

## Case Study 7: Death at a Rock Concert

### Lecturer notes

#### A note for lecturers

This case study is designed to give students some practice in considering issues associated with reporting or communicating about mental illness and suicide so they will be better prepared to deal with such a situation, should it arise, when they are working as journalists or public relations practitioners. Mental illness and suicide are very sensitive and complex issues, and it is natural that some people may feel uncomfortable talking about them. Usually, these feelings are temporary and do not cause serious distress. Talking about mental illness or suicide in an educational and supportive environment provides lecturers with an opportunity to advise students about counselling and other services available on campus, and to encourage students experiencing problems to seek professional help by talking to a GP, health professional or call a crisis counselling service such as:

- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 (5-25 years)
- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467

For online information visit: [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au) and [www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)

For further information and advice about preparing your class for this case study, you should refer to the document 'Discussing sensitive issues' which can be found on the *Mindframe* for journalism and public relations education website at [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info)

Suicide is a legitimate topic for community and media discussion. However, communication about suicide should be done with great care, especially where that communication occurs in the media. Journalists are urged to consider the way they report on and discuss suicide.

Similarly, people who may provide information to the media must also consider the potential impact of a story on vulnerable members of the community. This case-study will expose students to the complexities and challenges of managing communication where a death by suicide has occurred, and where the person involved was well known in the community.

### The Scenario

A large-scale one-day music festival is being held in your city today. The event is sold out to its capacity audience of 100,000 and is being headlined by international artists. One of the headline bands, appearing at 2pm, is popular band The Removed. The band recently won a

Grammy and is the face of a popular youth clothing label. Twenty minutes after their performance, the female lead singer of The Removed, Janie Smithfield, is found dead at the bottom of a lighting tower. Within minutes, individual recounts of the incident are being tweeted and retweeted on Twitter, for example:

*Smithfield just jumped off a tower at Homebound. So sad.*



Some important facts are:

- The death occurred at a large public event and although it happened in the backstage area, the act was still witnessed by several festival goers;
- The band were scheduled for a national tour following the festival;
- There is little to no information available about Janie Smithfield's mental health and wellbeing leading up to the incident;
- Comments have started appearing on the band's Facebook page and a memorial / tribute site has also been established by fans on Facebook within an hour of the death;
- The concert continues to run as scheduled;

As the day continues and throughout the week, there is considerable traffic on the band's website and a large volume of media interest in and coverage of the incident.

## Using the Scenario

Students are required to consider how they will liaise with publics and stakeholders, what mechanisms they will use to communicate with various publics, and how they will manage the media, whilst keeping in mind the potential for further harm that could be associated with this tragic event if communication is not managed well.

This scenario can be used as the basis for a class exercise in subjects such as issues and crisis management, media relations, brand management, ethics and law or introductory subjects in public relations. In considering the scenario and questions, you should refer students to the document *Issues and Impact: Communicating mental illness and suicide*, for an overview of key ethical and public relations issues involved in managing communication about suicide. This resource and additional reference materials are available on the *Mindframe* for Universities website ([www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info)).

## Discussion Questions and Exercises

### Exercise A

You are in charge of public relations for the Homebound event. Within minutes of the death (and while paramedics are still tending to the singer) you are called in to manage the situation. It is only mid-afternoon and the event is not due to finish until 10pm.

#### **Address the following:**

1. Identify who your key stakeholders and publics will be. Consider both internal and external stakeholders and publics.
2. Identify what further information you might need to know before making a response.

How would you go about obtaining it?

3. Brainstorm some of the key issues the media, or other publics, may focus on or want information about.
4. What will your key messages be?
5. Identify the specific ethical issues related to handling a death by suicide that you may need to consider in your communication.

6. What kind of preparation from a public relations perspective should have already been in place to help deal with this situation?
7. Discuss the impact of social media in this situation – both in terms of prolonging the crisis and managing it.
8. How will you communicate with your publics and stakeholders? What specific tactics might you use?
9. Given the publics that may have been affected by this crisis, what are the other organisations that you will be planning to involve in your response to this incident?

