

McDonald's Big Arch Crisis: Communications Plan & Op-Ed

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Part 1: Crisis Plan

Recently, the CEO of McDonald's, Chris Kempczinski, faced backlash after appearing in a promotional tasting video for their new "Big Arch" burger, in which he is seen begrudgingly taking a bite of what he calls their "product." Safe to say, it wasn't the most convincing pitch for McDonald's customers to buy the burger, as online audiences criticized the moment as inauthentic, awkward, and out of touch, suggesting the CEO does not genuinely enjoy or stand behind the company's food. Surprisingly, spiking sales didn't matter here; the unalignment of the CEO with his own brand, which he claims to know through and through, was what was most prevalent here.

McDonald's is a brand built on relatability, trust, and everyday enjoyment. One built to last, and here that didn't exactly ring true. If consumers feel leadership is disconnected, it can damage brand credibility and customer loyalty. Customers also felt that if the company's own CEO could not enjoy the food, neither should they, and why should they? Fast food brands constantly face backlash for not being a good option for health and overall quality, so when something like this happens, it just doubles down on that and places a lack of trust in the brand and its leadership.

So, this needs a response, and it needs one fast and honestly. First, Kempczinski's understanding went wrong here, and why it did, and how it could've gone much better. His team needs to come together and make sure he is aware of the mistakes made and that he is filled in on the current backlash that he and McDonald's are facing right now, if he isn't already aware. This is the crucial first step because, just as in any misunderstanding, to come to a conclusion and agreement, both sides must hear their sides out, and must be knowledgeable about what happened, and how they can correct themselves for the future, or even explain a potential misunderstanding that may have gotten lost in translation. Whether that is because Kempczinski is not a camera person, or if he was having a bad day that day, that doesn't matter; what does is the understanding that the video shouldn't have been executed in that way, and should not have been posted out to the public.

Secondly, once everyone in the room and on the team is on the same page and understands what is wrong, they need a plan of action. In this case, explaining to their publics how their CEO Chris Kempczinski is truly, at the end of the day, a good guy, with kids, and a family who is mainly behind the scenes working the numbers and configurations of the brand for a reason. Nothing more than that, and nothing less. He is not a camera person, and actually only shares a portion of his actual personality when a camera is put in his face, let alone when he is tasked to eat a huge burger on screen and get messy. It's not that he is pretentious in his cashmere sweater and collared shirt in the uploaded video, it is that he is actually a very organized, anal, detail-oriented, and schedule oriented guy who is described as reserved and very under the radar, even while being one of the most known food-chain's CEO, who could very well be much

known if he wanted to be. But that's the thing, he doesn't want to be; he wants to get his work done and go home to his family and live his life. No wonder this mistake for being called pretentious got confused with who he truly is, an incredibly structured and to-the-point person who may enjoy watching reels and TikToks of other people, but is well-aware that he isn't the one who should be cast for them. This in itself isn't an issue; how his on-screen presence was interpreted in this video is. So, his team came up with the idea to show the real him. What are the behind-the-scenes clips, while the camera was still rolling, that did not make the final cut. Clips that show the real him, maybe awkward moments, moments where he needed to be directed multiple times before getting it right, even a clip showing him say to his team, "Could you guys really not find anyone else?" even being seen apologizing to his team working tirelessly to make him more comfortable in front of the camera when saying, "I'm sorry guys, I'm just not a camera person." This shows that his team once thought that the final cut of the published video was the best they could get from Kempczinski, the clips that showed his personality the most, when in reality a fresh set of eyes, their publics, couldn't agree less and in fact thought it did just the opposite and were not afraid to speak their opinions on it either. However, after the team put this idea into action, they too quickly realized that the customer truly is always right, and that this new compilation they had of their CEO's behind-the-scenes blooper moments was what really should've been posted originally. Showing the personality and awkwardness, which at first glance was immediately thought to be cut from the final video, should've been included all along. They didn't realize that when they thought they were originally showing "authenticity" of a CEO doing a taste test in the middle of his workday at his desk, they weren't even beginning to scratch the surface.

