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CEOs and Crises.

Reputation. Response. Recovery.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What role does the CEO play in reputation recovery?

When leaders fall short during a crisis, their media coverage suffers and so does their business.

In the first part of Medianet's CEO series, we explored how closely a CEO's profile is tied to their brand's reputation. But what happens when a crisis lands on the CEO's desk, or begins with the CEO themselves?

Medianet examined **three Australian case studies** with quite distinct anatomies: the **Sydney Swans**' response to an alleged incident involving five players, **KPMG's** handling of damning whistleblower claims, and **WiseTech's** response to a raft of complaints made against co-founder and CEO Richard White.

These cases aren't like-for-like, but in each one, the actions of the CEO and leadership team shaped how the crisis played out in the media. We identified four factors that made the difference.

Four factors for crisis management

- **Timing of response.** Speed influenced how each crisis played out. Acting quickly helped leaders set the terms of coverage, while delay let the media define the story. However, speed only helped when the action was genuine.
- **Authenticity.** Journalists tended to measure leaders against their own words. Actions that matched statements built credibility, while contradictions often became the story.
- **Access to the media.** Visible leaders tended to have more say in the narrative. Fronting the media signalled accountability, while absence left critics to frame the crisis.
- **Empathetic messaging.** Leading with concern for those affected showed an understanding of the harm.

Crisis response scorecard.

	Sydney Swans	KPMG	WiseTech
The trigger	Reports of an alleged incident at a Melbourne hotel (Aug 2026)	Whistleblower claims aired in parliament (March 2026)	'LinkedIn Lecher' allegations first surface in media (Oct 2024)
Speed of response	Under 24 hours – fault admitted 2 days – players sanctioned and banned from finals	66 days – first media release and CEO resignation 91 days - Chair resignation	3 days – CEO steps down, no fault admitted 728 days – former CEO still at various senior roles
Media access	CEO, Chair, Coach and Captain fronted the media in person within a week of the incident.	Very little engagement until months into the crisis. CEO and Chair coverage largely contained to parliamentary inquiries.	CEO statement did not acknowledge the allegations. Stepped down, but kept a $1m-a-year consultancy and a board seat.
How they reacted	With empathy – condemned the conduct and acknowledged the human impact.	With process – an independent law-firm review.	With distance – keep professional and personal separate.
Media sentiment	75% of first-week coverage had a neutral tone. Positive sentiment appeared in reports at the end of the week.	Unfavourable sentiment rose from 19% in the six months before May to 28% since May 2026.	64% of WiseTech coverage in the past 12 months was unfavourable towards the organisation.
Where it stands	Stabilised. Focus remains on the players; likely to re-emerge if criminal charges are upheld.	Flatlined. Reputation impacted, government contracts blocked, major clients leaving.	Metastasised. The share price has fallen from a high of $138 to $28.

KPMG

Too dull to be news. Until it wasn't.

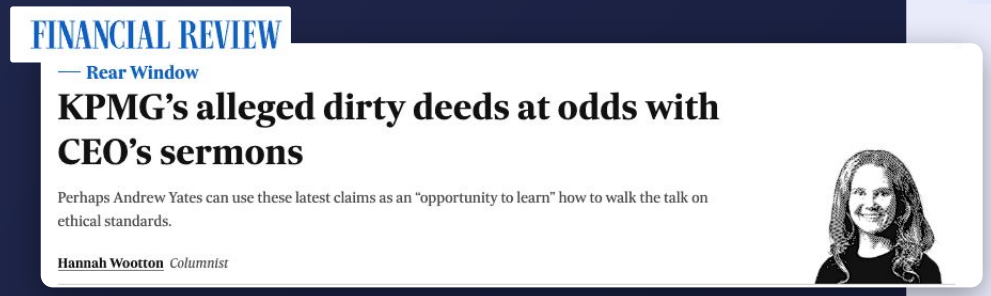
In March 2026, Labor Senator Deborah O'Neill used parliamentary privilege to air KPMG a whistleblower's claims the firm's audit arm had allegedly used confidential data from clients to win audit work.

For two months, the story stayed small: 328 print and online items, with almost 20% appearing in the *AFR*. The scandal was hard to explain and had no human hook.