### Exercise B

Members of the band The Removed have a lucrative celebrity endorsement deal with youth clothing brand Threddedbare. The band is featured in several promotional television and print advertisements as well as catalogues for this line of clothing. You are employed by Threddedbare to manage the Public Relations for their brand, including endorsements

#### **Address the following questions:**

1. Identify the key issues for the Threddedbare company, both the immediate issues as well as the longer term issues.
2. Who are the key stakeholders and publics that may be affected?
3. Consider the purpose of this partnership from Threddedbare's perspective. How might this situation impact the partnership?
4. What strategic risks or benefits does this incident pose for Threddedbare?
5. Brainstorm some of the key issues that relevant publics and stakeholders may focus on or want information about.
6. Identify the specific ethical issues related to handling a death by suicide that you may need to consider in your communication.
7. How will you communicate with the relevant publics and stakeholders? What specific tactics might you use?
8. What will your immediate response be? How might use of the promotional materials change?
9. What are the outcomes that your response plan will aim to achieve?
10. What might be Threddedbare's risk scenario for each of their plans or agendas, and what contingency plans could be implemented?
11. What kind of preparation from a brand management perspective should have already been in place to help deal with this situation?
12. Given the publics that may have been affected by this situation, what other organisations might you involve in your response to this incident?

### Optional Questions: *Media Relations*

1. What are some considerations for your organisation in engaging with the media regarding the event?
2. Will there be a spokesperson nominated? What issues should this person be briefed about prior to speaking with the media? Would this person engage with social media?
3. How will you manage the interests of your organisation and the possible risks to the community?

### Exercise C

You work for ReachOut, ([www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)) which is managed by the Inspire Foundation ([www.inspire.org.au](http://www.inspire.org.au)). ReachOut.com is a web-based service that inspires young people to help themselves through tough times, and find ways to boost their own mental health and wellbeing.

ReachOut.com outlines their aims and objectives as follows:

*“Reachout.com offers information, support and resources to help young people improve their understanding of mental health issues, develop resilience, and increase their coping skills and help-seeking behaviour. Anonymous and available 24 hours a day, ReachOut.com is there for young people who may not be comfortable seeking professional help, or who are unsure about where to find the help they need in their community. ReachOut.com aims to break down the stigma attached to seeking help, and connects young people so they can share their stories and provide support to each other in a safe and positive environment. When a young person visits ReachOut.com they experience an online environment that provides engaging and evidence-based resources to help them get through difficult times:*

- **Factsheets, stories and interviews** enable young people to better understand their experience and to reach out for the help they need. New content is constantly being developed by young people, keeping the site relevant and accessible to young people;
- **Community forums** provide a safe and moderated network, made up of ReachOut.com staff and other young people. The forums provide opportunities for young people to connect and share their story with peers, give or receive support and positive reinforcement, and develop strategies for managing adversity and seeking help;
- **Digital storytelling** also enables young people to tell their own stories about getting through tough times and help and inspire their peers;
- **Social media campaigns** allow ReachOut.com to become a part of young people’s landscape. Building loyalty with young people helps reduce the stigma around mental health and help-seeking.”

### **Address the following questions:**

1. Devise a pro-active engagement strategy to capture and encourage young people to talk in an appropriate and safe online forum about the issue of suicide and Janie Smithfield’s death via your site.
2. Identify what further information you might need to know before devising this strategy.
3. Identify what other organisations you may need to liaise with to coordinate your activity.
4. Identify some other appropriate organisations or individuals that you may engage to become involved in your strategy. How will you involve them?

5. What strategies might you use to communicate with young people visiting your site about the issue of suicide and the death of this woman?
6. What are the risks are associated with this kind of communication, and how might they be managed?
7. How can your organisation best communicate the services that are available to young people from Reach Out? What specific tactics will you use?

Related fact sheets are available online at [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info)

### Assignment or Individual Task

Considering one of the options above, develop one of the following:

- A. **A plan for managing the crisis**; outlining what systems you will put in place, resources and expertise you will draw on, how you will identify and communicate with stakeholders and publics and any other ethical considerations that you think may be important.
- B. **A Media Relations Plan**; including an outline of what media response you will provide, what research you may need to do, the timing of communication, how the issue will be handled, who will be the spokesperson or spokespeople, and how these people will be briefed. You may also want to include an outline of the specific ethical considerations posed by this scenario.

### Assessment Tip

Use the lecturer's notes above to assist in assessing the task. Ensure students have considered good public relations planning as well as the ethics.