The last step is getting this new video/response to the situation uploaded and to their publics, as soon as possible. The more time there is with no response on the matter, the more time their audiences are speculating and forming more and more perceptions of this CEO when in reality, they have it all wrong, and Kempczinski is actually more like them than they initially realized, just a camera shy guy who would rather enjoy his burger in peace in his own office, and not with millions watching. What comes with this post that will most likely be posted to their Instagram and TikTok platforms is a caption. Yes, this is a step in itself because this is more important than a lot of people realize and could be taken into multiple different routes. It is important to include where the brand's own stance is with their CEO and the situation. In this one, clearly playing on authenticity and telling it how it is, so the caption should be doing the same. The team came up with the caption saying, "And just when we thought we had gotten Chris to appear like he liked the camera, you guys were right, he doesn't and never did. We have finally accepted his wishes and pleads not to be on camera after this one, and he will continue on in the role that he does best, as our CEO, not our camera talent. Thanks for trying, though, Chris. We love you!" This matters because, as the viewers watch this hysterical compilation of cut clips where Kempczinski is seen multiple times messing up, getting nervous or just acting awkward, the audience will realize that all of their speculations and hopeful horrible rumors to be true about the CEO were in reality, false, and there was nothing more to it than just not being made

for the camera. Just as most people who are going to be watching this video aren't either, because even Chris Kempczinski, current CEO of McDonald's, gets camera-shy too.

Which is exactly why, in this case, Chris is his own best spokesperson, as he is not speaking anymore on the matter, but otherwise showing just how he is, authentically, from these already kept clips of him, which had not been aired before. Since there is truly nothing else to be said on the matter, or about him, and just showing his public who the real him is, when the camera is off, is enough. As it shows the more natural version of Chris, the one that admits he is bad at this whole camera thing, he isn't a food reviewer, and most importantly, he is actually enjoyable to be around, despite the false picture the public had painted just from this short, scripted taste test video that seemed to circulate for all the wrong reasons. In the end, by Chris being his own spokesperson through showing the real him, that is the best statement anyone can put out. A statement showing, not telling, that this person, who was just under fire for coming off pretentious and out of touch, is, at the end of the day, just a bit of a shy and awkward guy who means well and makes people laugh along the way by not being a natural in front of a camera.

Recommended steps

- **1st Step:** Making the CEO and the entirety of the team aware of the backlash they are facing and why and how this backlash has come to be. Making sure everyone is on the same page with the wrongly interpreted video of the CEO's taste test of the new burger, the Big Arch.
- **2nd Step:** Form their response, which is going to be the compilation of behind-the-scenes and uncut clips where the CEO is seen being much more personable and less uptight and nervous when he thinks the camera is turned off, even admitting to not being a camera person at all, and that they got the wrong person. He even apologizes for how badly he is doing when the camera is turned on and how he would rather them find someone better for the role.
- **3rd Step:** Once the video is made and ready to post, make a caption that supports the video and explains to their audiences what they are trying to get across as their response in posting this raw, unfiltered video of their normally very filtered and structured CEO, Chris Kempczinski. With the caption (Lucy and Ingrid feel free to edit this) ““And just when we thought we had gotten Chris to appear like he liked the camera, you guys were right, he doesn't and never did. We have finally accepted his wishes and pleads not to be on camera after this one, and he will continue on in the role that he does best, as our CEO, not our camera talent. Thanks for trying, though, Chris. We love you!” Trying to keep it kind to their CEO, but explaining that they see where the audience is coming from in seeing the discomfort that Chris showed in the previously posted taste test of him.

