure, Planned Parenthood, and the Crisis of Public Opinion

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### Abstract

On January 31, 2012, Planned Parenthood announced that longtime partner Susan G. Komen for the Cure would no longer provide grants to Planned Parenthood for breast cancer screening services. Planned Parenthood accused Komen of “succumbing to political pressure” from conservative groups who opposed Planned Parenthood because it provided abortion services. Komen denied this charge, claiming it had changed its grant-making criteria, but public outcry against Komen’s decision was swift and fierce. Komen declared Planned Parenthood eligible again to receive grants three days later and faced a difficult task of restoring its reputation and donor support.

**Keywords:** nonprofits; crisis management; social media; Susan G. Komen for the Cure; Planned Parenthood; fundraising; public relations

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### Overview

At approximately 5 p.m. Eastern Time on Tuesday, January 31, 2012, thousands of constituents of women’s health organization Planned Parenthood received an unexpected email alert from the organization’s president, Cecile Richards (Sun & Kliff, 2012). “We are alarmed and saddened that the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation appears to have succumbed to political pressure,” Richards said in the press release (“Alarmed,” 2012, para. 2) that was posted online at the same time as the email blast (Sun & Kliff, 2012). Thousands more saw a similarly urgent message on their Facebook news and Twitter feeds: “ALERT: Susan G. Komen caves under anti-choice pressure, ends funding for breast cancer

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screenings at PP health centers," the tweet said with a link to the press release (Sun & Kilff, para. 23).

## Background

### Susan G. Komen for the Cure

Decades ago, Nancy G. Brinker promised her dying sister, Susan G. Komen, that she would do everything she could to end breast cancer. In 1982, that promise was fulfilled in the creation of Susan G. Komen for the Cure, now considered the "world's largest grassroots network of breast cancer survivors and activists" and a part of every major advancement in fighting the disease ("About Us," n.d., para. 2).

Brinker was familiar with Planned Parenthood before Komen sent it grants for breast cancer screenings. In 1996, she served on a Planned Parenthood advisory board in Texas and received an award from the organization. Even at this time, pro-life organizations had criticized Brinker for her ties to Planned Parenthood (Loth, 2012). She was particularly a target because of her conservative political leanings. President George W. Bush had appointed her to positions in his administration (CNN Political Unit, 2012), and she was a "major donor" to his campaigns (Ryan, 2012a, para. 2). Those close to Brinker said she has hinted at pursuing a political career herself and has thus remained close to

#### Susan G. Komen for the Cure Fundraising Facts

- Has raised \$1.9 billion to fund breast cancer awareness, prevention, and research efforts ("About Us," n.d.)
- Headquarters in Dallas, Texas, with 122 local affiliates nationwide ("About Us," n.d.)
- Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure Series occurs in more than 120 communities across the U.S. with more than 1 million participants ("Our People," n.d.)
- Brinker is credited with "pioneering cause-related marketing" in which corporations partner with charities to further promote the charity's cause ("Nancy G. Brinker," n.d., para. 3)
- Cause-related marketing provides Komen with \$55 million annually in contributions (Flock, 2012a)

many of her Republican friends. Some of these conservative friends are involved with Komen and have “held increasingly greater sway with Brinker” in decision-making inside the organization in recent years (Goldman, 2012, para. 15). The Komen board of directors is indeed made up of many of Brinker’s closest friends, who often do not question her decision-making (Goldman, 2012).

In addition to political allies on the board, the former secretary of state for Georgia, Karen Handel joined Komen in April 2011 as senior vice president for public policy (“Susan G. Komen for the Cure,” 2011). At the time of her hire, Handel’s pro-life views had been well known; she had run for Georgia governor in 2010 on a pro-life platform that promised to end state funding for Planned Parenthood (Aravosis, 2012a). When Komen decided to pull funding from Planned Parenthood, many remembered its leadership’s pro-life and conservative background.

### **Planned Parenthood**

The Planned Parenthood Federation of America, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing sexual education and access to reproductive health care services, celebrated its 95th anniversary in October 2011. The advocacy arm of the organization is active in lobbying for policies that “enable Americans to access comprehensive reproductive and sexual health care, education, and information” (“Who We Are,” n.d., para. 7).

#### **Planned Parenthood Facts**

- Includes 79 local affiliates and 800 health centers that operate nationwide (Radnofsky, Matthews, & West, 2012; “Who We Are,” n.d.)
- One in every five women use a Planned Parenthood service for healthcare during her lifetime (“Who We Are,” n.d.)
- Educational programs reach nearly 1.2 million youths and adults each year (“Who We Are,” n.d.)
- Seventy-six percent of its services are to prevent unintended pregnancy (“Planned Parenthood at a Glance,” n.d.)
- About 3 percent of its total services are abortions (Planned Parenthood at a Glance,” n.d.)
- Provides nearly 770,000 Pap tests and 750,000 breast exams every year (“Planned Parenthood at a Glance,” n.d.)
- Supporters have doubled to number six million under Richards’ leadership (“Who We Are,” n.d.)