### Discussion Questions & Lecturer's Notes

#### Exercise A

#### *Identifying the issues*

You are in charge of public relations for the Homebound event. Within minutes of the death (and while paramedics are still tending to the singer) you are called in to manage the situation. It is only mid afternoon and the event is not due to finish until 10pm.

**1. Identify who your key stakeholders and publics will be. Consider both internal and external stakeholders and publics.**

- Event promoters;
- Paid Staff at the event;
- Volunteers at the event;
- Festival goers;
- The band;
- Other bands and performers and their crews;
- Management / publicists of the band;
- Legal advisors;
- Relatives of the deceased;
- Police and emergency services;
- Local council including safety;
- The general community;
- The music / arts community;
- Mental health and suicide prevention services.



## **2. Identify what further information you might need to know before making a response. How would you go about obtaining it?**

Some issues to consider are:

- Has the woman's identity been confirmed and relevant people notified? You would not want to make a response and reveal the woman's identity if people have not been notified. This information may be sourced from the police.
- What role will other key stakeholders play in the development of the strategic response? For example, will the police communicate the official statements about the incident and the details of the person(s) involved?
- The language used in communication about suicide can contribute to it being presented as glamorous, normal or as an option for dealing with problems. It is important to avoid using language which suggests that suicide was a desirable outcome. For example the term 'took his life' or simply 'died by suicide' can be used instead of 'successful suicide'. Similarly, 'attempt on their own life' or 'suicide attempt' can be used instead of 'unsuccessful suicide attempt'.
- It is important that you are familiar with current 'best-practice' in terms of talking about suicide, particularly if using the media as a forum for that discussion. All communication, including media releases, brochures, ministerials, speeches, presentations, website documents and reports should comply with best practice standards. It is important to be mindful of the use of appropriate language in all situations and contexts. For example, more and more often information is transferred non-verbally via text and consideration must be given to expression of ideas and language in this context as well.
- Research shows that detailed description or images of the method or location of a suicide has been linked in some cases to further suicides using the same method or at the same location. This has implications for choices regarding communication about the detail of a suicide. It may also impact on your choice of images or angle for a campaign or communication strategy.
- It is important as a Public Relations practitioner to use reliable sources to get accurate facts, statistics and information. Contacting experts in the field will assist with accurate interpretation of statistics and placing situations or campaigns in context.
- What internal and external supports are available for people affected by this incident? For example, there may be crisis or trauma response teams who could provide onsite counselling or debriefing for staff or festival goers. For the wider community, telephone counselling services may need to be promoted.

## **3. Brainstorm some of the key issues the media, or other publics, may focus on or want information about.**

- Whether the event organisers breached any duty of care and how they might change policies and practices to try to prevent another death?
- Whether the event should have been concluded early, or whether some formal moment of communal reflection and acknowledgement of the death should have been undertaken with the festival audience, such as a minute's silence in memoriam, to note that this person was valued and is missed by peers and fans alike;
- Comparisons with the suicide deaths of other musicians and celebrities in history;
- The types of issues that might have contributed to the death (e.g. drugs, conflict etc);
- Whether there are adequate services; whether more funding is required;

- How festival goers were affected and what kind of responsibility the event is taking for the traumatic impact on festival goers.

#### 4. What will your key messages be?

The messages developed by students will relate to their specific plan. In deciding on these messages, students might consider the following:

- Suicidal behaviour in any person is usually influenced by a number of factors, and each individual's situation is unique. Generally, suicide should not be attributed to any single factor in a news report (such as pressures of fame or mental illness) as this may oversimplify the act, which does not improve community understanding of the issues.

Below is a very brief overview of some of the risk factors associate with suicide. A more detailed overview can be found on the *Mindframe* for Universities website:

- Individual risk factors - male gender, experiencing psychological or emotional problems, physical health problems, stressful life events;
- Mental illness as a risk factor - major depression, bi-polar disorder, substance use disorder, history of psychiatric care, previous suicidal behaviour;
- Family related risk factors - family breakdown, family conflict or poor communication, child abuse, family history of suicidal behaviour;
- Social risk factors - socio-economic disadvantage, Indigenous communities, school disengagement, unemployment, isolation, rural communities
- Environmental risk factors - access to the means (e.g. gun ownership), exposure to peers or people in the media who have shown suicidal behaviour.