Spokesperson Bio

Chris Kempczinski is the President and Chief Executive Officer of McDonald's, where he has spent nearly a decade shaping one of the world's most recognized brands into something that continues to matter to everyday people. With over 25 years of experience across premier global consumer companies, including Procter & Gamble, PepsiCo, and Kraft Foods, Chris brought a sharp, strategic eye to McDonald's long before he took the top seat as CEO. Today, he leads the company's growth strategy with the same mission they've had since day one: to make delicious, feel-good moments easy for everyone.

What you won't find Chris doing is chasing the spotlight. He is, by his own admission, a behind-the-scenes operator; he's the kind of leader who would rather perfect the details of a decision than take a bow for making it. His comfort zone is the boardroom, not behind the camera, and anyone who has worked alongside him will tell you that his reserved, methodical nature is precisely what makes him so effective at what he does. Chris leads McDonald's the same way most of its customers enjoy it; without the fuss, and with a lot more going on beneath the surface than people might expect.

Key Messages

- McDonald's is built on consistency and trust, where customers know what they're getting and feel good coming back
- McDonald's strives for everyday relatability, which is at the core of our identity. We want our customers to see it as part of their routine, not something distant or out of touch.
- Turns out running a global company $\neq$ being a professional food influencer.
- Not everyone was born to be on camera... but everyone *can* enjoy a good burger.

Sample Q&A

Q1: If your own CEO looked like he didn't enjoy the product, why should customers?

A: We understand why the video released made it seem this way. What the video didn't capture is that Chris isn't a polished on-camera personality. Instead, he's a behind-the-scenes leader. In a world of ever-evolving trends and media involvement, our CEO took the time out of his day to try out something new. Our food continues to be enjoyed by millions of customers every day, and that hasn't changed.

Q2: Is this a sign that McDonald's leadership is out of touch with its own brand?

A: Not at all. Chris is wholeheartedly involved in McDonald's. This moment reflects a mismatch between the messenger and the medium and not a disconnect from the brand itself. All in all, don't shoot the messenger! In the future, we might choose someone to try out our new meals who really shines when on camera.

Q3: Why did McDonald's approve and publish a video that clearly felt inauthentic?

A: In hindsight, the video didn't land the way it was intended to. At the time, the goal was to show how involved every team member, no matter their rank. Now, we recognize that it didn't translate that way to audiences. That's exactly why we're responding quickly and transparently.

Q4: Isn't releasing "bloopers" footage just a way to spin the narrative instead of taking accountability?

A: It's actually the opposite. Rather than over-polishing a response, we're choosing transparency. The behind-the-scenes footage shows the reality of our media team's day-to-day operations. We hope this allows people to form their own opinions based on a fuller picture.

Q5: Does this incident reflect a larger issue with authenticity in McDonald's marketing?

A: Authenticity is something we take seriously, and this moment reinforces how important it is. We don't see it as a systemic issue, but as a learning opportunity to ensure our content consistently reflects who we are as a brand.

Q6: What concrete changes are you making to ensure this doesn't happen again?

A: We're being more deliberate about aligning the right voices with the right platforms and ensuring content feels natural and credible before it's released. That includes refining our review process and focusing on authenticity over performance.

Public Statement

We recognize the concerns raised regarding our recent promotional video featuring our CEO, Chris Kempczinski, and understand how it may have felt out of line with the authenticity and relatability that have come to define McDonald's. We take this feedback seriously and acknowledge the importance of maintaining trust with our customers. In response, we have reviewed the content and are taking immediate steps to better reflect our brand values by sharing more genuine, behind-the-scenes moments that highlight Chris's true personality. We want to reinforce that not every leader is meant to be on camera, even though in our case, they are entirely committed to the McDonald's community. We will be ensuring future content aligns more closely with audience expectations. Our priority is to continue building transparency and authenticity in how we communicate, and we are committed to learning from this moment by refining our approach to leadership visibility and brand storytelling so that it resonates more meaningfully with our community. For any questions or additional feedback, please contact our communications team at press@mcdonalds.com.