Because of its health screening services, Planned Parenthood seems a natural partner to team up with a breast cancer grant-making giant like Komen.

In 2006, Cecile Richards joined Planned Parenthood as president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, the advocacy arm of the organization. Like Brinker, Richards also has political ties—but with the opposite party. She is the daughter of the first female governor of Texas, Democrat Ann Richards, a well-known feminist and political activist (Holley, 2006). Cecile was also involved in politics, and before coming to Planned Parenthood, she served as deputy chief of staff for House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (“Cecile Richards,” n.d.).

### **Komen Faces Mounting Pro-Life Pressure**

Since launching its partnership with Planned Parenthood, Komen had been faced with pressure from pro-life groups to drop funding for the organization because it provided abortion services. In 2011, Komen defended its funding of Planned Parenthood, releasing a statement that said Planned Parenthood is the only option for treatment for many poor, minority, and uninsured women and that Komen would continue funding where this need was present (“Our View,” 2012). Statements further assured that “Komen funding is used exclusively to provide breast cancer programs” (Hartmann, 2011, para. 3). But criticism continued. In December 2011, LifeWay Christian Resources said it was pulling “Here’s Hope Breast Cancer Bibles” from its shelves after learning \$1 of each sale went to Komen (“LifeWay,” 2011).

However, soon Komen showed pro-life influence. Quietly, on November 30, 2011, Komen posted a statement to its website saying it would no longer fund embryonic stem cell research centers. Komen had made grants to five such groups in 2010, including Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and the U.S. National Cancer Institute. Coincidentally, bloggers said that Karen Handel also opposed stem-cell research in her platform while running for Georgia governor, and the new policy was adopted after her hire (Ertelt, 2012).

Within this climate, Komen hired the Ogilvy crisis management public relations team in summer 2011 to help “monitor media, support speaker

programs, and provide issues counsel” on an eight-month retainer (Bruell, 2012a, para. 3). However, no one at Komen or Ogilvy indicated that Ogilvy had provided counsel to Komen regarding the Planned Parenthood policy change before the decision was made in October 2011 (Dietrich, 2012).

## Research

### Komen’s Internal Debate to Defund Planned Parenthood

Hearing discontent from pro-life camps, Komen became concerned with losing the support of pro-life organizations and individuals (Belluck, Preston, & Harris, 2012). In addition to placing Komen on boycott lists (Crary, 2012b), “these people who are opposed to Planned Parenthood were threatening to disrupt our races or sponsors to our races,” said John Hammarley, a former Komen senior official (Belluck, Preston, & Harris, 2012, para. 11). In early 2011, Hammarley said professional staff leadership within Komen “got together inside the organization to talk about what the options were, what the ramifications of staying the course, or of telling our affiliates they can’t fund Planned Parenthood, or something in between” (Goldberg, 2012, para. 6). The officials decided that stopping funding to Planned Parenthood would “be worse from a practical standpoint, from a public-relations standpoint, and from a

#### Facts About Komen and Planned Parenthood’s Relationship

- Komen and Planned Parenthood have been partners for nearly 20 years, with Komen providing about \$9 million in funds during that time (“Andrea Mitchell,” 2012)
- Komen began giving grants to Planned Parenthood in 2005 for breast cancer screening services support, primarily for low-income and uninsured women (Strauss, Szabo, & Grossman, 2012)
- Grants from Komen to Planned Parenthood benefitted 19 Planned Parenthood affiliates, totaling \$700,000 in 2011 alone (Kliff, 2012a)
- Komen funds have allowed Planned Parenthood to provide 170,000 breast exams and 6,400 mammogram referrals (“Alarmed,” 2012)
- Komen’s grants to Planned Parenthood represent less than 1 percent of \$93 million in “community health grants that Komen provides” (“Komen Finds,” 2012, para. 13)
- In 2010, cancer screenings made up 15 percent of Planned Parenthood’s services (Roser, 2012)

mission standpoint” and advised the board not to cut funding (Goldberg, 2012, para. 6).

With Karen Handel’s hiring in April, the issue was pushed again at the forefront of internal discussion (Goldberg, 2012). Komen leadership revisited this issue at its October board meeting (Belluck, Preston, & Harris, 2012) just after Planned Parenthood received an attack by pro-life advocates on another front. On September 15, 2011, Congressman Cliff Stearns (R-Fla.) sent Planned Parenthood a memo saying his subcommittee was investigating how the organization used its federal funding, which his colleagues in Congress charged as “ideologically motivated” because of Stearns’ fierce pro-life stance (“Congresswoman McCollum,” 2012, para. 3). With Stearns’ investigation launched, Komen now had a reason to discontinue its partnership with Planned Parenthood, despite the warning from the professional staff.

