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Real-World PR Crisis Case-Study: The Crying CEO

In August of 2022, the CEO of HyperSocial, Braden Wallake decided to post to LinkedIn a photo of himself crying as he was upset over layoffs of several employees. HyperSocial is a small B2B marketing and sales agency service that began in 2019 and has fewer than 50 employees. The agency relies heavily on LinkedIn to implement their strategies and establish open communication with the public. However, after being dubbed the 'crying CEO' he may have been a little too public with his communication after the post gained a lot of attention.

Along with his selfie, he shared some kind words for his laidoff employees and expressed his upset and the emotional toll this took on him. To paraphrase, he expressed on hard days like that he wished he was a business owner that was only money driven and didn't care about his employees. He claimed it was the hardest thing he's ever done and wanted people to see that not every CEO is cold-hearted and doesn't care when they have to lay off people. He went on to recognise it wasn't professional to say but from the bottom of his heart, he loves his employees and he hopes they know that. He also acknowledged that 2022 saw widespread layoffs due to the economy which could be seen across LinkedIn but HyperSocial's was his fault.

As expected, the public had a largely negative reaction labeling Wallake's post as self-serving nonsense that was tone-deaf, cringe, and absurdly narcissistic. General LinkedIn users spoke up saying if their CEO did this 'they would lose their minds', another criticized him for crying despite him still having an actual job. This commenter painted the picture that 'if we all posted a picture crying we would never get hired, we are forced to be resilient in our industries.' Those that did have a positive reaction exclaimed they'd 'be interested in working

for people like Wallake who has a positive outlook on life.’ If this was his attempt to relate to the public, he clearly failed. While his goal might have been to take accountability in his leadership position, and show honesty and vulnerability, he fell really short in his intent, execution, and public perspective which is a PR nightmare for a small business like his.

If I were unfortunately responsible for creating a public response for HyperSocial to this situation I’d begin with time management. To do some damage control and shape the narrative, I would have Wallake release an apology statement that is framed to address the employees rather than his own emotions, giving them support as they should be the focus in general if the layoffs were to be addressed on the professional platform of LinkedIn. Wallake did eventually make a statement saying he wanted to help the laidoff employees find work elsewhere, but that should’ve been said in the initial statement as guidance and action driven to alleviate distress. HyperSocial should help their laidoff employees by facilitating networking, acting as a reference for those people to strengthen their resume. There’s also some vagueness that he decided on these layoffs in February and would explain his decision on LinkedIn; losing your job can be very overwhelming, he should have released an internal memo to include the whole (small) company on the upcoming changes rather than blasting it online. Lastly, some rebranding needs to be done to regain credibility and trust from the consumers and employees of HyperSocial. That means releasing statements on policy changes, and demonstrating how the leadership has improved whether that’s statements on LinkedIn or visual content showing the company doing better.

Wallake’s actions were inconsiderate and inappropriate towards the people who actually lost their jobs and all that came with it. While his intent may have been good, the whole situation lacks acknowledgement for the people actually affected and the perception they shape when viewing this type of brand representing content.

Work Cited -

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