That changed in May 2026 when KPMG admitted fault, and the first raft of KPMG executive leaders resigned.

Coverage rose 133%. Negative coverage rose 230%. Scrutiny of the organisation, and the culture within these large professional service firms hit the mainstream.

Furthermore, this propelled KPMG executives into the spotlight, particularly CEO Andrew Yates and Chair Martin Sheppard. These individuals would shape the evolution of the story in months to come.


FINANCIAL REVIEW

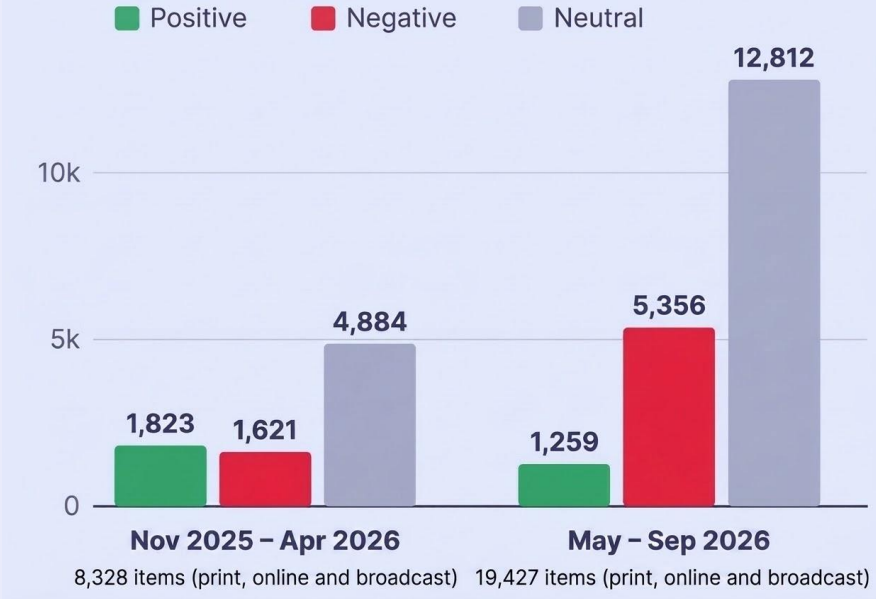
— Rear Window

KPMG's alleged dirty deeds at odds with CEO's sermons

Perhaps Andrew Yates can use these latest claims as an "opportunity to learn" how to walk the talk on ethical standards.

Hannah Wootton *Columnist*

Before the scandal, positive items outnumbered negative ones. After the scandal, positive coverage fell from 22% to 6% of items.



Print, online and broadcast mentions of KPMG, 1 Nov 2025–30 Apr 2026 vs 1 May–18 Sep 2026.

HOW THEY HANDLED IT

Silence for months.

Two former KPMG executives were instrumental in shaping subsequent media narratives. One one hand, CEO Andrew Yates and Chair Marin Shappard on the other.



CEO Andrew Yates: The Values Gap

Yates enjoyed a strong profile in Australia's corporate sector, positioning himself as the most ethical of the big 4 firms, and was scathing of PwC's own tax scandal back in 2023. So when allegations arose, media were quick to notice the delta between his values-based reputation and allegations he had threatened the whistleblower with legal action.



Chair Martin Sheppard: Defiant until the End

KPMG Chair Martin Sheppard stayed on after Yates departed, and remained in defiance despite a slew of scandals, including allegations of a conflict of interest, misuse of confidential client information, and refusal to offer whistleblower protections. Sheppard was a leader whose refusal to accept accountability became the focus, and the firm's reputation recovery stalled until he finally stepped down on 23 June.

KPMG's response in three steps.

1 **Distance**
CEO Andrew Yates was the first of eight executives to step down, including the Head of Audit, COO, Head of HR and Chair.

2 **Acknowledge**
New CEO John Sams is a 'competent' voice, praised by the media for not downplaying the firm's misconduct.

3 **Investigate**
KPMG announced an independent legal investigation and a formal review of the firm's culture.

THE VERDICT

Too little too late.