### **Strategy**

Komen’s strategy was to tread carefully when making its new policy decision—so carefully that Komen announced the change quietly. At its October board meeting, Komen decided to adopt a policy that would exclude any organization under investigation from receiving any of Komen’s grant funding (Belluck, Preston, & Harris, 2012). This policy “was specifically adopted with Planned Parenthood in mind,” Komen sources said (Hobson, 2012, para. 7). In December 2011, Komen quietly notified Planned Parenthood that the new policy would end funding in 2012 to 17 of 19 Planned Parenthood centers that had previously received Komen grants (Harris & Belluck, 2012). Komen’s president, Elizabeth Thompson, made the announcement by calling Cecile Richards by phone. Richards’ subsequent letters to Nancy Brinker and the board chairman requested a meeting to talk about the change. The reply from Komen simply defended the change, and no meeting occurred (Crary, 2012a). “We didn’t want to tell anyone except Planned Parenthood,” Komen board member John D. Raffaelli told *The New York Times*. “The whole approach was to not issue press releases to do anything to hurt Planned Parenthood” (Belluck, Preston, & Harris, 2012, para. 17).

**Timeline of Events Leading to Funding Cut**

- 1982 - Nancy Brinker creates Susan G. Komen for the Cure.
- 2005 - Komen begins giving grants to Planned Parenthood centers.
- 2006 - Cecile Richards joins Planned Parenthood.
- Early 2011 - Komen professional staff consider the consequences of cutting funding to Planned Parenthood; they decide not to cut funding.
- April 2011 - Karen Handel is hired as senior vice president for public policy at Komen.
- September 15, 2011 - Rep. Cliff Stearns (R-FL) notifies Planned Parenthood that it is under investigation.
- October 2011 - Komen board of directors votes to end funding to any organization under investigation.
- December 2011 - Komen notifies Planned Parenthood that the organization will not be eligible for grants in 2012 according to Komen’s new rule.
- January 31, 2012 - Planned Parenthood announces via press release and email blast that Komen is cutting funding to the organization. The Associated Press breaks the story to the public. Komen-Planned Parenthood funding issue is a trending topic on Twitter.

However, this strategy failed when Planned Parenthood decided to go public with the news and rally its constituents against the decision with email and social media blasts. The story became mainstream media when the Associated Press exclusive was released almost simultaneously (Sun & Kliff, 2012). Cecile Richards described in the story how her attempts to talk to Komen and defend Planned Parenthood’s eligibility were rebuffed and said Komen “bowed to...bullying” from pro-life activists (Crary, 2012a, para. 10). Komen spokesperson Leslie Aun explained to the Associated Press that newly adopted funding criteria was to blame for the funding cutoff, assuring that the change was not to blame Planned Parenthood for any wrongdoing. If Stearns’ investigation concluded by clearing Planned Parenthood of the accusations, the Komen grants would continue. She also denied that any political motives were behind the change. At this time, however, Stearns said he had yet to receive any of the requested paperwork from Planned Parenthood; thus, the investigation hadn’t even begun (Crary, 2012a). Komen’s timing for the funding cut therefore seemed premature, and the reasons for the cut seemed questionable.

By later that evening, Komen’s strategy to keep the funding cut quiet had backfired. Thanks to Planned Parenthood’s aggressive approach to spreading the news about the funding cut, the Komen-Planned Parenthood funding issue became one of the most talked-about topics on Twitter (Crary, 2012a).

“Planned Parenthood must’ve had a crisis plan in place because they organized very quickly. The messages were prepared so they weren’t scrambling for who to push out the message, and who to respond,” said NM Incite Vice President of Client Development Idil Cakim, an expert on social media strategy and observer of the crisis. “They plugged emotional cords effectively. It goes to show that Planned Parenthood had been communicating with their influencers—and sincerely communicating with them—because they were able to get people to stand up for them” (personal interview, 2012).

### **Execution**

Faced with Planned Parenthood’s aggressive crisis management plan, Komen had to abandon its original strategy to keep the policy change as a quiet decision. Instead, Komen had to respond to Planned Parenthood’s accusations publicly and launch its own crisis management plan. After Aun spoke to the Associated Press to explain Komen’s decision, Komen officials would not make her—or any other spokesperson—available to the press for further comment (Belluck, 2012). Not until the next day did anyone from Komen provide further explanation when Nancy Brinker released a YouTube video defending the organization’s decision and denying that it was made for political reasons. “The scurrilous accusations being hurled at this organization are profoundly hurtful,” she said (Morgan, 2012, para. 4).

