

Scenario for the Assignment

I am doing personal publicity for a new chef in Seattle named Mario Valo. He currently owns two popular pizza places and is about to open a third restaurant in the hip, up-and-coming Columbia City neighborhood. The new restaurant will be called Rainier Fog and will be his biggest restaurant yet. The restaurant will serve pizza during the day and feature live bands and dancing on Friday and Saturday nights. Mario hopes to attract the young millennial and Gen Z professionals currently moving out to the area. Mario has hired me to help him promote the new restaurant, build a fan following, and get some coverage in the press to help spread the word about his hottest new restaurant.

It is currently December 1, and I have three months before the restaurant opens on March 1. Mario has done some press in the past, but mainly local newspaper and food blogs and is ready for more national recognition to help him reach out of town tourists and position him for other potential business opportunities.

To add in a crisis PR element, two weeks before the restaurant opens, a man claiming to be a customer at one of Mario's other restaurants claims he found a slug in his breadsticks and posts a fake photo on Instagram. This is likely just an immature prank, but the comments under the post are starting to gain traction, with people questioning the cleanliness of the restaurant and its food handling practices. My client, Mario, is getting worried about this potentially causing bad PR right before his new restaurant opening. The Seattle Times gets wind of the story and calls me asking for a statement from Mario.

Develop a PR plan to help Chef Mario Valo meet his goals and address the crisis incident.

PR Plan for Chef Mario Valo's Rainier Fog Restaurant Opening

Current as of December 1, 2021 – to be updated as the campaign progresses

Research

1. I would first research some well-established restaurants in the Columbia City neighborhood that seem to attract a customer base similar to that which Rainier Fog will be targeting. For example, [Tutta Bella Neapolitan Pizzeria](#), [Archipelago](#), and [Off Alley](#). Each is an upscale eatery specializing in some unique variety of food, with a unique story to tell, and a mission rooted in delivering something different while serving the community.
2. Then I would look into tips for preparing and executing a successful opening night. Two insightful articles on this: [The Best Restaurant Grand Opening Ideas](#) and [Do's and Don'ts for Your Restaurant's Grand Opening](#). I would discuss the strategies with Mario:
 - Have a soft opening as a “dress rehearsal,” inviting just family and friends.
 - Identify a local charity you think would match well with the brand and incorporate a fundraising challenge into your opening night activities.
 - Get people in your doors on opening night with a can't-beat offer—one which also requires a purchase, as making revenue is important.
 - Have “bounce back” offers for patrons attending your opening event to get them back in your doors as soon as possible.

3. I would also research Seattle foodie influencers and local celebrities, looking at their social media and blogs to get a feel for the types of food experiences they are interested in.
4. I would meet with Mario and all of his Rainier Fog employees, asking them throughout the campaign to notify me immediately of any negative press or potentially detrimental social media threads. I would additionally request that no one comments without running them by me first so we can attempt to avoid further issues and maintain a consistent voice.
5. I would also want to meet with Mario and his personal lawyer to make sure that all of our ideas for events and promotions adhere to the law, so as to avoid legal complications.
6. I would also do some research specifically on restaurants coping with customer complaints. This article discusses gross things people have purportedly found in fast food, with restaurant responses, which provide a good starting point for handling such scenarios: www.insider.com/fast-food-grossest-things-found-2017-8. One recommended action that stood out was reassuring the public that the restaurant values customer health and satisfaction above all else and that they take cleanliness and proper food handling seriously. Additionally, this article discusses scenarios that can result in customers taking to social media to complain and addresses how restaurants can empathetically respond: <https://pos.toasttab.com/blog/on-the-line/common-customer-complaints-social-media>.
7. I would then identify the specific publics to reach with the campaign, how I want the people in these publics to respond, and what messages I want to communicate to each public. Using all of this information, I will then assemble the rest of the PR plan.

Planning / Programming

After meeting with Mario and discussing his goals for the restaurant opening, I would lay out the rest of the campaign.

Goals

1. Plan and hold an event for the restaurant's opening night.
2. Foster public engagement and connection with the new restaurant, establishing it as an important addition to the community.
3. Get positive press coverage leading up to opening night.
4. Have a plan in place to manage any issues or crises that come up.

Publics the Campaign is Targeting

- Young working professionals, especially Millennials and Gen Zers. The age range of this group of individuals is 20–34 years old (according to the Current Population Survey).
- Local influencers and celebrities
- Tourists

Objectives

Building Engagement and Community

- Work with Mario to define his unique mission / about statement for Rainier Fog and what will make it special.
- Create social media accounts for the new Rainier Fog restaurant.
- Promote the restaurant establishment in the Columbia City neighborhood, connections to the neighborhood, and the opening night event, 'Into the Fog,' on March 1.
- Get one or two local Seattle foodie influencers interested in Rainier Fog on social media.
- Have 5k followers on Instagram and Facebook by opening night on March 1.