The Australian KPMG firm remains embattled. Media reputation has not recovered. Corporate contracts have dried up, and the federal government has temporarily blocked KPMG from any new public sector contracts. **The scandal could have stayed in the business pages. Instead, KPMG's CEO and chair turned it into mainstream news.**

A dull audit story

The issues were complex. Outlets ran explainers to help readers follow the hearings, which rarely get noticed without a hook.

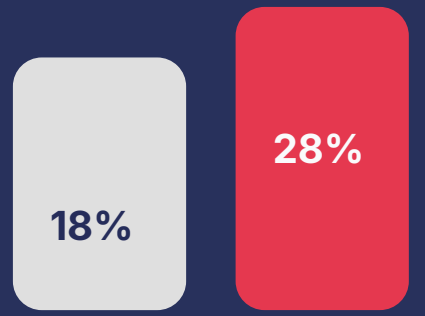
A gossip scandal

Sheppard sparked lurid media coverage after admitting Westpac Chair Peter Nash stayed at his home during KPMG's audit pitch.

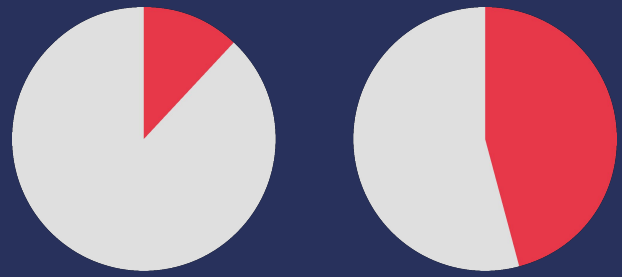
A question of trust

Yates's mishandling of whistleblower claims contradicted his ethical stance, revealing a cosy network between auditors and the boards they audit.

From small story to front page news.



Negative sentiment in coverage mentioning KPMG shifted to 28% from 18% since the scandal hit headlines in May 2026 compared to the 5 months prior.



Oct 2025 - Apr 2026
12%

May - Sep 2026
46%

The disconnect between Yates' ethical positioning and revelations of whistleblower mistreatment was a key theme of early unfavourable reporting.

Unfavourable
All other coverage

SYDNEY SWANS

Facing up to breaking news.

Coverage of the Sydney Swans saga followed a different trajectory to KPMG.

The alleged incident involving five Swans' players at a Melbourne hotel was reported in the early hours of Monday 17 August, and hit the headlines as early as 2pm on the same day.

Unlike KPMG whose leadership were quiet for months after whistleblower revelations were first reported, Swans and AFL leadership team were immediately on the front foot.

Public appearances from multiple members of the Swans leadership were consistent in days and weeks to follow, helping to contain the crisis from expanding further.





