

Alec Baldwin 'Rust' Shooting Crisis Response Analysis

Kaley Pieper

Casper College

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Mrs. Bri Weigel

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Abstract

Alec Baldwin has been involved in many controversial issues in the media in the past. Nothing however, with as much sadness and gravity as the accidental set shooting that left one crew member dead. Following an accidental shooting on the movie 'Rust' set, Baldwin and his team had to come up with a crisis response strategy in order to overcome the PR incident. Research has shown that following the RPIE (Research, Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation) Model is a good way to handle crisis situations. Baldwin's immediate crisis response to this tragedy is "Deny", in which he describes it as a tragic accident, of which he had no fault. In this paper, I will analyze the events leading up to the incident from a public relations expert's view, and criticize how Baldwin and his team handled the PR moves after the incident.

Introduction

On Thursday, Oct 21, 2021, a shooting occurred on the set of the western movie 'Rust'. The controversial shooting resulted in the death of the film's cinematographer and wounded its director, according to court papers filed in New Mexico (Hill, Campbell, Melas, & Rodgers 2023). Actor Alec Baldwin held a prop gun, and when he fired it, he shot Halyna Hutchins in the chest. Sadly, Hutchins died on route to the hospital. The film director, Joel Souza, also got injured. The gun was supposed to carry only blanks but contained a live round. Charges were filed against weapons specialist Hannah Gutierrez-Reed and Baldwin by a Sante Fe District Attorney. Gutierrez-Reed was in charge of safety and inspection on set. Filming of the movie paused after the incident.

The controversy surrounding this case came from how the live round ended up in the gun or on the set at all, why Alec Baldwin aimed the gun and fired, and why certain safety precautions weren't in place to make sure that the incident never even occurred. Baldwin himself, and his attorneys call this crisis an "Accident Crisis". This means that they think the crisis could not have been avoided. The public deems it more as a "Preventable Crisis", which is when the accident is caused by illegal or unethical action (Kelleher, 2023). Many set directors, and other staff reported a pattern of disregard for safety on set. Mamie Mitchell, the script supervisor for "Rust," filed a lawsuit over the shooting, claiming Baldwin and others failed to keep the set safe by skimping on safety measures to cut costs. The lawsuit says there had been two instances where guns had been misfired on set prior to the fatal shooting. There are reports of previous misfires on set, though no live rounds were ever found. The suit also claims that the gun used by Baldwin was "regularly left unattended" during filming, as was the cart storing ammunition, which would violate industry standards.

Initial Response

Immediately following the incident, Baldwin voluntarily worked with police to get the story of what happened. He talked to police for over an hour about the incident. He also volunteered his phone and password to the police when requested. Police in New Mexico said the phone may contain “necessary information” in the case. This decision to work with police and help their investigation is a good move on Baldwin’s part.

Baldwin’s first public reaction to the tragedy occurred on October 22, 2021, the day following the shooting. On his Twitter account, Baldwin tweeted, “There are no words to convey my shock and sadness regarding the tragic accident that took the life of Halyna Hutchins, a wife, mother, and deeply admired colleague of ours. I’m fully cooperating with the police investigation to address how this tragedy occurred... My heart is broken for her husband, their son, and all who knew and loved Halyna. (AlecBaldwin, 2021)” This sentimental tweet is a step in the right direction. Portraying an emotional impact towards the incident shows that he does feel badly about what happened. It puts him in a more vulnerable and understanding position. It shows people that he does feel for Hutchin’s family, and understands the gravity of the situation. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Theory, different people process information differently (Kelleher, 2023). The peripheral route of information processing involves ethos and pathos. This sentimental Twitter message appeals to those who tend to use this route. It makes his fans and the public also feel empathy for the family, and even Baldwin himself.

Baldwin’s sympathetic stance on social media is a good move. However, it can also be determined that he is deflecting blame and responsibility for the event that occurred. According to Coombs and Holladay’s situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) this is known as the “Deny” strategy (Kelleher, 2023). Blaming others and denying all fault isn’t the best strategy

(Floyd & Andrews, 2023). His good and bad PR moves can be determined through a SWOT analysis.

Strengths

Baldwin's biggest strengths were in his social media posts. This first tweet wasn't the only social media activity from Baldwin's accounts. Social media is becoming more and more important in the PR industry every day. People look to social media to see the kind of person someone is, and the things they have opinions on. Baldwin posted a letter addressed from the cast and crew of 'Rust' as his next activity online regarding the case. In the letter, cast and crew express their opinion surrounding the case. They claim that the public opinion on the case is manipulated from the truth in order to fit a narrative. An excerpt from the letter states: "The descriptions of Rust as a chaotic, dangerous, and exploitative workplace are false and distract from what matters most: the memory of Halyna Hutchins, and the need to find modern alternatives to outdated industry firearm and safety practices. (alecbaldwininsta, 2021)" Posting this stance of the cast and crew on his Instagram showed his opinions clearly. The letter also goes on to say that the cast and crew asks for sympathy, and understanding in the difficult time they face.