However, Brinker’s explanation in the video was slightly different than the one Aun gave to the Associated Press. Brinker said that Komen wanted to move in a different direction because Planned Parenthood doesn’t directly provide mammograms and Komen wanted to fund organizations that had a more direct impact (Gee, 2012). Still refusing to speak with the media, Komen released a statement later that day (Flock, 2012a) to reiterate that the change in policy was “widely mischaracterized” and that Komen “implemented more stringent eligibility standards to safeguard donor dollars” as Brinker said in her video (“Statement from Susan G. Komen for

### **Timeline of Events During Komen’s 24 Hours of Silence**

#### January 31, 2012

- Associated Press story announces Komen cut funding to Planned Parenthood. Komen spokesperson Leslie Aun is quoted in the story (Crary, 2012a).
- Planned Parenthood announces cut via email and social media blasts (Sun & Kliff, 2012).
- Funding cut becomes one of most talked-about topics on Twitter (Crary, 2012a).
- First Congressional statements are released criticizing Komen’s decision (Murray, 2012).
- Angry posts begin to appear on Komen’s Facebook and Twitter pages (Crary, 2012b; McGregor, 2012).
- Bloggers become the first to suggest the funding cut was politically motivated (Marcotte, 2012; Sheppard, 2012).
- California Komen affiliates hold a conference call and decide not to support the decision (Kliff, 2012b).
- Corporate sponsors begin to receive critical comments via social media about their relationships with Komen (Miller, 2012).

#### February 1, 2012

- Op-eds appear in morning newspapers criticizing Komen’s decision (Hirshman, 2012).
- Komen still does not answer media requests by the end of February 1 (Kliff & Sun, 2012).
- Nancy Brinker makes first comments defending Planned Parenthood decision via YouTube video. Komen breaks 24-hour social media silence around 10 p.m.

the Cure,” 2012, para. 1, 3). The organization started tweeting again around 10 p.m. by providing links to Brinker’s video after more than 24 hours of silence (“Statement from Susan G. Komen for the Cure,” 2012).

On February 2, for the first time since the controversy started, Komen officials held a press conference via phone to reiterate messages in the YouTube video (Rovner, 2012). Brinker also made her first television news appearance on MSNBC to defend the decision. During her appearance, she denied the critical backlash visible on social media,

claiming the response to Komen's decision had, in fact, been "very, very favorable" ("Andrea Mitchell," 2012, para. 36).

However, Brinker had missed an important opportunity to amend Komen's relationship with Planned Parenthood. Cecile Richards had appeared earlier on the same show and expressed a wish to continue working with Komen. However, no Komen representatives were present to discuss the offer, and Brinker did not directly address it during her segment on the show ("Andrea Mitchell," 2012; Wagner, 2012).

When Komen began to answer questions from the media, the organization faced accusations that it had been trying to silence criticism on its social media platforms. Facebook posters accused Komen of deleting negative comments on that platform and on other message boards, a charge denied by a Komen tweet and through Aun (Flock, 2012b). Commenting on Brinker's YouTube video was initially disabled, and Aun did not know why. She also said that the Komen blog was not working at the time due to "technical reasons" (Flock, 2012b, para. 5). Further public relations blunders befell Komen; Karen Handel's Twitter feed had retweeted an anti-Planned Parenthood sentiment: "Just like a pro-abortion group to turn a cancer orgs decision into a political bomb to throw. Cry me a freaking river" (Flock, 2012b, para. 5). Handel's retweet suggested politics was at the core of the debate, despite Komen's assurances otherwise. The tweet was later deleted from her feed (Flock, 2012b; Gray, 2012a).

"In looking at the chatter, the term 'abortion' was more often referenced along with Komen, while Planned Parenthood was more often associated with 'women's health,'" said Cakim. "Planned Parenthood elevated the discussion to an issue that was an attack on women's health, which applied to a much broader audience than abortion issues. Everyone knows that this is one of those backlash topics, and it was shortsightedness on Komen's part to think pulling their funding wouldn't be an issue" (personal interview, 2012).

## Evaluation

The quality of Komen's crisis strategy and execution can be determined simply by looking at the reactions from its various constituents as voiced in social media, news outlets, and public statements. Public conversations and outcry over the funding cuts began to grow rapidly on social media as

### **Social Media Outcry by the Numbers**

#### Twitter

- Anti-Komen to pro-Komen tweets numbered 80 to 1 (Miller, 2012).
- Twitter mentions focused on Komen at a rate of 2 to 1 (Miller, 2012).
- Komen saw a 32,731% increase in Twitter mentions the week after the story broke, averaging 457,301 per day, up from 1,399 in a typical day (Fleming & O’Connor, 2012).
- Total 1.3 million Twitter posts about Komen and Planned Parenthood over three days (Roser, 2012).

#### Facebook

- Average 20 negative posts about Komen every minute (Moire, 2012).
- Komen’s Facebook page saw a 288 percent increase in negative posts with a 99 percent decrease in “likes” per comment (Fleming & O’Connor, 2012).
- Group called “Defund the Komen Foundation” had 18,645 likes as of February 3 (Bruell, 2012b).
- Popular profile images read, “Tell Komen not to throw PP under the bus,” or “I still stand with PP” (Moire, 2012).