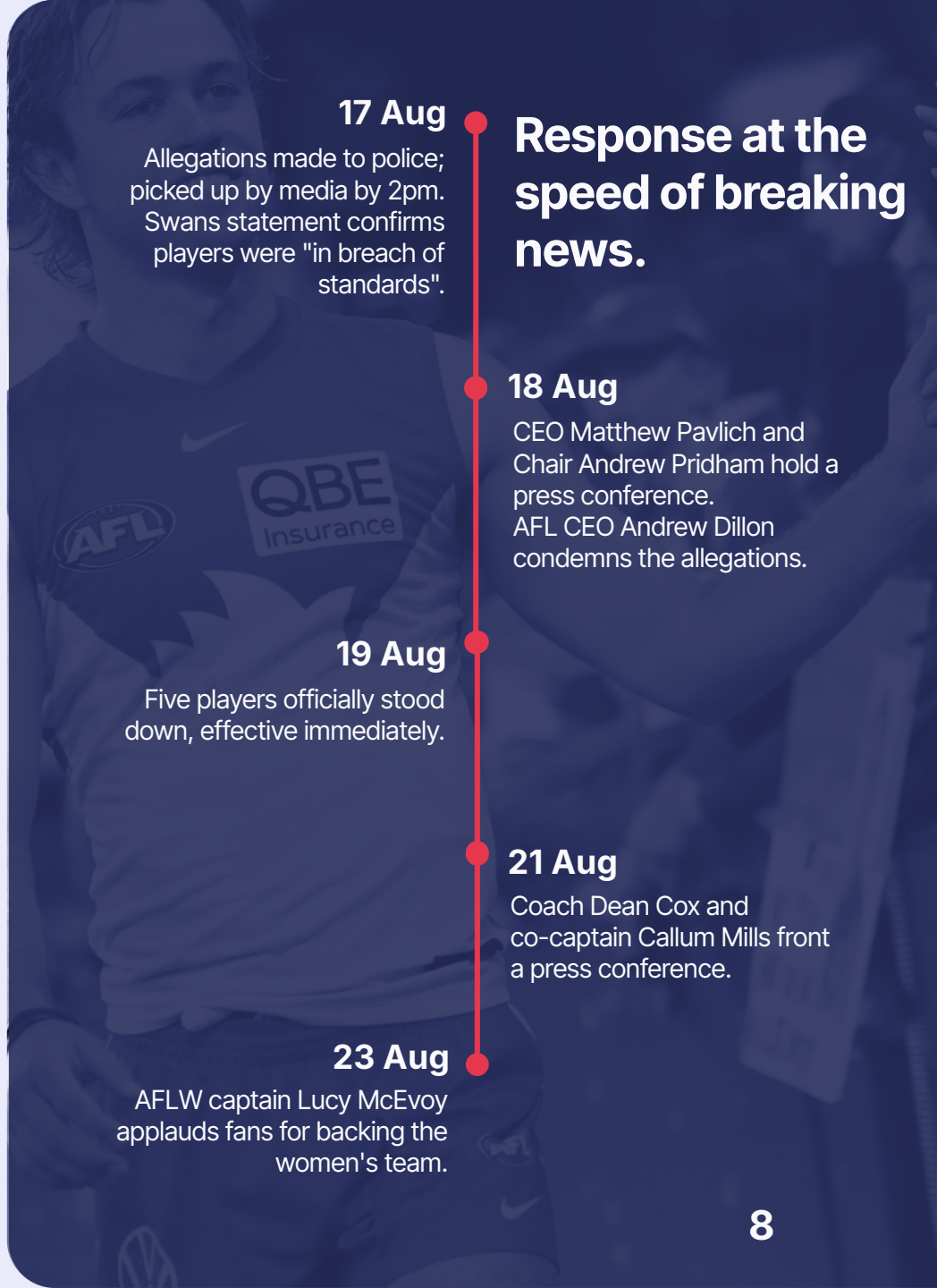
HOW THEY HANDLED IT

Immediate response.

The timing and actions of leadership from the Sydney Swans Football Club were key in the seven days following news breaking. Importantly, each individual fronted the media in person, rather than relying solely on a written statement.

- **Speed:** CEO Matthew Pavlich responded immediately, condemning the player's actions. Shortly after press conferences saw Pavlich and Swans' Chair Andrew Pridham emphatically apologised and assure a swift disciplinary response.
- **Consistency:** AFL CEO Andrew Dillon and Swans coach Dean Cox, and co-captain Callum Mills, followed suit within the next two days.
- **Accountability:** Sydney Swans immediately sanctioned the players and later confirmed they would not be playing in the highly anticipated AFL Finals series.

These actions did not necessarily minimise unfavourable sentiment - the incident prompted widespread condemnation of the AFL's 'bad culture'. However, the rapid response by Swans' leadership team helped distance the club from the 'bad apples' in the early days of the crisis.



THE VERDICT

Messaging and unity pays off.

By the end of the week, positive narratives related to club unity, support from fans, and record crowds to watch the women's game were appearing in headlines and social media discussions.

Values-Led Messaging

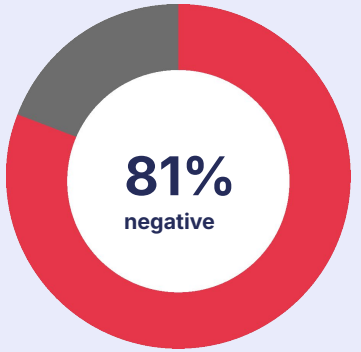
In the early days these public statements were highly scrutinised, with media and social channels ready to condemn justification for the players' actions, or overemphasis on the impact for the football club rather than the victim..

Pavlich and Cox saw some initial criticisms, with social media reactions highly unfavourable in the first 24 hours of the scandal.