While there may be no clear answers as to why the woman died by suicide, communication could be framed around the major risk factors and warning signs for suicide, and the help that is available to people experiencing problems. Having an understanding of these factors may assist people in the community to identify when a friend, family member or colleague may be in need of some additional support and professional assistance.

A number of factors have been identified which seem to reduce the probability of suicidal behaviour. The following protective factors have been suggested: connectedness, having a significant other, responsibility for children, personal resilience, spirituality and beliefs, economic security, good health, effective treatment, and restricted access to means. It is also important that the media have access to updated suicide statistics.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics release comprehensive statistics on causes of death in Australia each year. For the most up to date statistics on suicide, refer to the section of the *Mindframe* for Universities website titled Overview of Suicide in Australia.

- Focus on providing help-seeking information via multiple media platforms.
- *Mindframe* also recommend that emphasis should be placed on the tragedy of the loss without excessive memorialising or traumatic detail.
- For more information about ways to communicate about suicide, consult the quick reference card and Suicide fact sheets at the *Mindframe* for Universities website ([www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info))



**5. Identify the specific ethical issues related to handling a death by suicide that you may need to consider in your communication.**

- An important consideration in communication about suicide is the impact of releasing information about method and location. In this circumstance, detailed information about the death is circulating extensively via social media. Practitioners could respond to this by “managing the message” and counteracting detailed social media conversation with help-seeking information. How else could this ethical dilemma be managed?
- Consider the privacy issues of the deceased and their family and friends. Given that the identity information is already available, what will you communicate about the identity of the deceased?
- It is vital that any communication strategy avoids blaming individuals or groups for the death, at the same time as managing the reputation of the client.
- People who have been directly affected by a suicide death can be experiencing grief and the effects of trauma. They may not be in an optimal state to make an informed decision about media involvement.
- How will you involve / consider those who have direct relationship to the deceased? How would you respond if the bereaved family seeks media involvement which does not correspond with your key messages and plan?
- Many people believe that telling their story (in all its detail) could help others to prevent the same thing happening. This may or may not be the case. Communication that is just about the death is more likely to increase the chances of other deaths, rather than be protective. That is not to say that suicide should never be discussed. However, great care needs to be taken to ensure the messages that are promoted are about prevention and likely to have positive outcomes for the audience.
- Media may or may not report about the situation appropriately, and could add to the shock and grief of witnesses, fans of the artist or vulnerable audiences.

**6. What kind of preparation from a public relations perspective should have already been in place to help deal with this situation?**

Answers might consider the following:

- Crisis management plan and crisis management team with clearly identified roles and responses;
- Social media specific crisis response strategies;
- A list of key spokespeople that can be drawn on if a public response is required;
- Lists of key contacts in certain areas. For example, within the organisation, OH&S, legal etc;
- Research: It’s important to base all activities and communication on best-practice evidence (including suicide prevention information).

**7. Discuss the impact of social media in this situation – both in terms of prolonging the crisis and managing it.**

Answers may consider the following:

- There is detailed information about method and location circulating rapidly;
- Information about the identity of the deceased circulating rapidly;
- Images are potentially circulating from the event and the situation;

- Event organisers will also need to consider how other stakeholders such as other performers on the bill might communicate about this incident, and the influence this may have on their fan-base and/or followers (e.g. via Twitter) and the wider community;
- Consider some of the social media and communication technologies that may have been developed for this event: how will these be used to manage this new situation: e.g. Homebound Facebook page and Twitter account, or festival guide Smartphone application with push-notification function;
- The festival may also want to consider follow-up information they can send out to ticket holders about how to access help if distressed about the incident in the days and weeks following, e.g. via social media or email;
- The event will also need to consider how to communicate with staff to keep them informed and provide support for those who may need it, particularly those who are required to continue working as the festival continues;
- Event organisers will need to consider how to manage staff communication, and whether and how staff should be talking about this incident outside of their professional roles. How will you sensitively communicate responsibilities to staff and generate ideas for how their expertise may be used to support each other and other external stakeholders? Would volunteers be managed differently, and if so, how?
- If there are claims of negligence on behalf of your organisation or individuals within your organisation, then it may seem reasonable to defend those allegations in the media. However, students will need to consider whether more public discussion of the situation will be helpful or potentially harmful to the wider community.