Part 2: Op-Ed Article

Let me be the first to say it: I have read the comments on the video. And honestly? You're not wrong. If you happened to catch my recent Instagram post promoting McDonald's newest "product," the Big Arch, you witnessed something that no amount of boardroom experience could have prepared me for: me, on camera, attempting to sell you a burger. The internet had

thoughts. My team had thoughts. Even my kids had thoughts, and teenagers are not known for their diplomacy. The consensus was clear, and I am self-aware enough to admit it: I should not be in front of a camera. I never should have been, and after this, I won't be again. Truthfully, that reaction makes sense because, according to a study, 59% of Gen Z are far more likely to trust brands and leaders who come across as real rather than polished or performative. But here's what I need you to understand. My awkwardness on screen has absolutely nothing to do with the burger.

I have spent the better part of three decades working in the food industry and have sat across the table from some of the sharpest minds in the food industry. I have pored over data, obsessed over strategy, and spent more hours than I can count thinking about what people want and how to deliver it to them. What I have never done, in any of those three decades, is go viral for eating lunch. And yet, somehow, here we are. My Instagram following is up 30%. Which, if I'm being honest, says less about my skills as a food reviewer and more about how quickly the internet will come knocking at your door the first second they can.

That is not my world. I am, by nature, a behind-the-scenes person. I am the guy who gets in early, works the numbers, and goes home to his family. I find genuine satisfaction in the details of running this company, the logistics, the strategy, the thousand small decisions that go into making sure that when you walk into any McDonald's anywhere in the world, your experience is exactly what you came for. That is what I was built for. A "mukbang," apparently, is not.

And look, I know what you are thinking. If the CEO of McDonald's can't even eat his own burger, why should I? It is a fair question, and my honest answer is that making a great burger and starring in a "mukbang" are two completely different skills, and we have spent sixty years mastering exactly one of them.

I will admit something that my communications team will probably wince reading. Walking into that tasting video, I was nervous. Not because I had any doubt about the Big Arch, I didn't, and I still don't. I was nervous because I am a 58-year-old introvert who was about to eat a towering burger in front of a camera while trying to look natural. I was genuinely worried about getting sesame seeds in my teeth or mustard on my face. I was in my own head in a way that I never am when I am doing the job I was actually hired to do.

And for what it's worth, the work I have spent my career focused on (the kind that happens far away from a camera) has mattered. Since I stepped into this role in 2019, the company's stock has risen 72%. Not because I know how to take a perfect bite on cue, but because I know how to do the job I was actually hired to do.

That is the irony of the whole situation. The version of me you saw in that video, being stiff, careful, overly composed, is the least like me of any version you could have caught. Ask anyone who works with me. The real version of me is the one nervously asking the camera operator if we could do another take. The one who turned to his team afterward and said, genuinely, "I'm sorry, I just don't know how to do this." That version is a lot more fun at dinner, I promise.

And strangely enough, the moment that I would probably redo if given the chance ended up generating an estimated \$18.4 million in brand value in just one month. Not exactly the outcome I had in mind when I sat down with that burger.

But here is where I want to stop talking about me and start talking about what actually matters, and what should have been the point all along. The Big Arch is a great burger. I know that not because I said so in a video, but because I know what went into making it. I know the testing, the iterations, the conversations with franchisees, and the feedback from customers. I know the craft behind it, even if I couldn't quite convey it while trying not to chew too obnoxiously.

So I'm stepping back from that pretense. I'm handing the Big Arch over to the people who were actually built for this: the creators, the fans, the mukbangers who eat on camera for a living and somehow make it look like the best part of their day. Because the burger can speak for itself. It just needs the right voice.