Baldwin lessens his social media coverage of the case over the next year, but still mentions it from time to time. He instead posts more videos to be viewed as a good person. He posts videos of his family and children, him helping children, and otherwise giving back to society. According to SCCT, this is known as a "Reinforce" crisis response strategy (Kelleher, 2023). This strategy attempts to remind the public that you are still a good person who has done good things in the past.

On Oct. 5 2022, Baldwin posted a link to an article. The article explains that a settlement was reached between Hutchins's estate and the 'Rust' movie productions. It also announced that filming was set to resume in January of 2023. Captioning the post, Baldwin says, "We are pleased to announce today the settlement of the civil case filed on behalf of the family of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins. Throughout this difficult process, everyone has maintained the specific desire to do what is best for Halyna's son. We are grateful to everyone who contributed to the resolution of this tragic and painful situation."

Weaknesses

A major weakness of Baldwin that hurt his case and reputation in the long run, was the tell-all interview he did with George Stephanopoulos. The interview was aired on ABC. In their discussion, Stephanopoulos asks Baldwin why he broke his period of silence on the incident to talk now. In the interview, he continues the "Deny" crisis response strategy.

Baldwin replies, "Well, I think that there's a criminal investigation and that could be a while. There's all kinds of civil litigation and I felt there were a number of misconceptions, most of it from sources I really wouldn't concern myself about, but a couple that I did concern myself about where there were these authoritative statements of this is what happened. The Sheriff's department hasn't even released a report to the DA yet."

Baldwin seems more concerned about the technicalities of the sheriff's department and the statements others made, rather than the actual incident. Stephanopoulos actually directs the topic of conversation towards the victim before Baldwin even mentions her name. He should have never even decided to do this interview in the first place. This decision caused his name to circulate in the media, mostly for negative reasons.

Instead of talking about feeling guilty about what happened, he instead spends the interview blaming the movie's armorer, Hannah Gutierrez-Reed, and assistant director, Dave Halls. Baldwin claims that Halls handed him the gun. Then Baldwin asked: 'This is a cold gun?', meaning there was no danger. He claims that he then started positioning the gun towards Hutchins, when he cocked back the gun. He then claims that when he let go of the hammer, the gun went off, without him pulling the trigger.

Stephanopoulos then asks about the moments before the incident when he grabbed the gun. Baldwin claims that in his 40 years of acting, some prop assistants would insist on showing everyone that the gun was empty with blanks. On this set however, cast and crew overlooked this safety precaution, and handed Baldwin the loaded gun. This can definitely be seen as an ethical issue. Ethics is defined as a value system by a person or organization that indicates what is right or wrong (Kelleher, 2023). This major weakness of negligence and safety issues is hard to overlook.

The interview also shows actor George Clooney saying, "Every single time I'm handed a gun on a set, every time, Mark. They hand me a gun, I look at it, I open it. I show it to the person I'm pointing it to. We show it to the crew. Every single take. You hand it back to the armor, when you're done, you do it again. Everyone does it. Everybody knows it." Clooney tried to make the point that safety precautions were overlooked. And instead of accepting any responsibility towards the fact that he never checked, Baldwin responds with, "...well good for you. Good for you." This crude response can seem rude and insensitive.

In the interview, Stephanopoulos also brings up Lane Luper, a camera assistant. In an email Luper sent the week before the day of the shooting, he tells production managers he was quitting, citing safety concerns. He says, "During the filming of gun fights on this job, things are

often played very fast and loose. So far there have been two accidental weapon discharges.” Baldwin denies hearing any complaints about safety concerns, or improper handling of guns before the incident.

According to an article by Agility PR Solutions, “Baldwin’s statements resulted in a lot of consequences, making shocking headlines in multiple news outlets. Instead of trying to calm down the story from when it first occurred, the actor did the opposite, fanning the flames and making the story itself a lot worse. During the interview, he managed to blame the gun for the shooting, denied that he ever pulled the trigger, and simply refused to take any responsibility for his involvement in the incident (Torossian, 2021).”

Opportunities

Reaching out to the victim’s family is a major opportunity in any crisis situation like Baldwin’s. If the victim’s family is on your side, you look good in the public eye. Baldwin should have reached out to the family to offer condolences immediately in the days or weeks following the incident. He should have also conveyed his guilt towards his involvement in the incident. The day after the incident, Baldwin’s tweet did convey his sorrow for the family. However, after the interview he conducted with ABC, the family was furious. Matthew Hutchins, the widower of Halyna, conducted his own interview on a Today Show segment. He was upset because during the Stephanopoulos interview Baldwin didn’t accept any blame for the incident. Hutchins argued that he made the interview about himself instead of the victim.