#### Other Platforms

- Online petition of support for Planned Parenthood gained 120,000 signatures (“Komen Finds,” 2012).
- “Planned Parenthood Saved Me” Tumblr blog started on February 1 gained about 1,000 followers and 306 posts by February 15 (*Planned Parenthood Saved Me*, n.d.; Rivas, 2012).
- Popular Pinterest board post read, “Komen: Own your politics! Are you anti-choice or not? Be transparent so donors can make their choices” (Judd, 2012).

people questioned Komen’s motives. Posters simply were not buying the idea that Komen’s decision wasn’t political (McGregor, 2012), and many former donors were denying any future support for Komen (Crary, 2012b). They created Facebook groups to protest Komen’s decision (Kliff & Sun, 2012), and online petitions from MoveOn, Credo.org, and SignOn.org were widely circulated (Velez, 2012).

Public frustration appeared online in other ways. The nonprofit rating site, GuideStar, also saw an influx of 170 people who joined after the decision was made to give Komen a bad organizational review. They plunged Komen's rating to 1 star, the lowest possible, from 5. "I am so ashamed of what [Komen] has done," wrote one reviewer on GuideStar. "I had no idea that they were political...I am done. I will direct those \$ to Planned Parenthood, an organization that I KNOW cares about women" (Morran, 2012, para. 6).

Not all of the chatter was negative. Family Research Council said that 15,000 emails from anti-abortion groups were sent to Komen in support (Rojas-Burke, 2012). Once Komen did join the social media conversation, it did not respond to posters on Facebook or Twitter ("Susan G. Komen," n.d.). Komen simply made statements to clarify its position on defunding Planned Parenthood.

### **Responses from Donors**

On February 2, Brinker said donations to Komen had risen 100 percent since January 31 (Sun, Kliff, & Aizenman, 2012). Despite Brinker's positive announcement, most news reports described donors withdrawing their support from Komen. A Cleveland councilman said he would vote not to give a permit to Komen to hold a Race for the Cure in his city (Steer, 2012). The American Association of University Women canceled its annual participation in a Komen race (Sun, Kliff, & Aizenman, 2012), and the Legislative Women's Caucus said it would not hold its annual Komen-benefitting bake sale (Ryan, 2012b). One letter to the editor in a local newspaper best captured a majority of donor sentiment: "Shame on Komen Foundation. I for one have lost all my respect for them. I support Planned Parenthood" (Burnett, 2012, para. 7-8).

Meanwhile, other breast cancer organizations also reported increases in donations as people looked to direct support away from Komen (Leuty, 2012). These organizations included Planned Parenthood, who reported receiving \$3 million (Weiderman, 2012) from 10,000 donors within 72 hours after Komen's decision to withdraw funding was announced (McCarthy, 2012).

## Responses from Affiliates and Employees

The backlash felt by the local Komen organizations was strong. The Virginia affiliate said donors were pulling funds from the local organization, even though the affiliate didn't have any direct relationship with Planned Parenthood in the area (Simpson, 2012). The San Diego affiliate boosted security at its offices after getting threatening emails. Its executive director said that of the 400 emails it saw since January 31, only 2 were supportive. The affiliate's executive director also felt part of the mayhem was due to the fact that Komen's national office didn't have any kind of crisis communications policy in place because it was comprised of public health workers who didn't have experience in public relations (Kliff, 2012b).

Responses from Komen affiliates made it clear they had not bought into the decision, which had been made at the national level without consulting affiliates (Crary, 2012b). Almost immediately, Komen affiliates expressed dismay through statements on their Facebook profiles (Harris & Belluck, 2012). The next day, the Oregon affiliate, whose local Planned Parenthoods had not received any funding in the past, officially rejected the decision by sending a letter to Komen headquarters (Terry, 2012). By February 3, affiliates in Aspen, Colorado, and Connecticut said they would continue to fund their Planned Parenthood partners despite the national ruling (“Komen's Bad Call,” 2012). “The community is speaking loud and clear about what needs to go on here,” said a Wisconsin affiliate official, urging Komen to overturn the decision (Wahlberg, 2012, para. 10).

Resignations of officials also showed division in the Komen ranks. On February 2, reports surfaced that Mollie Williams, managing director of community health programs, had resigned immediately in protest of the board's decision to cut funding (Hobson, 2012). At Komen since 2006, she had overseen 2,000 community health organizations and \$93 million in grant money (Belluck, Preston, & Harris, 2012). Other officials at affiliates resigned in protest (“Komen's Bad Call,” 2012), while radiologist Kathy Plessner, a member of the Komen medical advisory board, also threatened to quit if the decision was not reversed (Bassett & Belkin, 2012). Komen did not directly address any of the complaints or resignations.

### **Responses from Politicians**

Almost immediately after the Associated Press story was released, the first congressional statement appeared disapproving of the decision (Murray, 2012), and Rep. Mike Honda (D-Calif.) even personally called Brinker to say he was disappointed (Speier, 2012). Nearly 20 Congressmen released statements about the decision, dividing opinion along party lines with Democrats against the change, and Republicans for it. On February 1, Rep. Jackie Speier (D-Calif.) took the House floor to denounce Komen, promising that she would no longer be affiliated and urged everyone to call Komen and tell them “to stick to what they know” (Speier, 2012, para. 8).