#### **8. How will you communicate with your publics and stakeholders? What specific tactics might you use?**

Answers may consider the following:

- How will the response of stakeholders to the information being exchanged via user generated platforms shape your approach? Are they participating in these communications? Should you be entering these conversations, starting new ones or using other platforms altogether?
- How will you make use of traditional media? See the *Optional Exercise* below for further discussion of Media Relations;
- The broader community can be reached through the media (although consideration would need to be given to whether this is a good idea), through websites etc;
- There has been considerable debate about whether reporting suicide can influence other vulnerable people to take a similar course of action. Practitioners and students may wish to look at research that has been conducted in this area (see [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info)). Students might consider that it is not so much whether or not this suicide is talked about but *how* it is communicated. These issues are the topic of ongoing research and practitioners and students should be encouraged to critically evaluate the findings of the research to date.

#### **9. Given the publics that may have been affected by this crisis, what are the other organisations that you will be planning to involve in your response to this incident?**

- 24 hour crisis support organisations such as Lifeline, Kids Helpline;
- Health department and trauma counselling services;
- Police service;



- Mental health and suicide prevention organisations;
- Bereavement services;
- Australian recording association and other peak bodies.

### **Exercise A: Optional Questions: *Media Relations***

#### **1. What are some considerations for your organisation in engaging with the media regarding the event?**

Things students will need to consider include:

- The amount of information and detail about the death of the woman that is already widely circulating in the public domain, and the potential impacts of this. The availability of detailed information about the death of the woman could have an impact on others - such as risk of copycat suicide by fans or community members, distress it could cause to the family, friends, and fan base. Appropriate use of language and management of information already available may ensure any potential for further harm and distress is minimised.
- The news values associated with the story and media's observance of the national guidelines on reporting on suicide deaths. It is likely that the media will report the story regardless of any response from your organisation. If the media will report the story anyway, it may be better to provide information to the media that ensures that the angle, context and content are responsible and unlikely to cause further harm. Students should consider what information they would include/exclude from a media response. Would the organisation take the opportunity to explain to journalists the importance of treating the story with great care – noting the need to refrain from discussing location and method, and the importance of highlighting available supports for people who are distressed?
- Which specific tactics student may use to communicate with the media and manage communication about the incident. Given the media's observance of the guidelines, how might Public Relations professionals use these to liaise with media about the issue? Students should indicate when and how they would make a response – i.e., immediately or in time, traditional or social media.
- The ethical considerations of engaging with the media about this issue. How will you respond if media do not handle the story appropriately? What are the potential risks if this occurs?

#### **2. Will there be a spokesperson nominated? What issues should this person be briefed about prior to speaking with the media? Would this person engage with social media?**

Students should indicate the relevant spokespeople for their organisation and also consider providing this person or people with:

- Enough background information about the situation;
- A list of information the organisation is happy to release as well as information the organisation would not like to comment on;
- Clear information about the potential risks of talking about suicide in certain ways – with instructions not to discuss method or location of deaths;
- Notes on the critical issues that the media may ask about – e.g. the claim of alcohol use – and the agreed response to those questions;
- Prevention information that could be included in their comments – how people can care for each other, common risk factors and warning signs etc;

- Information about support services that could be promoted to assist people who are distressed or affected;
  - Clear guidance about which are the appropriate platforms for each message, and about the way pieces of information should be communicated (or not) according to each platform.
- Will you provide the media with access to witnesses or the bereaved? People who have been directly affected by a suicide death can be experiencing grief and the effects of trauma. They may not be in an optimal state to make an informed decision about media involvement. Consider which media platform might be best if calling witnesses or bereaved to become spokespeople.
  - Many people believe that by telling their story (in all its detail) they could help others to prevent the same thing happening. This may or may not be the case. Reporting that is just about the death is more likely to increase the chances of other deaths, rather than be protective. That is not to say that suicide stories should never be communicated about in the public sphere. Sometimes there is also opportunity for people to tell their stories using communication platforms other than media – context and likely audience are essential considerations. In all cases, however, great care needs to be taken to ensure the messages that are promoted are about prevention and likely to have positive outcomes for the audience.

