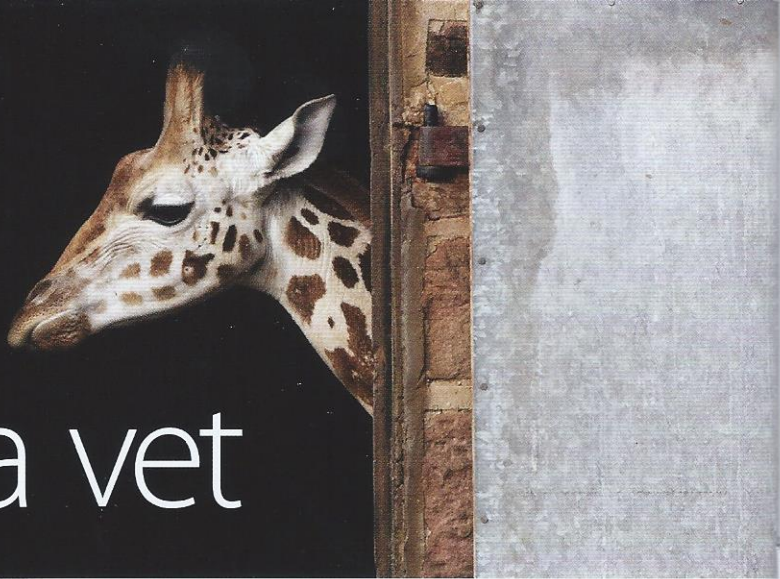


It shouldn't happen to a vet



Rosie Murray-West considers the reputational issues around Copenhagen Zoo's decision to put down a baby giraffe

If you are a Danish giraffe called Marius, now would be a good time to think about changing your name. Just three days after Copenhagen Zoo decided to stick its neck out and cull one of its herd for having the misfortune to be genetically common, a second Danish zoo was outed for considering killing another giraffe, also called Marius.

Given the PR furor surrounding the death of the first Marius in early February, you would have expected that Jyllands Park Zoo would have preferred to stay quiet about its own plans.

After all, the death of Marius the First provoked 30,000 people to sign an online petition, as well as thousands of tweets and messages decrying the action and vowing never to visit the zoo again. At times, the Danish zoo's behaviour seemed so perverse as to be almost courting further bad publicity – so what can the rest of the PR world learn from its actions?

Jonathan Chandler, partner at ReputationInc, describes Copenhagen Zoo's PR strategy as involving 'an utter lack of tact or any emotional response'. Despite the fact that the zoo's arguments were 'rational' he says, it 'argued coldly' and ended up looking 'harsh and insensitive'.

'There is a huge risk of alienating large tracts of latent support for their projects, funding and so forth,' adds Chandler. 'Was it worth that to make the point so bluntly?'

Perhaps giving a name to a baby giraffe that you are going to kill was a bad start, but Copenhagen Zoo followed this through to a bad finish. After announcing that it was going to put down Marius, it ignored offers from other zoos to adopt him, choosing instead to post a blunt statement on its website from scientific director Bengt Holst, with a number of answers to 'frequently asked questions'.

The zoo also chose to shoot the giraffe with a bolt gun, rather than use an anaesthetic, carry out a public autopsy into the giraffe with children present and then, as a finale, feed Marius' remains to the lions. Holst described the public outcry as 'totally out of proportion' and went on to point out that 'a giraffe is not a pet'.

Jonathan Hemus, crisis expert from Insignia Communications, says that the reaction had been so off the pace he had first wondered whether it was, in fact, 'a calculated

decision to stimulate debate', but ultimately decided this probably wasn't the intention.

Hemus says that, while the decision to kill the giraffe appeared to be scientifically justifiable, the inevitable accusations of cruelty were 'a much bigger reputational challenge'.

He adds: 'You have to ask yourself why they would want to do that. There was a lack of empathy and understanding about how this would be perceived.'

He says that if PRs were to learn anything from the Marius crisis, it is to do proper communications and crisis planning when you have to make a highly sensitive and emotionally-charged decision. 'That could have resulted in a sensitive and empathetic communications strategy,' he says. 'However, that isn't at all what happened.'

Rod Clayton, EVP, head of crisis and issues at Weber Shandwick, believes there are lessons to be learned. 'On the one hand, the martyrdom of Marius made for great media - the innocent giraffe slaughtered, viewed by innocent children. Astonishingly, it took the world's eyes off Syria but they have since settled back quickly on Ukraine,' he says. 'Presumably, the zoo has learnt a couple of important lessons. First, what's routine to you may be wholly extraordinary to others; surprise them with it and you will have no chance to explain. Second, the image of an animal being killed and eaten by lions while children look on is capable of driving the infinitely greater horrors of civil war from people's hearts, minds and screens.'

And giraffe lovers will be relieved to know, however, that Marius the Second has now been spared. In a post on its Facebook page, Jyllands Park Zoo said that it would have had to euthanise Marius 2 if more females were brought in to breed, but that this would not now be happening.

The post read: 'There is no plan, and there has never been a plan to neither move or euthanise any of our giraffes. The media stories are only based on a hypothetical situation, which we have answered questions about. This situation now seems to be eliminated. Have a nice weekend.' If only Marius the First could say the same. ☺