Politicians even organized to ask Komen to reconsider. On February 2, 26 Democratic Senators signed a letter to Brinker asking Komen to reverse its decision (Roan, 2012). Twenty-two House members signed a letter also asking for a reversal (Bassett & Belkin, 2012). Taking his support even further, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg pledged to match donor funds 1 to 1 up to \$250,000 to benefit Planned Parenthood specifically to offset the loss of funding from Komen (CNN Wire Staff, 2012). Suddenly, Komen’s non-political decision had been thrown fully into the political arena.

### **Responses from Sponsors**

While Komen imparted its 24 hours of social media silence, the most recent post on its Facebook page took the brunt of anti-Komen sentiment (Miller, 2012). That post happened to be a statement welcoming Energizer as the newest \$1 million sponsor, and the public was now promising to boycott Energizer because of its affiliation with Komen (McCullough, 2012). On its own Facebook page, Energizer posted a note with a statement that promised Energizer officials “are constantly evaluating the charitable organizations with whom we partner,” while comments urged them to remove their company’s partnership with Komen (“Energizer,” n.d., para. 2). Two days later, Energizer announced it was making a donation to a cancer center in the company’s hometown “to show you our appreciation for your passion and to further our commitment to this cause” (“Energizer,” n.d., para. 1). The company did not, however, revisit the Komen partnership issue directly in its social media or communications.

Other Komen corporate sponsors also tried to distance themselves from the backlash. Many didn't return journalists' calls for comment on the situation (Mathews, Radnofsky, & West, 2012). By February 3, American Airlines, Ford Motors, and Yoplait had all confirmed to the media that they were committed to their relationship with Komen (Nichols, 2012). Many reports indicated Komen faced no pressure from its sponsors to reconsider the decision (Crary, 2012b).

In looking at the websites and Facebook profiles of Komen's Race for the Cure national sponsors, the researcher found that no sponsors posted comments about their relationships with Komen in either location. Some, like Yoplait, provided a way for consumers simply to voice their frustrations by setting up a special page called "Your Thoughts..." and directing consumers to post their comments about Komen there. "We're continuing to listen to your comments, and are taking them into account as we discuss the best way for Yoplait to champion women's lives. Because this situation was a surprise to us as much as it was to you, we thank you for being patient," the page said ("Yoplait," n.d., para. 1). Others like Honest Tea did not even address the Komen-related comments posted to its wall ("Honest Tea," n.d.).

### **Responses from the Media**

Bloggers were the first to question Komen's assertion that the decision was not political. Slate was the first to blame pro-life pressure for causing Komen to change course (Marcotte, 2012) while Mother Jones was the first to connect pro-life Karen Handel's arrival at Komen to the sudden change in policy (Sheppard, 2012). Other blogs showed support for Komen. One urged people to email Komen to thank it for pulling its funding from Planned Parenthood and provided a link to make a donation to Komen as a show of gratitude (Erickson, 2012).

At this time, news editorials also appeared questioning Komen leadership's political ties, especially those of Handel (Harris & Belluck, 2012). By February 2, "three sources with direct knowledge of the Komen decision" told *The Atlantic* that the criteria were adopted specifically with Planned Parenthood in mind (Hobson, 2012, para. 7). One day later, news reports would cite anonymous sources claiming that Handel was indeed behind the change in policy (Crary, 2012b), and blogs began calling for her

to resign (Blue Texan, 2012). Soon Mother Jones brought to light another inconsistency in Komen’s policy: Penn State University had been under investigation since November 2011 for accusations of covering up child sexual abuse, but Komen had not withdrawn its funding from the university (Serwer & Sheppard, 2012). With this report, Komen’s credibility took another blow.

By their February 3 morning editions, many major U.S. newspapers had published op-eds about the situation. Of 15 op-eds found in newspapers from February 2 to 3, 14 were negative toward Komen’s decision. *The Boston Globe* went so far so as to question the truthfulness of Komen’s statements and called for a full explanation (“In Rejecting,” 2012). Only one piece, written by *Wall Street Journal Online*, gave Komen support for changing its policies. Komen will “show itself to be rather brave if it does not back down amid the abuse it is now taking,” it said (Taranto, 2012, para. 8).

### **Outcomes: Komen Reverses Course**

By February 3, Komen’s decision to remove funding from Planned Parenthood and the aftermath of public outcry began to be painted as “a public relations debacle,” wrote *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (McCullough, 2012, para. 1). Others observed that “Brinker struggled to contain the damage” to Komen’s brand brought on by the overwhelming and passionate opinion against the organization’s decision (Williams & Myers, 2012, para. 8). As *The New York Times* wrote, Komen’s reputation “suffered a grievous, perhaps mortal, wound this week” (“A Painful Betrayal,” 2012, para. 1).