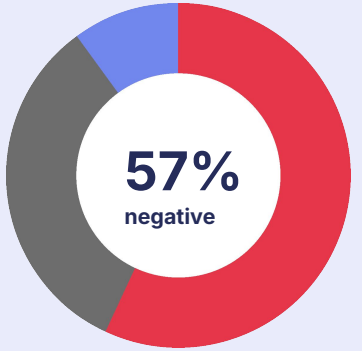
Message evolution

The Swans leadership adjusted their messaging in subsequent media and social media appearances:

- Pavlich and Pridham co-penned a social media statement that led with concern for the victim.
- Pridham noted that the 'football outcome' was not a consideration in sanctioning the players.
- Coach Dean Cox and co-captain Callum Mills expressed they were 'deeply sorry' in a widely published media conference.



Publicly available social media references to Sydney Swans **17 August 2026**.



Publicly available social media references to Sydney Swans **23 August 2026**

Negative Neutral Positive

WISETECH GLOBAL

When the CEO is the crisis.

WiseTech Global is an Australian logistics software company, listed on the ASX since 2016.

In October 2024, an investigation by Nine publications made several allegations against co-founder and CEO Richard White, including unwanted approaches to female entrepreneurs, relationships with employees, and pay arrangements not disclosed to investors.

Like KPMG, WiseTech works in a sector that rarely draws much media attention. However, the personal nature of the allegations changed that. The investigation into "the LinkedIn Lecher", ran across several days, and WiseTech shares fell 14.6% on the first trading day after it broke.

What White did next continues to plague the organisation he co-founded. He resigned as CEO, but stayed on as a consultant and major shareholder. When four directors resigned over his ongoing role, he became executive chairman. It wasn't until July 2026 when he finally stepped down amid ASIC and AFP investigations.



THE AGE

'The LinkedIn Lecher': Billionaire's controversial approaches, board concerns revealed

Nick McKenzie, Kate McClymont and Max Mason
October 21, 2024 – 5:00am



HOW THEY HANDLED IT

Quick yet superficial.

WiseTech's crisis did not fail because of one bad decision. It failed because each response kept Richard White at the centre of the company, and so at the centre of the media story.

The resignation that wasn't

White stepped down as CEO within days, but took on a full-time consulting role on the same salary. Investors were not convinced, and **shares fell 6.3% the day it was announced.** What was meant to draw a line under the scandal became evidence that nothing had changed.

The board walked out, and the market followed

In February 2025, four directors, including the independent chair, resigned over White's ongoing role, leaving only two on the board. This was WiseTech's **biggest single-day share-price fall** in the period.

Unlike Sydney Swans, there was no actual disciplinary action taken against the individual at the centre of the scandal - Richard White. Unlike KPMG, there was no independent legal or cultural review. **As co-founder of the company, WiseTech's response was really White's response.**

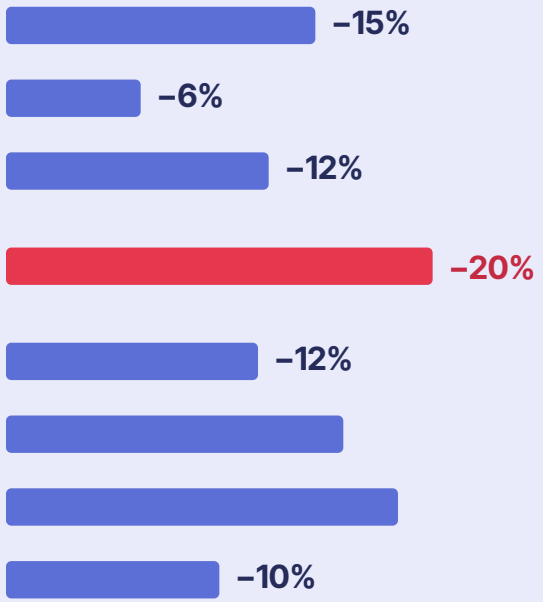
A response without genuine substance.

1. **Distance, in name only.** White resigned as CEO within days, but stayed on as a full-time consultant on the same $1 million salary, and remained a major shareholder.

2. **Deflect.** White's resignation statement did not acknowledge the allegations, focusing instead on his commitment to the company's future.