### **3. How will you manage the interests of your organisation and the possible risks to the community?**

- If there are claims of negligence on behalf of your organisation or individuals within your organisation, then it may seem reasonable to defend those allegations in the media. However, students will need to consider whether more public discussion of the situation will be helpful or potentially harmful to the wider community.
- Students will need to consider if other organisations are responding or making public comment. At this stage, the media have enough information for extensive coverage. There is a chance that making a quick public response would give them an angle to cover the story. Your organisation's response may lead to others doing the same – giving the story more traction and profile.
- Although other organisations and/or media may be keen to explain to people why a needless death has occurred, you need to consider whether this actually helps or hinders the community's understanding of suicide. For example, you may inadvertently portray suicide as someone's way of solving their problems - someone who is looked up to and followed by certain members of the community.
- Giving prominence to a report about suicide (i.e. as front page news, as the lead story on television or radio, or as the feature of a talk-back program or current affairs feature) may inadvertently glorify the act for those who are vulnerable, and may be distressing to families bereaved by suicide.
- How will you deal with inaccurate information, particularly where errors may have been circulated about the method and location of the death? How will you ensure that by clarifying information or providing facts you are not offering inappropriate details?



## Discussion Questions and Lecturer's Notes

### Exercise B

*Address the following questions:*

**1. Identify the key issues for the Threddedbare company, both the immediate issues as well as the longer term issues.**

Things students will need to consider include:

- Reputation;
- Financial impact;
- Contractual / legal obligations;
- Future opportunities;
- Mental health of staff?

**2. Who are the key stakeholders and publics that may be affected?**

- Clothing company;
- Consumers;
- Associated brands or products;
- The band;
- Management / publicists of the band;
- Legal advisors;
- Relatives of the deceased;
- The music / arts community;
- Retailers;
- Advocacy organisations such as Youth Suicide Prevention initiatives

**3. Consider the purpose of this partnership from Threddedbare's perspective. How might this situation impact the partnership?**

*Purpose:*

- Celebrity endorsement – increased appeal amongst target market (youth);
- Brand recognition;

*Impact:*

- Implications for contract obligations of The Removed;
- Target market associating product with negative event, diminished appeal?;
- Opportunity to take response role in issues communication.

#### **4. What strategic risks or benefits does this incident pose for Threddedbare?**

*Risks:*

- Reputation management;
- Impact on other endorsements and how this event might be framed or considered;
- Maintenance of contract with other members of Threddedbare;
- Negative feedback and reputation by being seen to do nothing.

*Benefits:*

- Coverage of the death may mean publicity for the brand (with careful management this could be a benefit);
- Opportunities to engage in social action responses to the death such as awareness raising events, youth collaborations etc (e.g. donate a percentage of sales profits, sponsor a campaign or tribute concert etc) - this would require particularly careful consideration and delivery as it could also present a new collection of risks;
- From this event the clothing company could consider re-orienting the endorsement by supporting young people – so that it gives back - promoting a responsible and socially connected brand.

#### **5. Brainstorm some of the key issues that relevant publics and stakeholders may focus on or want information about.**

- Future of contract / endorsement with remaining band members;
- Threddedbare's knowledge of Janie Smithfield's mental health struggles;
- Impact on other endorsements, or company's use of same;
- Threddedbare's plans to address impact on consumers (e.g. young people) of product association;
- Brand association issues – is Threddedbare's marketing encouraging risk-taking behaviour and poor mental health in young people etc;
- Threddedbare's intentions to support and raise awareness of the youth suicide.

#### **6. Identify the specific ethical issues related to handling a death by suicide that you may need to consider in your communication.**

- It is vital that any communication strategy avoids blaming individuals or groups for the death, at the same time as managing the reputation of the client.
- An important consideration in communication about suicide is the impact of releasing information about method and location. In this circumstance, detailed information about the death is circulating extensively via social media. Practitioners could respond to this by "managing the message" and counteracting detailed social media conversation with help-seeking information. How else could this ethical dilemma be managed?
- People who have been directly affected by a suicide death can be experiencing grief and the effects of trauma. They may not be in an optimal state to make an informed decision about media involvement or the future of their endorsement of your brand.
- How will you involve / consider those who have direct relationship to the deceased, such as the other band members?



- How might the influence of your brand be capitalised upon to promote positive messages about help-seeking behaviour and hope?
- How might you be placed in an ethically challenging position between your client Threddedbare and the members of The Removed? What responsibility do you have to ensure that vulnerable stakeholders and audiences are not caused further distress as a result of Threddedbare's communication plans?