In this climate, Komen decided to reverse course once again. By midday, Komen released a new statement apologizing for “recent decisions that cast doubt upon our commitment to our mission” (“Statement from Susan G. Komen Board,” 2012, para. 1). It said that Komen had refined its grant-making criteria to prevent funding to an organization under investigation that “must be criminal and conclusive in nature” and said that it would continue funding Planned Parenthood’s existing grants and “preserve their eligibility to apply for future grants” (“Statement from Susan G. Komen Board,” 2012, para. 2-3). “It is time for everyone involved to pause, slow down, and reflect on how grants can most effectively and directly be administered” (“Statement from Susan G. Komen Board,” 2012, para. 4).

The statement said Komen intended to reach out to affiliates and supporters to begin moving forward and allow them to retain the right to make their own funding decisions (“Statement from Susan G. Komen Board,” 2012). However, Komen officials were “unavailable for comment on how they came to change their plans” beyond the released statement (Crary, 2012c, para. 7).

### **Karen Handel’s Resignation**

On February 7 at about 10:30 a.m. Eastern Time, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* broke the story that Karen Handel has resigned as vice president for public policy after less than one year on the job (Sebastian, 2012). In a statement on the Komen website, the organization said it “made mistakes in how we have handled the recent decisions and take full accountability” before saying Brinker had accepted Handel’s resignation (“Statement from Susan G. Komen Founder,” 2012, para. 2). Handel’s letter stood firm on Komen’s point that the decision to end funding to Planned Parenthood was not based on “political ideology,” yet “the controversy related to Planned Parenthood has long been a concern to our organization” (Bookman, 2012, para. 5). She also “openly admitted her role in the matter” but assured that the decision to end Planned Parenthood grants “was fully vetted by every appropriate level within the organization” (Bookman, 2012, para. 4-5). These statements were in conflict with earlier statements from Brinker, who denied Handel was behind the funding cut (Henry, 2012).

### **Responses from Constituents**

The public’s reactions to the decision reversal indicated Komen still had a long way to go to contain the public outburst. Those who were happy with initial decision, particularly pro-life groups, were now upset (Holt & Myers, 2012). The Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute (C-FAM) released statement saying pro-lifers should not support Komen and that it didn’t believe the new statement is actually a reversal (Ruse, 2012). Even board member John Raffaelli said to *The Washington Post* that the statement was not necessarily a reversal in policy unless Planned Parenthood received additional funding in the future (Blue Texan, 2012). Because there were no guarantees for future funding, Komen’s apology seemed hollow and disingenuous to some (Gray, 2012b).

Even with the announcement, Komen donors had the strongest lingering emotions. Komen supporters felt “sense of betrayal,” wrote the *Tampa Tribune* (Shedden, 2012, para. 4). Donors felt they could no longer support Komen because of what seemed like political motives (Roser, 2012). For others, Komen’s reputation took a hit. “It just feels like it’s all tarnished now. Honestly, I’m not sure what they can do to change that,” said a Komen donor to the Associated Press (Noveck, 2012, para. 3). Citing a lack of trust in Komen, some donors said the original funding reversal “raised red flags” about the organization (Vargas, 2012, par. 13) and that they would instead give money to other organizations that support breast cancer research and treatment (Szabo & Strauss, 2012).

The outcomes of Komen’s decision and strategy may be best described by the Komen affiliates who experienced it. The West Virginia affiliate said it feared the repercussions from the controversy, particularly the loss of funds from donors who would go elsewhere, ultimately hurting what it could do in the community (Nyden, 2012). Perhaps the director of the San Diego affiliate said it best to *The Washington Post*: “We don’t know if the money will come back. It’s going to be a hard sell because it’s a trust issue. There are some relationships that are, perhaps, irrevocably damaged” (Kliff, 2012b, para. 14-15).

### **Analysis & Discussion**

The communications crisis that followed Komen’s funding decision demonstrates what happens when an organization is not prepared to handle a politically charged decision. Even if Komen was not politically motivated to change its funding criteria, it should have been prepared to dissuade the public from drawing this conclusion—and it should have better anticipated the counter-strategy of a politically affiliated partner like Planned Parenthood. Komen’s actions and strategies can be examined to determine where it failed to prepare for this political debate. This discussion will focus on a few key areas where the organization strayed from acting according to public relations standards that may have helped them better navigate this crisis.

#### **Getting the Story Straight**

Komen and its officials should have come out with the full and honest story from the start. Komen’s strategy to keep the decision quiet appeared

untrustworthy in the eyes of the public once Planned Parenthood brought it to light. By not notifying the public, Komen looked like it was hiding its decision and appeared to be deceiving its donors and constituents. The public now doubts Komen’s honesty in matters beyond this controversy. Telling the truth is so important to public relations that it is one of the Page Principles, ethical standards developed by public relations pioneer Arthur W. Page and used to guide the practice today (“The Page Principles,” n.d.).

