

The Mysterious Case of Cosmo Sludge

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ABSTRACT

When one of her clients is involved in a hazardous waste spill, Karyn Kassing faces the dilemma of a lifetime. How should she encourage her client to proceed?



“Thanks, John. This is Keiko Kagome, reporting live from Yokohama, Japan.” Keiko stared into the camera as she held the microphone so the viewers could hear her around the world. Keiko had dreamed of this type of story from the moment she became a broadcast journalist.

“Keiko, Lauren Redding here—”

“Hi Lauren,” Keiko responded, staring into the camera. *Oh my god!!!* Keiko wanted to scream out loud. *I can’t believe I’m talking live with John Cartwright and Lauren Redding, two of BCNN’s legendary news anchors!*



Keiko had started working for BCNN (BroadCast News Network) in the fall as a translator on the Tokyo desk. She quickly worked her way through Tokyo because the higher-ups at BCNN had heard all about Keiko’s work ethic. If someone needed to put in extra work, Keiko was the go-to person for the job. Before too long an opportunity opened at the Yokohama office, Japan’s second largest city, so Keiko jumped at the opportunity. Raised in Osaka and educated in Cambridge, Keiko was hardly the typical fresh-faced broadcast graduate.

In fact, it was her late-night work ethic that led her to the position she was standing in right now. About 11:00 pm a story manager from BCNN called in asking if any of the on-air talent was available immediately. Unfortunately, Keiko and one of the camera operators were the only people in the office, so Keiko’s supervisor grabbed a jacket out of her own office, throwing it on Keiko as the fresh-faced journalist sped off in the van with the cameraman, Nagaharu Wakahisa. Keiko was still on the phone with the BCNN newsroom trying to get a heads up on the unfolding story.

Keiko held on for dear life as Nagaharu sped through the city of 3.7 million. Thankfully, there was relatively little traffic at 11:30 pm on a Thursday evening. Of course, to the BCNN

anchors in New York City, it was only 10:30 am. Keiko and Nagaharu's destination was an intersection nestled between the Intercontinental Hotel and Cosmo World, the largest indoor theme park in Asia. But tonight's news story had nothing to do with the theme park. No, tonight's story had to do with the intersection next to Cosmo World that blocks the bridge between Cosmo World and the Intercontinental Hotel on the other side.



"So, Keiko, what's happening on the ground there in Yokohama?" Lauren asked.

"Lauren and John, about an hour ago, a white, foaming sludge started appearing in the intersection. No one seems to know where the slime is coming from or what is causing the slime. If you look over my shoulder," the camera quickly zoomed past her to where a number of individuals wearing hazmat suits were gathered, "you can see that the government health officials are taking samples of the sludge."

"Does it smell?" John asked.

"I'm glad you asked John," Keiko responded, making a crinkled nose to further illustrate what she was about to say, "I can honestly say this is the worst thing I've ever smelled."

"Keiko, we're actually going to switch to a live feed one of our sister networks is showing from a helicopter in the air, can you please narrate what it is that we're looking at here?"

Keiko stared at a small display monitor that Nagaharu had set up so Keiko could see the live feed. As she stared at the video, she told the network personalities that it looked like the mass was about half the size of a football field. She also added that from her vantage point (before hazmat had shown up), she had measured the sludge at around 11 inches thick, and that the sludge had a consistency of a combination of tar and mud.

For the next two hours, Keiko and Nagaharu were on standby waiting for the BCNN anchors to come back for periodic reports. Almost immediately, BCNN had scientific experts in the fields of geology, chemistry, and environmental science, along with leading theorists in terrorism, environmental toxins, and environmental cleanups. The experts debated what the sludge could be while Keiko and Nagaharu were periodically called back to give live updates.

Sadly, the updates weren't that interesting because the sludge just kind of sat there for two hours not doing much of anything. Nagaharu kept feeding the B-reel for the studio, which was starting to get run on a loop as the various "experts" attempted to determine what the sludge was from half-a-world away.

At almost 1:30 am, Nagaharu motioned for Keiko to turn around and look. She stared in disbelief as the sludge was quickly retreating. Through her earpiece she heard two environmentalists discussing the possibility of toxic waste from the ocean coming ashore. She didn't want to be pushy, but she knew this was news.

"Excuse me."

"Did someone say something?" Keiko could see John checking his Earwig to see if it was working.

"John and Lauren—"

"Oh, Keiko," Lauren exclaimed. "What can we do for you?" As if Keiko were a small child who had just entered into an adult conversation.

“Actually, I have breaking news from here in Nagaharu, the sludge has actually started retreating.”

“What!?” exclaimed John and Lauren almost simultaneously.

“If you go to our current film, you can see that in just the past five minutes the sludge has started seeping away from the barricades that were established by the police. In fact, the sludge appears to be disappearing at the same rate it appeared just a few short hours ago.” Keiko could hear someone in her ear telling her to keep talking because the network was trying to get the helicopter pilot back to the area. Not quite sure what to say, Keiko just started in on a recap of the night’s events. Just when she was afraid she didn’t have anything else to say, the image from the helicopter was back on the screen.