**7. How will you communicate with the relevant publics and stakeholders? What specific tactics might you use?**

- Communication with the band and their management: this will require particular caution and sensitivity. Direct personal communication such as telephone calls and emails may help to maintain a good relationship with the client. What kind of time period would this tactic require?
- Communication with consumers: this should acknowledge the seriousness of the loss but be sensitive to the grief of consumers and other people who may be impacted by the death. In showing such sensitivity, communication should also be appropriate and avoid mention of details such as method and location of the death. Threddedbare may wish to release a letter or email of "sympathy and regret" to consumers as well as a public statement about the death.
- Communication with stockists should be formal and simple. While the death should be acknowledged, the communication should focus on the company's strategies forward and expectations of the stockists within these strategies. The communication should also offer contact details for a liaison person who will deal with the stockists solely about this issue and related strategies.

**8. What will your immediate response be? How might use of the promotional materials change?**

- Use of the deceased's image should be ceased, both for ethical and potential negative audience response reasons;
- Press release / public statement via social network page;
- Engaging major outlets who stock supplies (e.g. Myer, DJs, Kmart etc);
- How will you manage the Label's image as it features in promotional materials that are owned or distributed by the band's management rather than your company? (e.g., Smithfield in Threddedbare on band webpage).

**9. What are the outcomes that your response plan will aim to achieve?**

- Protection of the brand;
- Reassurance of stakeholders such as stockists;
- Maintain good relations with endorsement stakeholders such as other members of The Removed, other artists etc;
- Identify opportunities in the crisis, such as engaging support for Youth Suicide Prevention initiatives: Demonstrate that you are a responsible citizen and your organisation is a socially responsible organisation.

**10. What might be *Threddedbare's* risk scenario for their plans or agendas, and what contingency plans could be implemented?**

- Current marketing material that is being used both nationally and internationally;
- Images and marketing material in shops (see Q7);

- The company should have risk scenarios for how it engages with external agencies, for example to do with health and suicide (see Q12).

**11. What kind of preparation from a brand management perspective should have already been in place to help deal with this situation?**

- Multi-angled endorsements - not relying on one identity or group;
- Maintain clear boundaries around endorsement to allow for distinction and protection of the brand in crisis situations.

**12. Given the publics that may have been affected by this situation, what other organisations might you involve in your response to this incident?**

- Media organisations;
- Other youth-relevant brands;
- Other celebrity clients?
- Youth mental health organisations.

## Discussion Questions and Lecturer's Notes

### Exercise C

**Address the following questions:**

**1. Devise a pro-active engagement strategy to capture and encourage young people to talk in an appropriate and safe online forum about the issue of suicide and Janie Smithfield's death via your site.**

Consider the following:

- Define your target public: who are "young people"? Will you exclude all others? How?
- In promoting this event and engaging young people, how will you manage the message about its aims? What are the potential risks to this message? As an organisation, such social crises as these can prevent unique opportunities to spread awareness about your organisation and its message to a broader target group;
- Aims: why is it important to engage young people in this kind of forum? Social media communication has the capacity to be circulated with great speed and inaccuracy. This is dangerous for young people who are unsettled and / or distressed about this death. Given the core business of this organisation is to empower young people to manage difficult life situations, emotions and experiences, misinformation in this regard sets back your organisation's objectives. It is thus in the organisation's best interests, as well as those of young people, that the correct information and help-seeking advice is widely and responsibly promoted.

**2. Identify what further information you might need to know before devising this strategy.**

- In order to facilitate helpful and informative discussion among people, practitioners should be armed with facts about suicide and contributing risk factors, and have engaged relevant experts who can answer questions relating to this information.
- Practitioners should be familiar with the evidence about communicating about suicide in the media and consider how this might apply to public forums. They should also note of the gaps in contemporary research, particularly in regards to social media and online communication.



- In the interests of minimising harm, students should refer to the principles outlined by *Mindframe* for recommendations about ways to frame the strategy.
- What laws and practices need to be referenced when engaging young people online?
- In devising this strategy, the first principle that practitioners should consider is how they can ensure that this communication will not cause harm to vulnerable people who may part of the target public.

### **3. Identify what other organisations you may need to liaise with to coordinate your activity**

- Well-known youth organisations;
- Schools;
- Youth councils or networks;
- Other Local Government services;
- Other musical artists or celebrities that have strong following of young people;
- Youth-relevant commercial enterprise;
- Sporting organisations;
- Arts organisations;
- Youth liaisons from police or other law enforcement;
- Legal advisors to advise on privacy protection for the young people participating online;
- *Mindframe* National Media Initiative for advice about communicating about this issue.