One of Komen’s most apparent miscues was the numerous and sometimes contradictory reasons it gave for changing its funding policy. At first, spokeswoman Leslie Aun and CEO Nancy Brinker gave two different reasons for the decision to cut funding to Planned Parenthood. The inconsistency did not give the public an accurate picture of the reason for cutting funding to Planned Parenthood and made them skeptical of the true motivations. Once the funding cut was reversed, many bloggers and media outlets wondered what the wording “criminal and conclusive in nature” really meant for Planned Parenthood because Komen did not make any guarantees to fund the organization. Because it seemed like Komen was still hiding the full story, it questioned the sincerity of Komen’s statement of reversal. Lastly, although Brinker first said Handel had nothing to do with the reversal, Handel admitted she was behind the change when she resigned.

One way Komen can restore trust is to show its constituents with action that it wants to restore the relationship with Planned Parenthood, another Page Principle (“The Page Principles,” n.d.). While many affiliates said they will fund Planned Parenthood anyway, the Komen leadership will only convince the public that it really has reversed course if it reaches out to Planned Parenthood leadership and shows support in other visible ways like grant-making or joint fundraising. Otherwise, the reversal statement will seem hollow.

### **Listening to Constituents**

Komen missed many opportunities to engage its constituents even before the controversy erupted. Professional staff determined that defunding Planned Parenthood was not practical, unwise from a brand management standpoint, and untrue to Komen’s mission. If Komen’s board of directors questioned this advice, they could have looked further into the matter by

arranging focus groups of donors or volunteers to gauge public opinion on this decision. Instead, the board went ahead and changed the policy without consulting its constituents, who felt betrayed.

As the social media conversation was heating up, Komen responded with silence. Rather than engaging the public in conversation, Komen did not show the public it was listening to its concerns and anger over the decision, another important Page Principle (“The Page Principles,” n.d.). Instead, it pushed its own message out via YouTube and media appearances in a one-way conversation model. Komen’s deleting Facebook posts from angry constituents further created this one-way conversation and perception that Komen were trying to control the message. Komen could have acted like Planned Parenthood, which urged constituents to donate to make up for the lost funds, created social media buttons, and generated conversation with its constituents (Sun & Kliff, 2012).

Komen could benefit from asking its donors what they think of the Komen brand going forward and what the donors need and want to see from Komen before they are willing to support the organization again. Opening the lines of two-way communication with the public will help restore relationships that were lost during the crisis, particularly by using social media to engage these members of the public and respond to their criticisms. This way, Komen will earn respect and even loyalty to those social media users who are active and involved in the conversation. Komen may also have a better feel for public opinion and thus be able to more quickly and efficiently react to controversies with this knowledge.

### **Employees as Spokespeople**

Komen was met with criticism from its own affiliates after announcing Planned Parenthood was no longer eligible for grants. Komen should have engaged these constituents in the decision-making process from the start, which may have helped the affiliates to understand the rationale for the change and may have been more supportive, thus influencing the public positively. Instead, the affiliates were critical of the decision rather than being ambassadors for the Komen brand during the crisis.

After a number of affiliates expressed concern over the policy change and some outright refused to follow the new rules, Komen will need to restore

the trust of its own employees and volunteers. The Page Principles remind public relations officials that “a company’s true character is expressed by its people” (“The Page Principles,” n.d., para. 7). Disgruntled and insubordinate employees reveal a poor organizational character.

### **Managing for the Future**

Komen’s decision-making during the crisis revealed a lack of concern for long-term health of the organization. One Page Principle urges organizations to “eliminate practices that create difficulties” and to “generate goodwill” (“The Page Principles,” n.d., para. 5). However, Komen decided to institute a practice (defunding Planned Parenthood) that actually created difficulties and bred ill will between the organizations.

When changing a policy that affects a major partner like Planned Parenthood, Komen should have attempted to gauge donor feelings about the policy change before implementing it to ensure all potential difficulties were anticipated. Komen neither arranged focus groups nor asked its Ogilvy PR team to research the matter. Perhaps this research would have advised it not to implement the criteria change or helped Komen anticipate the public outcry to follow. Second, Komen did not try to work with Planned Parenthood to explain the change and instead refused Planned Parenthood’s requests to meet about the decision. These actions instead increased tensions between the organizations.

By learning from the mistakes made and finding out what it will take to win back support, Komen could inform leadership of changes and new practices that would bring back donors and public trust and ensure that another crisis like this does not happen again.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What should an organization strive to do in a situation of conflict between stakeholders, like the one Komen faced between Planned Parenthood and pro-life activist groups?
2. Was Komen wise to make the criteria change in private? What could it have done differently?

3. How could Komen have involved its stakeholders (donors, grant recipients, affiliates, the general public, corporate sponsors) in the discussion about the criteria change?
4. What strategies could Komen have used to communicate with its stakeholders to prevent or lessen the backlash it received over its decision?
5. How could Komen have better engaged its stakeholders through social media?
6. What should Komen do moving forward to restore a positive image to its brand?
7. How can Komen rebuild relationships that have been damaged?
8. How can Komen restore trust among its stakeholders?

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