3. **Entrench.** When four directors resigned over his ongoing role, White became executive chairman. White stepped down as chair in July 2026 amid ASIC and AFP investigations, but remains a director and Chief Innovation Officer.

Timeline of share price drops x media headlines.



21 Oct 2024	'The LinkedIn Lecher': Billionaire's controversial approaches, board concerns revealed
24 Oct 2024	WiseTech chief executive Richard White quits amid scandal
22 Nov 2024	WiseTech shares crash as founder Richard White fails to front shareholders
24 Feb 2025	**WiseTech Global shares plunge as board directors quit over Richard White's ongoing role**
27 Aug 2025	Richard White insists WiseTech troubles are over, but shares dive
28 Oct 2025	AFP raids WiseTech office over Richard White's selldown, shares dive
22 Jun 2026	WiseTech boss probed over sex trafficking claims
26 Aug 2026	WiseTech reports record revenue growth while shedding 1700 staff

Single-day falls in WiseTech's ASX share price, with the leading media headline on the day. Oct 2024–Aug 2026.

THE VERDICT

Reputation and share price fall out.

White's activities had implications for Wisetech's financial performance. Each fall in share price followed a trigger in media coverage, and the largest single drop (20%) responded to reports of the board walkout, not a new allegation. The failure to separate White from the company did as much damage as the allegations themselves.

A successor in White's shadow

When Zubin Appoo was named CEO in July 2025, coverage highlighted his close working relationship with White.

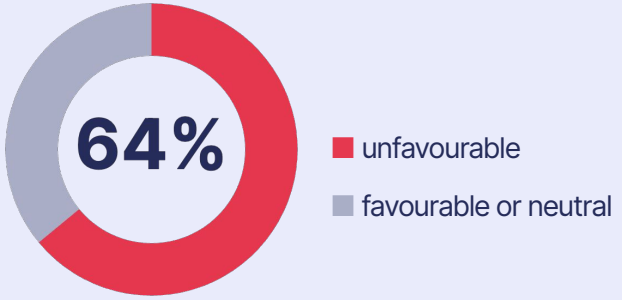
Over the past year, White has attracted almost **three times** as much media coverage as Appoo. A new CEO can only reset the story if they are allowed to own it.

The scandal now discounts the good news

In August 2026, despite WiseTech reporting record revenue growth, shares fell 10.1%. Financial analysts noted the "regulatory cloud" of ongoing investigations, many centred on White.

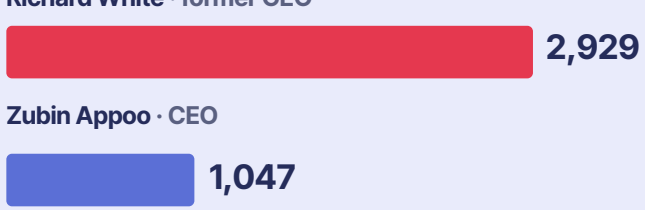
This is the clearest sign of lasting damage, the crisis now shapes how investors read WiseTech's strongest results.

Sentiment in coverage mentioning White



Two years on, most prominent coverage of White still reflects badly on the company.

Share of voice, past 12 months



White attracted **almost three times** the media coverage of his successor.

LEARNINGS

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1 Balance speed with substance.

Front the media early, but back it up with genuine action within days. Rushed, superficial actions won't contain the issue.







LEARNINGS

2 Match words with consequences.

Statements only carry weight when tied to real accountability. If your response contradicts your established reputation or avoids meaningful reform, coverage will turn quickly.





LEARNINGS

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3 Give the media direct access.

Put leadership forward in person to take questions. Relying on written statements or waiting until you're forced to speak always fares worse.





LEARNINGS

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4 Lead with empathy, not process.

