

# Follow the leader?

Mired in the mother of all crises, BP has had to endure stinging criticism. But it is the beleaguered CEO Tony Hayward who has attracted the greatest ire.

**Neil Gibbons** reports

**T**here's been an oil spill. You may have heard about it. BP's torment has dominated the front pages for two months, with every new day bringing a fresh twist of the knife. Eleven workers dead, wildlife covered in sludge, a share price drop of 49% (perhaps more when you read this), a feral press pack administering a daily shoeing, public vilification of the CEO, and even the President of the United States using the crisis for political grandstanding. That's some crisis.

First, the news. On April 20, an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig killed eleven crewmen. The resulting fire could not be extinguished and, on April 22, the rig sank, leaving its well gushing and causing the largest offshore oil spill in US history.

The spill has given rise to a reputational crisis of unprecedented scale and ferocity. But more than anything, it has been a crisis characterised by the leadership of the organisation – CEO Tony Hayward has become a lightning rod for the world's fury, accused not merely of a lack of personal empathy and tact but of personifying the sluggishness, aloofness and lack of contrition that, critics say, have been the hallmarks of BP's response.

In fairness, Hayward has maintained a high level of visibility throughout the crisis, flying out to the US two days after the accident, and only returning to the UK for 36 hours to pack more bags. He has promised to remain in the US until the spill is fixed.

And BP and its advisers Brunswick (neither of whom chose to comment) have orchestrated a vigorous PR offensive – an appropriate term given its bellicose language. The terms BP has used are deliberately militaristic: an "armada" of 200 vessels skimming the water, planes "bombing the hell out of" the spill with dispersant, 15,000 "armed" fishermen.

But while Hayward recently claimed not to have read any newspapers or watched the news since he flew out to the US – "I do not want my judgment to be clouded by what is being written about me" – he can't have failed to pick up on the scorn being heaped on him in the media.

"The strategy of putting the CEO centre stage is



clearly the right one," says Richard Griffiths, head of strategic media at Ketchum Pleon. "That said, Tony Hayward is fast learning about the risks of striking an inappropriate tone in public. While he has rightly sought to directly engage with media with a series of broadcast and print interviews, he prompted disbelief by telling Gulf coast residents: "I would like my life back". This was clearly an unfortunate follow-up and somewhat negated his apology for the disaster."

This, says Griffiths, reinforces the importance of practising key messages before speaking. "It's not just his tone but his demeanour that's causing comment."

So visibility alone isn't enough. "Hayward has made it personal, which is good," says Kerem Yazgan, partner and senior executive in the corporate affairs team at PR firm Prime. "He is out there in the field, without jacket and tie, and it almost looks like he is part of the team that works with the actual efforts. But the question is if he has not made it too personal, and he has become too operative. Saying 'I'd like my life back' almost implies that his own life is more important than solving this crisis."

Critics have seized on that gaffe. "Tony Hayward comes across as not only totally over his head but as a whiner who cares more about getting rest than solving the problem," says a Shel Horowitz, a PR and marketing consultant specialising in ethical messaging in the US. "This, I believe, is one of several factors

Pensive: does Hayward's "inappropriate" public tone need a rethink?



that have shredded the company's market cap since the incident".

More damaging was Hayward's attempt to understate the significance of the spill. "The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean," he told The Guardian. "The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume."

To many crisis communicators, this is as bad as it gets. "When Hayward uttered that, hours and hours of preparation went out the door," says Lou Hoffman, CEO of the Hoffman Agency.

Wizened PROs shake their heads, but what BP needs to do is actually very straightforward, says Horowitz: "Admit responsibility without any shilly-shallying. Had the company done this immediately, no one would be faulting their PR."

But Hayward has lent the opposite way, saying that the disaster "was not BP's accident". BP has repeatedly stressed that the rig was leased and operated by the drilling firm Transocean.

"I cringe when BP's CEO and its interminable COO go on TV and explain to people what they will do now when they haven't taken responsibility for the spill," says Richard Laermer, CEO of RLM PR in New York. "They need someone who shrugs and says we fucked up. I know that would work. I see it and help people do just that (often kicking and screaming) daily."

But not everyone is that disparaging. "The communications controlled by a company during a crisis - not the media coverage - can be revealing," says Lou Hoffman. "After all, if you can't get the communications under your control right, you have zero chance of winning over others to carry your story forward."

"Here, BP actually comes off as competent. The copy in their advertisement both acknowledges the debacle and takes responsibility. Compare that with a similar ad from Toyota during their recall crisis in which the first sentence says: 'For more than 50 years, Toyota has provided you with safe, reliable, quality vehicles and first-rate service.' Horrible. Using the lead sentence to take a walk down nostalgia lane is ▶