

Midterm Case Study:

The Charlie Kirk Incident and Its Reputational Fallout

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Situation Overview

Turning Point USA is a conservative nonprofit organization founded in 2012 by Charlie Kirk, with a mission centered on promoting free-market principles and conservative values among young Americans, particularly on college campuses. Over the years, TPUSA has grown into a highly visible political organization with strong donor support, an expansive social media presence, and frequent involvement in national political debates. Kirk himself became the public face of the organization, positioning TPUSA as both a political movement and a personal brand closely tied to his leadership.

In late 2025, TPUSA and the broader political landscape were thrown into crisis following the assassination of Charlie Kirk. The immediate aftermath was marked by intense emotional reactions online, including social media posts celebrating or mocking Kirk's death. These posts quickly became flashpoints, as conservative influencers and political figures amplified screenshots and urged consequences for those involved. What began as a tragic event escalated into a reputational and communications crisis with national implications.

Key stakeholders included TPUSA leadership and staff, political figures who helped amplify the backlash, media organizations reporting on the incident, employers responding to public pressure, and hundreds of individuals whose online speech became subject to scrutiny. The broader social context, characterized by extreme political polarization, distrust in institutions, and rapid digital amplification, played a critical role in shaping the crisis. According to Reuters, the controversy resulted in more than 600 people across the United States being fired, suspended, or investigated by employers for social media activity related to Kirk's death.

The timeline of the event remains ongoing. While the assassination itself was a discrete moment on September 10, 2025, the reputational fallout, institutional consequences, and leadership transition within TPUSA continue to evolve, making this a sustained rather than resolved crisis.

Impact on Business & Brand

Although Turning Point USA is a nonprofit organization rather than a publicly traded company, the incident had significant implications for its brand, donor relationships, and long-term legitimacy. TPUSA's reputation became further polarized, reinforcing strong loyalty among supporters while intensifying criticism from opponents. Media coverage framed the organization not only as a political entity but as a central actor in a national debate over speech, accountability, and institutional power.

Financially, the organization faced indirect but meaningful risks. Heightened controversy can influence donor confidence, partnership opportunities, and the willingness of venues or institutions to associate with TPUSA programming. At the same time, the increased visibility may have strengthened fundraising among core supporters, illustrating how reputational impact can be uneven across stakeholder groups.

Beyond TPUSA, the broader brand impact extended to employers, universities, and institutions drawn into the controversy. Employers who disciplined workers faced reputational backlash from free-speech advocates, while those who refrained from action risked criticism from political activists. This spillover effect demonstrates how reputational risk can radiate outward, affecting organizations far removed from the original incident.

Communications Approach

Turning Point USA adopted a restrained and continuity-focused communications approach following Kirk's death. Rather than aggressively engaging critics, the organization emphasized honoring Kirk's legacy and maintaining operational stability. The emergence of Erika Kirk as a more visible leader, as reported by The New York Times, served as a symbolic and strategic move to reassure stakeholders that TPUSA would continue its mission despite the loss of its founder. There is little evidence that TPUSA conducted formal research during the initial response period; however, the organization appeared to rely on informal insights into its core audience, prioritizing messages that would resonate with loyal supporters rather than attempting to persuade skeptics. The primary stakeholders targeted were donors, members, and allied political actors.

In contrast, political figures and influencers outside the organization employed a highly confrontational communications strategy. Calls for accountability reframed the issue as a moral and cultural battle, effectively mobilizing attention but also escalating the crisis. Media organizations played a dual role, both reporting on the backlash and correcting misinformation. CNN and the BBC, in particular, focused on debunking conspiracy theories and contextualizing the institutional responses that followed.

Analysis

From a public relations perspective, TPUSA's restrained approach succeeded in avoiding further escalation but limited the organization's ability to shape the broader narrative. By focusing inward on continuity rather than outward on clarification, TPUSA maintained internal legitimacy but ceded narrative control to political actors and media outlets. The crisis illustrates principles of situational crisis communication theory, particularly the importance of matching response strategy to perceived responsibility. TPUSA was not responsible for the assassination, yet reputational responsibility emerged through association and response. This misalignment complicated effective communication. Ethical tensions were central to the case. Employers faced conflicting values between protecting free expression and safeguarding organizational reputation. Political actors leveraged moral framing to pressure institutions, raising questions about proportionality, fairness, and the ethics of public shaming. Legally, while employer actions were largely permissible, public misunderstanding of First Amendment protections exacerbated reputational damage.

What worked was the media's corrective role in addressing misinformation. What failed was the lack of consistent, values-based messaging from institutions responding to public pressure, which created confusion and fueled perceptions of arbitrariness.

Recommendations

If advising TPUSA leadership, a more proactive communications strategy would have been beneficial. While restraint has value, the organization could have articulated clearer principles regarding speech, accountability, and institutional responsibility, helping to frame the crisis rather than simply endure it.

For employers, clear and transparent communication about decision-making criteria would reduce reputational vulnerability. Explaining how policies are applied consistently, rather than reacting to public pressure, can preserve trust across stakeholder groups.

For PR professionals, the key takeaway is the necessity of anticipating secondary and tertiary reputational fallout. In an era of rapid digital amplification, crises rarely remain contained. Effective PR strategy requires early stakeholder mapping, rapid misinformation response, and values-driven messaging that can withstand polarization.

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