Hutchins said, “Watching him, I just felt so angry to see him talk about her death so publicly in such a detailed way, and then not accept any of the responsibility, after having just described killing her.” He believes that the tragic incident was an accident, but at least some of the fault lies on Baldwin’s shoulders. Hutchins added: “Hearing him blame Halyna in the

interview and shift responsibility to others and seeing him cry about it, I just feel like, are we really supposed to feel bad about you, Mr. Baldwin?"

Not connecting with the victim's family was a huge missed opportunity on Baldwin's part. Not only did he miss out on a potential ally in the situation, he also gained an adversary.

Threats

The first biggest threat to Baldwin's case is public opinion. The public decides how to determine Baldwin's actions. For example, he can control what he says on social media; however, once it is out there he can't control how people respond. Many people became upset about his social media posts. Some comments were very negative, saying he should accept responsibility and be ashamed of what he did. While he could also control what he answered in the interview with Stephanopoulos, he couldn't control what questions he asked, or how his answers were interpreted. Renato Mariotti, a former federal prosecutor, said that from a legal perspective, "there's only downside" in speaking to the media while being the subject of a criminal investigation (Floyd & Andrews, 2023).

Baldwin speaking in this interview came off as rude to many viewers and caused potential for a lawsuit. The interview not only came across as offensive to the public, but especially the family. Matthew Hutchins lives in the US with their son, but her extended family resides in Ukraine where she is from. Her sister and parents claim that Baldwin never even reached out to them to offer sympathy. In February following this interview, the family of Halyna Hutchins filed a civil suit against Baldwin, and other members of the 'Rust' cast and crew. According to an article by CNN, the lawsuit also claimed the production companies and producers "cut corners" and "chose to hire the cheapest crew available," specifically noting that

they “knowingly hired a wholly unqualified armorer,” and required her to split time in a second role as assistant props master.

The lawsuit was settled and Baldwin and Rust Productions LLC gave Hutchin’s family an undisclosed amount of money. This potential fight with the family is another huge risk to his case. Lawsuits have a big negative impact on someone’s general reputation. Especially as a public figure like Baldwin. Baldwin currently has three active lawsuits against him, all related to this case. Overcoming these lawsuits and coming out on the prevailing side is a big threat to Baldwin and his PR team.

RPIE

In order to tackle any crisis, planning is important. In this intense, it’s important to remember the RPIE Model, and follow strategic planning principals (Kelleher, 2023). RPIE stands for research, planning, implementation, and evaluation. In establishing a plan, it’s important to research past PR crises and see what failed or succeeded. The planning phase is also very important. The first part of my plan for Baldwin is to set SMART goals. In Baldwin’s position, my goals are to minimize damage to my client’s personal and professional reputation, and help the victim’s family recover. These broad goals are at the forefront of my mind in every step I take.

The next step is to set objectives. These realistic, measurable steps are the goal of every action I take. The first objective is to apologize for the incident publicly within two weeks of the incident and accept guilt and responsibility. While Baldwin did post on social media conveying his sorrow for the incident, he failed to accept any responsibility. Even if his actions were not purposeful, they still caused the death of an innocent co-worker. The next objective is to reach out to the family. He should have reached out to the husband, son, parents, and sister of the

victim offering his condolences and sorrow. He did reach out to the husband, but this was after the family filed a civil suit. At that point, it's ingenuine to reach out to the family. The next step is keeping his name out of the media.

In order to accomplish these objectives, there is a plan of specific actions. These tactics are tools that you use, such as social media. And in today's world, social media and analytics are an easy tactic to use. For the initial apology, social media is a great way to implement this objective. It would get the word out quickly and publicly. The tactic used to reach out to the family should be a personal phone call or message. The PR team should track down their phone numbers and allowed Baldwin to personally offer his apology. Analytics are also the third tactic used. Tracking social media mentions of Rust, Baldwin, Hutchins, and legal proceedings can help to identify whether or not a low profile is kept. The less Baldwin is mentioned and trending, the less bad things are circulated. He certainly made a mistake agreeing to conduct the tv interview with ABC; this accomplished only more scrutiny and discrepancy. While he could control what he said in the interview, he couldn't control what questions they asked or how his image was spun on tv. This critical mistake could have been easily avoided.

The underlying strategy behind all of these tactics is transparency, accepting responsibility, and genuine sympathy over the tragic accident. By reaching out to the family, accepting guilt, and being willing to work with police on the investigation this strategy is achieved. Making sure that you don't say, or post anything out of anger, frustration, or emotion is important to achieving this strategy.

Conclusion

The 'Rust' shooting was a tragic but preventable accident that changed the lives of many. It also left the reputation of Alec Baldwin in shambles. Initially, using the "Diminish" crisis

response strategy instead of the “Deny” strategy would have helped him. In crisis situations, it is important to always plan out each action, and use the systems of the RPIE Model. By apologizing for his involvement, offering condolences to the family, staying out of the media limelight, and using analytics to track progress, some of this could have been prevented as well.

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