“As you can see here, the sludge has already gone from almost half a football stadium to about the size of a small park. At this rate, the sludge will be all but gone in the next 30 minutes.”

Keiko kept doing her check-ins with BCNN, but the excitement of the evening was starting to wear on her. By 2:00 am, the sludge had all but vanished. Now, a whole new panel of BCNN experts were talking about the sludge’s departure. *Gotta love the 24-hour news cycle*, she thought to herself.

She rested her head against the passenger window as Nagaharu drove back to the station more slowly this time. She was almost surprised when Nagaharu shook her awake. She went into the building, collected her belongings, and walked home in the cool of the early morning. As she walked in the door of her apartment, she glanced at her watch and thought, *I have to be back at the station in five hours*. She didn’t bother to undress; she just saw her bed and collapsed on top of it after double-checking to make sure her alarm clock was set.

YOU WIN SLUDGE, YOU LOSE SLUDGE

Karyn Kassing, CEO of The Kassing Group, was sitting in her office on the 25th floor of a Manhattan high rise when her secretary buzzed her.

“Ms. Kassing, Zubaydah Abdul from Wabâl Pharmaceuticals is on the line.”

“Give me a minute to finish this email, and then patch her through.” Karyn finished typing a press release for a Fortune 500 company and sent it to one of her copyeditors to ensure that the evening news would pick up the story by 5 pm. *Just in time for the 6 pm news*, she thought.

She hit send on her email right when the phone started buzzing. She placed her Bluetooth headset in her ear, gently tapping the side of the device, “Dr. Abdul, so nice to hear from you. It’s got to be close to quitting time for you in Dubai?”

“That is correct, Ms. Kassing.”

Karyn stared at the series of clocks on the opposite wall clearly indicating major time zones across the world. She saw 10 am on the New York clock and 18:00 (or 5 pm) on the Dubai clock.

“So, Dr. Abdul, what can the Kassing Group do for Wabâl Pharmaceuticals?”

“This is confidential?” Zubaydah questioned, wanting to ascertain if she could trust Karyn with dicey information.

“Dr. Abdul, I can guarantee that the Kassing Group and its employees are completely discrete when it comes to our clients’ information. I don’t discuss other clients’ information with you and I don’t discuss your information with other clients.” Sensing that she could go on, she added, “So back to the reason you called today?”

“We’ve had a minor leak of some of our industrial byproduct that seeped out from our facility in Yokohama, Japan.”

“OK, how bad is the leak?”

Dr. Abdul could sense from the question that Karyn was talking risk factors and not image factors at this point, so she said, “The waste is not harmful. In clinical testing, the waste did not increase morbidity or mortality rates in mice.”

“So, the only outcome data you have on this substance is in mice?” Karyn questioned.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Kassing, we never had any reason to run any specific tests examining the substance because it’s always been contained, stored in biohazard containers, and sealed in concrete bunkers in an industrial waste facility an hour south of the plant.”

Karyn could sense that Zubaydah, did not like where this line of questioning was taking her. Although Karyn had no reason to think that Dr. Abdul was hiding anything from her, she still needed to get all of the facts.

“OK, so the first step is to get you to send us all of your corporate information about this byproduct. The more we know about the material, the more organized and targeted our management of this crisis can be.”

“I trust you and the Kassing Group. You were a gift from Allah when we had that massive international recall two years ago. When I heard about the leak, I told the board president that we should contact our best external PR firm in Manhattan.”

“Thank you for the compliment, Dr. Abdul. I’m just a fixer. I help introduce people in their times of need to those in various sectors who can help them get through the crisis.”

With that Karyn promised to call Dr. Abdul back before nightly prayers in Dubai and hung up the phone. Immediately, she called one of her most trusted account reps, Devin Treadway.



Within 30 minutes, Devin and his small team of PR specialists were sitting in a small conference room a few doors down from Karyn’s office. When she entered the room, the team quickly shot to attention. Devin, on the other hand, barely acknowledged her presence before saying, “Karyn, you do remember we have the Pop’s Pizza crisis right now? We’ve already issued a press release informing the public that Pop’s Pizza does not condone drinking and driving and that Pop’s DUI is a clear stain on the family-friendly nature of Pop’s Pizza.”

“Trust me, Devin, I know what all of my teams are working on,” she acknowledged with a simple lift of one of her eyebrows. “Speaking of Pop’s, the local newspaper today got ahold of the mug shot.”

Devin slammed his newspaper down, “Geez! How did none of you not know that this morning!?” he blurted out, staring at his team. “You’re paid to make sure our client looks good. We can’t do our work if we don’t know all the facts. And one small, teensy-weensy fact would have been that his mug shot was released!”

“Anyways,” Karyn continued, “I kind of need you on a more important case. We have a new client who had a biological spill in Japan. For now, I’m not going to talk about who the client is, but we should be getting some internal memos later this morning about the industrial waste that was spilled. I need to have this ready prior to 1:00 this afternoon. I need to call the client by 1:44.”