### **4. Identify some other appropriate organisations or individuals that you may engage to become involved in your strategy. How will you involve them?**

- Lifeline / Kids Helpline;
- Other mental health organisations including Crisis Helplines;
- Other suicide prevention organisations including Crisis Helplines;
- Youth-mental-health-trained clinicians and support workers;
- State Health departments and emergency services;
- Grief & loss organisations;
- Youth ambassadors – both from within your organisation and outside;
- Politicians / Government departments?;
- Child protection services or agencies;
- Other youth-focused organisations and charities;
- Youth-relevant commercial enterprise;
- News outlets;
- Social media companies who have ethical codes of conduct and support this activity.

**5. What strategies might you use to communicate with young people visiting your site about the issue of suicide and the death of this woman?**

- Encourage students to look at real life examples used by ReachOut.com such as videos, stories and blog.
- Consider the use of personal accounts and stories – these can be powerful tools to communicate stories of recovery or hope. For young people, it can be effective to show that peers may be experiencing similar feelings, and to promote the importance of connection with support networks including family and friends. Students should be careful, however, to avoid the temptation to dwell on the morbid details that are often associated with sudden bereavement and the trauma and distress it can cause.
- Consider the frame and angle of discussion in terms of the celebrity element. The effect on a vulnerable person may be more profound if they are able to identify with the person in the report. This can happen in two ways: because they identify the person as “someone like them” – because they are in the same age group or share similar experiences to the person portrayed; or because the person is “someone I would like to be” – that is, a role model, public figure or celebrity. As such, communication about high profile suicide should be handled with caution. How would you mitigate potential glorification that could imply that some lives are more valued than others? Would this forum imply this?
- [www.reachoutpro.com.au](http://www.reachoutpro.com.au) also provides advice to those working in this field and communicating about this issue with young people.
- What are some of the language considerations? How will language use feature in your communication strategy?

**6. What are the risks associated with this kind of communication, and how might they be managed?**

- Participants or visitors may contribute information or detail that you deem inappropriate for this forum. In preparing a forum like this, participants should always be prompted to agree to the “Community Guidelines” about the kind of communication that is acceptable and appropriate, as a condition of entering the forum;
- It is strongly advised that students consider the role of experts in such a forum. To have factual information on hand for those seeking answers on this forum, engage the assistance of professionals in this area. These kinds of forums also often engage the assistance of helpline professionals such as telephone counsellors, who individuals can be referred to for private conversation and support if there is any indication that they may be struggling;
- Participants in the forum or visitors to the site may also become distressed by the content of discussion. Frequent reiteration of help-seeking information and promotion of help-seeking behaviour and stories of hope and recovery will provide people who are struggling with the necessary tools to access help;
- Phrases such as “chose the time to die”, “forever young” and “the only way out” may inadvertently portray suicide as a romantic or courageous way to solve problems. For similar reasons, it is recommended that terms such as “successful suicide attempt” or “unsuccessful suicide attempt” not be used. “Fatal suicide”, “completed suicide” or “died by suicide” can be used instead of “successful suicide”. “Non-fatal suicide” can be used instead of “unsuccessful suicide”;
- Caution and planning should ensure that this forum does not become a tribute page such as those on other social networking sites. It is important that discussion not glorify the dead woman



or memorialise her positive characteristics to excess (e.g. “she had everything to live for” or “she was loved by thousands” or “she was most talented musician of her time”) without acknowledging that she may have had problems or worries. The story can be balanced by reference to the fact that suicide is caused by multiple factors and that most people who suicide have a history of psychological and/or social problems.

**7. How can your organisation best communicate the services that are available to young people from Reach Out? What specific tactics will you use?**

- Encourage students to look at real life examples used by ReachOut.com such as the “Txt tips” positive wellbeing SMS service or membership options;
- How will your tactics be shaped by language considerations?;
- How will you avoid miscommunication about services that are available (e.g. clarification that you are not providing crisis services);
- Word-cued alerts and pop-up links;
- Visual maps on homepage;
- E-lists and EOIs at registration;
- “Tell a friend” incentives? - viral challenges.