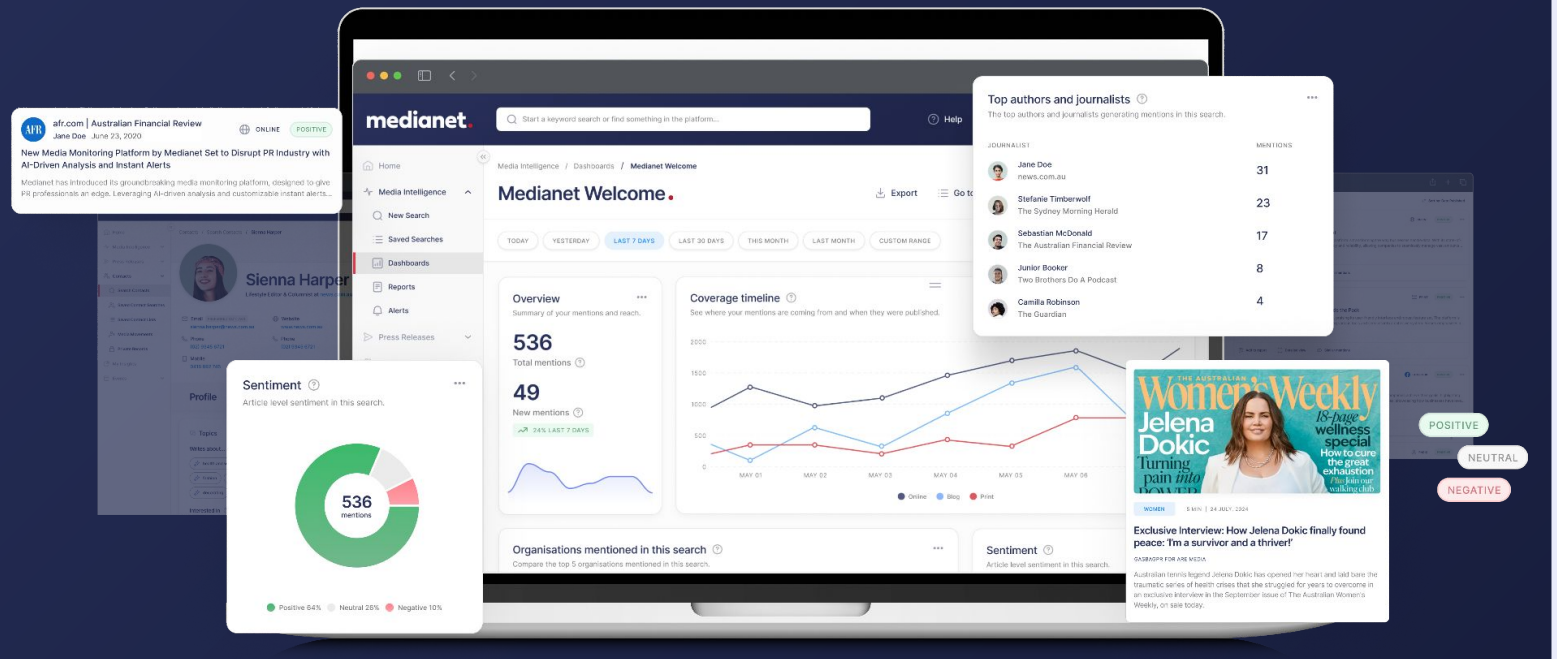
Focus on the people affected first. Hiding behind policy, process, or silence only prolongs the scrutiny.





Methodology.

Medianet sourced print, online, broadcast and select social media content through our own media intelligence platform. These data points were reviewed and interrogated by our expert analysts to uncover strategic insights and learnings.



A note.

These three cases span different industries and different kinds of crises, so they aren't like-for-like. KPMG's claims were contested and complex, the Swans faced conduct the players admitted to and apologised for, and White denies the allegations at the centre of the AFP investigation.

The time frames also differ. With one week of data for the Swans against much longer periods for KPMG and WiseTech, the Swans' story may still change. Other factors also played a part in each organisation's business performance, including AI disruption and US tariff announcements for WiseTech.

Even so, the same leadership factors shaped the media response in each case, and there were clear levers that influenced the outcome for each organisation in crisis.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The information on this report was sourced from Medianet's media monitoring platform and other third-party sources such as the ASX, industry reports and social listening tools.

This data was analysed by Medianet's media analysis arm, Medianet Insights. Medianet Insights provides expert and actionable media analysis for some of Australia's top organisations to uncover the deeper meaning of their media coverage.

Our team of expert analysts thoroughly interpret your media data to give you understanding and context of the impact of your media mentions through award-winning weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual bespoke reports.

Learn more about Medianet Insights here.



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