The specificity of the time went over everyone but Devin’s head in the room. He immediately knew which client he was dealing with because of the specificity of evening prayers at 8:44 pm in June.

Karyn was about to continue talking when one of Devin’s minions raised her hand. Karyn looked at the young woman and responded, “Yes. And oh yeah, this isn’t school. No need to raise your hand to ask a question or go to the bathroom,” she informed the young woman sarcastically.

Devin rolled his eyes, shooting Karyn a sideways glance. The other young PR associates had looks of shock on their faces. In Devin’s world, Karyn’s sarcasm was legendary, but the younger associates never quite knew how to handle her.

“Ms. Kassing,”

“Please, call me Karyn,” she responded in an effort to soften her image.

“Karyn,” the young woman started hesitantly. “You mentioned that this client is involved in a chemical spill of some kind in Japan. Is this by chance the spill occurring in Yokohama?”

The look of pause on Karyn’s face indicated that the young woman had hit the nail on the head. Karyn took a second to collect her thoughts before asking, “What do you know about a chemical spill in Yokohama?”

“Well, it’s currently all over social media and the news. Please, the sludge even has its own hashtag on Twitter already #CosmoSludge.”

Karyn let a short curse slip from between her lips before asking the young woman to continue.

“Well, from what I can tell, this white sludge started appearing next to a big amusement park in Yokohama. My fiancé is originally from Japan, and actually worked in that amusement park as a teenager. The sludge started appearing as the park was closing, so some of his old friends who still work there started snapping pictures and uploading them to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.”

Karyn, paused letting all of this new information soak in. *Why didn’t Dr. Abdul let me know about any of this?*

“Heck, I even received a video of the sludge from my fiancé earlier.” The young woman pulled out her cell phone, her fingers gliding over its surface before turning the camera toward Karyn, showing her the video in question.

Karyn lowered herself into one of the conference chairs as she watched the sludge grow and grow. She watched as it took over the amusement park's parking lot. She processed the video knowing that it would go viral in hours if it hadn't already gone viral.

After watching the video, she turned to the group and informed them to call anyone they needed to call because it was about to be a very long day. "In fact," she warned them, "This is one of those days that tends to make or break a PR professional's career. The decisions we make in the next few hours will be some of the most crucial decisions you're faced with in this firm."

Looking at her watch, 11:45 *already*, she thought to herself. Thinking about the massive scope of this crisis, she decided this was going to be an all-hands-on-deck situation. She called her secretary and asked her to call all of the account heads. She then checked her smartphone to see if Dr. Abdul had emailed her any of the files. *Still nothing!*

She walked back to her office to grab a few tools she'd need for the next few hours, and took a brief moment to dig up some research on what was happening in Japan. She quickly found BCNN's streaming news coverage. Everyone covering the event seemed to be jumping out of their chairs with glee at the crisis. *If we don't handle this situation correctly, those vul- tures will devour Wabâl Pharmaceuticals and us in the process.*



By 12:15, the entire office had convened in the largest conference room. There were more cell phones, tablets, and laptops at the ready than she'd seen in a long time. She briefed the company on what was transpiring, again concealing the identity of her client. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to accidentally leak Wabâl Pharmaceuticals' name before she was ready for it to happen.

The group immediately started discussing possible ways to help the client. They came up with message strategy ideas, a list of possible experts they could turn to, and how to ultimately help the client repair their reputation after the crisis subsided.

Around 12:40, there is a soft rap on the conference room door before Karyn's secretary poked her head into the room informing her that she had a phone call.

"Can it wait!?" Karyn questioned.

"Ms. Kassing, it's the same person you were talking with earlier this morning?"

For a second, Karyn tried to interpret her secretary's meaning before realizing that her secretary was alluding to Dr. Abdul. Karyn told the group she'd be back in a minute and walked back to her office.

This time, she didn't bother with the Bluetooth, she just picked up the receiver. "Dr. Abdul, what can I do for you? I still need a few more hours to complete a PR prospectus for you."

"Ms. Kassing, thank you for indulging me here. But apparently, our little mishap in Japan has gone away. The board has decided that it's not in our best interests to say anything at this point."

"I would agree about not speaking out too quickly, but we need to get on top of this and soon," Karyn interjected.

“I think you’re missing my point. We won’t be needing your services after all. Well, we may, just not today.” With that, Dr. Abdul ended the conversation.

Karyn sat looking at her desk phone. *Zubaydah is making a seriously detrimental, calculated mistake.* She sat looking at her phone, deciding what would be in The Kassing Group’s best interests at this point.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What should Karyn tell Dr. Abdul to do?
2. Is Karyn ethically obligated to inform anyone about the culprit behind the leak in Japan?
3. How do you think the Kassing Group should handle preemptive reputation management for Wabâl Pharmaceuticals?

KEY TERMS

Crisis Communication, PR Ethics, Reputation Management