I'll keep doing what I'm good at: the numbers, the strategy, the thousand decisions that go into making sure McDonald's is worth showing up to. And I'll leave the camera to the people who don't spend the entire time worrying about their teeth. So that is exactly who we are handing the mic to. Starting now, McDonald's is inviting food influencers, creators, and everyday fans to be the voice of the Big Arch. Try it. Film it. Tell people what you actually think using #ReviewtheArchRight.

It turns out knowing your strengths is just as important as knowing your product. Lucky for all of us, we're confident in both. Not everyone was born to be on camera. I am living proof of that. But everyone, regardless of their relationship with a camera crew, deserves a burger worth talking about. We made that burger. We'll leave the talking to the people who are actually good at it. The Big Arch is here. Go try it for yourself (and please, do a better job reviewing it than I did.)

Who did what - Part 2:

Lucy (Spokesperson Bio and Op-Ed Article) I was responsible for writing the Spokesperson Bio for Chris Kempczinski and the Op-Ed article. Writing the Spokesperson Bio taught me how much context matters in a crisis. Simply listing Chris's credentials was not enough to regain the audience's trust. I had to think about how his awkward personality and leadership style were actually relevant to his review of the big arch burger and how framing those traits honestly could work in his favor rather than against him. What made the process especially interesting was building Chris's persona in the Spokesperson Bio first, and then getting to bring it to life in the Op-Ed. The bio gave me a foundation of who he is, how he leads, his quirks and what makes him tick. Then, the Op-Ed became the place where that character actually got to speak. The Op-Ed article was where I learned the most. Writing in Chris's voice forced me to think about one of the core tensions in crisis communication: how do you make someone seem human and self-aware without undermining their authority? I tried to strike that balance by letting him own his

awkwardness by including little details like worrying about getting food in his teeth or mustard on his face, while keeping the focus on the brand and the product thanks to Ingrid's help incorporating relevant statistics. The goal was for the vulnerability to be endearing. Funny enough, yesterday I came across a Wall Street Journal TikTok interview with Chris where he spoke about the crisis himself and he actually brought up feeling embarrassed and self-conscious about things like chewing with his mouth open. It was a really cool moment to realize that the way we approached this crisis by leaning into his self-awareness and humanizing him rather than polishing him was pretty spot on to how it actually played out in real life.

Ingrid (Key messages, Sample Q&As, Key statement, supporting Op-ed data): For this project, being able to work on the mentioned sections allowed me to be creative, come up with ways to support our vision, and add in key metrics was a whirlwind of fun! Our project has some humor to it, so it was fun to incorporate that, especially in the Q&A. On the opposite end of the spectrum, I added onto Lucy's Op-Ed and provided specific data to provide a well-rounded article. Lucy already had lots of great stuff in there, so that made it straightforward to find points to add. The key messages were fun to write as well because I wanted to include McDonald's normal identity while also responding to the situation, and not directly one or the other. As a team, the three of us brainstormed and explored multiple ways to approach the situation. Because this was just focused on brand image and transparency, there were no huge stakes on the line. No one got hurt, and no one was offended. This allowed us to have some fun and try out different ideas until we circled in on one that worked!

Gabby (Crisis Plan and Recommended Steps): While working on this Crisis PR & Op-Ed Assignment, I focused on the Crisis Plan and the next recommended steps for McDonald's. This was such an interesting project to work on, and really fueled my passions that I already have grown for Crisis PR, especially to do with a topic that I was familiar with beforehand, as I saw across multiple social media platforms the now famous video of Chris Kempczinski trying the new Big Arch burger McDonald's just recently launched, and the brewing, continuous criticism that continues to build around it. So, this part really allowed me to sit and think to brainstorm exactly what I would do if I were in his team's role, having to manage this crisis, and figure out how they would be able to do it quickly and honestly. Of course, coming to these final step recommendations with the help of my group, Lucy and Ingrid, who helped form my writing for this part of the project greatly. This was a great assignment that helped me practice real-world applications of crisis management, especially thinking at the larger scale with major companies such as McDonald's.