Positive Press Coverage

- Get Mario segments and feature articles in both local and national press, promoting him as a talented young chef and spreading the word about his new restaurant, Rainier Fog.

'Into the Fog' – Opening Night Event

- Hold a soft opening on February 22, one week before opening night, as a dress rehearsal.
- Book Troubled Shore, an up-and-coming local group, to provide live music on opening night.
- Have Mario make appearances throughout the evening to be able to connect with patrons.
- Make a list of important guests that Mario should personally thank for attending (food critics, reviewers, reporters, and influencers).
- Create promotions to get people in the door and also get them coming back soon.

Crisis Management Plan

- Respond immediately to the customer's post.
- Keep word of the incident as contained as possible.
- Reassure the public about the sanitation practices of Mario's restaurants.
- Seek legal advice about opening an investigation.
- Redirect attention to the 'Into the Fog' opening night event for the new restaurant, but continue to provide updates to the public about the incident as new information is discovered, so as to not appear as if the restaurant is trying to "sweep it under the rug."
- Issue a statement on the incident and respond to inquiries with consistency.

Strategies

Building Engagement and Community

- Launch a social media campaign to create buzz about the new restaurant, in addition to Mario's appearances on local TV and coverage in national press.
- Write a press release to announce the opening of the restaurant.
- Reach out directly to the local influencers to invite them to the 'Into the Fog' opening night event and get them hyped.

Positive Press Coverage

- Pitch Mario to be on a local Seattle news channel, promoting him as a hot new chef and his new restaurant, Rainier Fog.
- Pitch Rainier Fog to be featured in VisitSeattle.org's dining section of the [Seattle Localist](#).
- Pitch Rainier Fog's opening night event, 'Into the Fog,' to feature writers at Seattle Met and Seattle Magazine. Invite them to attend.
- Get in touch with a reporter for the Seattle Times, who I've pitched stories to before, and ask her to come to opening night and write a piece on Mario's newest restaurant.
- Pitch an article idea to Good Morning America for the food section of their website, highlighting Mario, his restaurants, his passion for enhancing local cuisine culture, and his desire to support local charities in the community.
- Pitch Mario and Rainier Fog to Vogue's "America's Most Anticipated Restaurant Openings of 2022" list, and to be featured in the accompanying article, published in January 2022.
- Invite local food critics to attend the opening night event.

'Into the Fog' Opening Night Event

- At the "soft opening," have Mario invite friends / family and treat them to a free meal, operating the restaurant as he normally would but without the stress of the public and critics.

- On opening night, encourage patrons to post on social media.
- Get people in the door on opening night with an exclusive promotion: Get a drink on the house with the purchase of any signature pizza.
- Encourage patrons to come back: See you back at Rainier Fog in the month of March and enjoy appetizers at half price. PLUS enter your name for the chance to choose the local artist at our summer ‘Sips and Slices’ event on Saturday, August 6, 2022.

Crisis Management Plan

- Discuss the incident and potential negative implications with Mario and his restaurant staff.
- Respond to the customer who posted about the alleged slug in the breadsticks, but avoid giving him extra attention, as this may appear as a validation to the truth of his claims.
- Release at least one official statement about the incident on each of Mario’s communication channels: website, all social media pages, email to the press, local media networks.

Tactics / Tools

Building Engagement and Community

- Post on social media intriguing teasers for the new restaurant that are somewhat mysterious, adding to the “fog” theme, to build excitement (See Sample Social Media Copy).
- Create a new page on Mario’s website, www.chefmariovalo.com/rainierfog, with eye-catching graphics and engaging copy about the new restaurant and ‘Into the Fog’ event.
- Respond to all inquiries on the social media pages, drumming up excitement about the upcoming Rainier Fog restaurant and ‘Into the Fog’ opening night event.

Positive Press Coverage

- Angles to promote in pitches:
 - Chef Mario Valo is a rising figure in the culinary industry. He was recently voted a top “Chef to Watch” in the U.S. 30-under-30 list.
 - He is branching out into new territory with his third restaurant, Rainier Fog, an establishment seeking to provide a unique gustatory experience with an atmosphere that reflects and amplifies the Columbia City lifestyle and culture.
 - He is passionate about delivering not just food but a dining *experience*, supporting local organizations and charities, and giving back to the community.
- Secure the Seattle Localist and Seattle Met interviews, as well as the Vogue and Good Morning America features as soon as possible.
- Secure the Seattle Magazine article to go out in the February issue.
- Secure the Seattle Times article to run a week before opening night.
- Schedule Mario’s appearance on local TV to occur within the week leading up to opening.
- Invite all reporters doing pieces on the restaurant to an exclusive experience at the ‘Into the Fog’ opening night event.

‘Into the Fog’ Opening Night Event

- Survey the people at the soft opening and ask them what went well and what could be better.
- Encourage patrons attending the opening night event to use the hashtags #RainierFog and #IntoTheFog, and to tag Mario (@chefmariovalo) and the restaurant (@rainierfog).
- Respond to messages and inquiries on social media, and help Mario respond directly to several customers’ posts, helping to build connections between him and the community.

These people will hopefully share his comments with their networks, further spreading the word about Mario as a rising chef and the new Rainier Fog restaurant.

Crisis Management Plan

- Inform Mario and restaurant management staff about the incident of the customer post about finding a supposed slug in their breadsticks on social media.
- Immediately respond to the customer's public comment on social (See Sample Messaging).
- Ask Rainier Fog employees again to refrain from responding to the incident.
- Contact Mario's lawyer and ask him about legal steps to take in this scenario. For example, should Casa di Valo open an investigation?
- Shift the conversation with the customer to private email to ask about details. Demonstrate that Mario's restaurants take this type of complaint seriously, even if it seems fake, and reassure the customer that Casa di Valo takes sanitation and customer health seriously.
- Privately ask the kitchen staff that day at the restaurant about details regarding the incident.
- Write an official statement for the press and adapt a version of this statement to post on Mario's website, www.chefmariovalo.com, and the restaurant's social media pages, reassuring customers of the restaurant's stringent food safety standards and prioritization of customer health and satisfaction.
- Demonstrate to the public the extra rigorous cleaning that all three of Mario's restaurants will be implementing after this incident to ensure cleanliness and bring patrons peace of mind.
- In the week prior to the opening of Rainier Fog, subtly add in language about customer health, cleanliness, proper food handling, and food safety to subconsciously reassure patrons but not blatantly reference the specific incident.

Activities / Timeline:

- Emily meets with Mario to discuss goals of the campaign, 'Into the Fog' event, budget, and Rainier Fog unique mission / about statement – Dec. 1.
- Emily books local group Troubled Shore to play on opening night 'Into the Fog' event.
- Emily writes and submits press release announcing the opening of Rainier Fog – Dec. 3.
- Emily creates Rainier Fog Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter pages and launches social media campaign. Also creates new page on Mario's website for Rainier Fog – Dec. 5.
- Emily gets finalized designs for Rainier Fog branding from Lucy by Dec. 14.
- Emily, Mario, and Luc (Mario's lawyer) meet to discuss legalities – Dec. 15.
- Emily secures national press and contacts influencers by Jan. 1.
- Emily invites all feature writers and restaurant reviewers to 'Into the Fog' by Jan. 19.
- Emily secures and schedules local news interviews by Feb. 1, to take place Feb.17 and 20, and to air on Feb. 25 – Mar. 1.
- Emily assists Mario in inviting friends and family to soft opening by Feb. 1.
- Emily learns of the slug in the breadsticks crisis on Feb. 16. Emily responds to customer complaint on Instagram ASAP and works with Mario to have an official statement by EOD.
- Emily drafts list of important guests for Mario to personally thank for coming to 'Into the Fog' event – Feb 22.
- Emily briefs April, Social Media Manager, on managing the Rainier Fog social accounts starting on Feb. 22, responding to inquiries, comments, and important influencers.
- All hands on deck help out at the 'Into the Fog' opening night event – Mar. 1.
- Emily and Mario meet to debrief 'Into the Fog' opening night – Mar. 3.

Implementation

PR Campaign Timetable

This PR campaign will run from December 1 – March 1 (three-month campaign). Rainier Fog will open to the public on March 1 with the ‘Into the Fog’ event.

Budget

Discuss with Mario to determine his budget.

Sample Messaging

Press Release Lead Paragraphs

SEATTLE — Chef Mario Valo, Seattle’s own artisan pizza restaurateur and recently voted top “Chef to Watch” in the U.S. 30-Under-30 list, announced this morning the opening of his third restaurant, Rainier Fog, on Mar. 1, 2022.

To be located in the Columbia City neighborhood, this upscale establishment is set to serve up a tantalizing new experience for the senses. With variations on Valo’s classic pies and a full bar during the week, Rainier Fog will transform into an entertainment venue on Fridays and Saturdays, featuring live local bands and dancing, while of course still serving pizza and drinks.

Sample Social Media Copy (to generate buzz early in campaign)

In the background of the cityscape, barely visible behind a veil of mysterious mist, Rainier stands. But move closer, through the city, into the fog.

To the outside world, you’ll disappear. But within, you’ll discover yourself in something completely new.

03.01.22 || Join us in the Fog.

#RainierFog #IntoTheFog

***Include an eye-catching graphic with the post with Rainier Fog branding. Then on opening night, use the line: “Rainier Fog is open. Join us in the Fog.” ***

Sample Official Statement in Response to Crisis

Chef Mario Valo would like to offer this statement regarding the recent incident at Casa di Valo:

Bringing joy to others through food is my life’s calling.

In response to yesterday’s incident, I could only hope that the situation was false. But, you cannot operate a restaurant on hope alone. I would like to apologize to the group involved, as well as to the broader community, for having been the source of this disturbance.

I assure you that all my establishments treat sanitation, food handling, and overall cleanliness with extreme seriousness. The health of our customers is the top priority, so in the next few days I will personally inspect each of my kitchens and request that my excellent staff intensifies our cleaning procedures to give you peace of mind.

My staff and I continually strive to bring you the best possible dining experience, and we greatly value your input. Please contact support@chefmariovalo.com to submit additional feedback to help us increase your satisfaction with our establishments.

Thank you, and I look forward to serving you in the future.

– Chef Mario Valo

Each of Chef Valo's restaurants will undergo a rigorous cleaning process and a thorough building inspection. Additionally, Casa di Valo is opening an investigation into the incident. We will share updated information in regard to the situation as we learn more.

Specific to the email to the press (not to include in public statement):

Please direct all additional inquiries to Mario Valo's personal media representative, Emily Tracy, at emilytracy@etpublicists.com.

Sample Social Media Response to the Customer Complaint

Hi John, we are really sorry to hear this. It is the first time we have heard of anything like this happening at our restaurant. The health of our customers and the cleanliness of our establishments remain our top priorities, so would you email the manager at manager@casadivalo.com to provide us with more details about this incident? We will inspect the kitchen and intensify our cleaning procedures to ensure that our service is up to our highest standards. We hope this will give you and all our customers peace of mind.

Evaluation

What went well?

After completing the PR campaign, I will meet with Mario and several employees to discuss aspects that went well:

- The soft opening the week prior helped to iron out wrinkles and provide helpful feedback to the restaurant staff, for example repositioning the host desk to better fill the entryway.
- Social media engagement was positive. Between Dec. 1 and Mar. 1, Rainier Fog gained 10.1k followers on Instagram, 8.7k on Facebook, and 7.3k on Twitter. The hashtags #RainierFog and #IntoTheFog were used 1,389,251 times combined across all platforms. Mario also grew his followers across all personal platforms by an average of 4.2k.
- The feature article on Mario and Rainier Fog on the GMA website attracted the attention of at least 12 celebrities, influencers, and food bloggers across the U.S., four of whom attended 'Into the Fog.'
- The 'Into the Fog' event on opening night served a total of 247 customers. Five reporters and representatives from local media, three restaurant reviewers, two Seattle foodie influencers, and two nationally recognized food bloggers attended the event.
- Rainier Fog brought in 11% more revenue than expected on opening night.
- When casually asked by restaurant staff if they would return to the restaurant in the near future, approximately 83% of guests asked said "yes" (out of approximately 150 replies).
- The handling of the incident with the alleged slug in the breadsticks at Casa di Valo did not blow up into a full-fledged crisis. It only resulted in minor media coverage, typically inserted in articles about Rainier Fog opening. The stir on social media quieted down within a week, as word got out from a friend of the customer who posted the photo that it was indeed fake. When asked about the incident in his press events in the week buildup to opening night, Mario directed the focus to the importance of protecting customer health first and foremost. He praised his restaurant teams for treating the incident as legitimate, even though it seemed fake from the beginning, not wanting to take chances. This resulted in a positive public response on social media.

What could be improved next time?

I will also discuss areas for improvement while the restaurant is still in this fledgling stage:

- Provide customers with links to complete an online satisfaction survey to more formally collect specific feedback regarding areas for improvement.
- Determine a better placement in the restaurant for the live band. The location at the 'Into the Fog' event created congestion between the dance floor and the kitchen, resulting in several near-collisions between wait staff and patrons.
- Better promote the next big event, 'Sips and Slices.' While we wanted to focus on the current event and avoid information overload for customers, even putting up flyers and signs would have started to get the word out more.
- Secure more national press and media coverage. The Vogue listing and feature did not work out, leaving the GMA article and celebrity / influencer social media posts as the only more widespread media. Focus more on tourism and niche restaurant-focused media next time in order to better reach this broader tourist audience.
- Take more action in the community outreach and fundraising aspects of the restaurant. We touted this but did not execute this aspect well. At the 'Sips and Slices' event, add a fundraising component, where proceeds will go toward a current cause or local charity.