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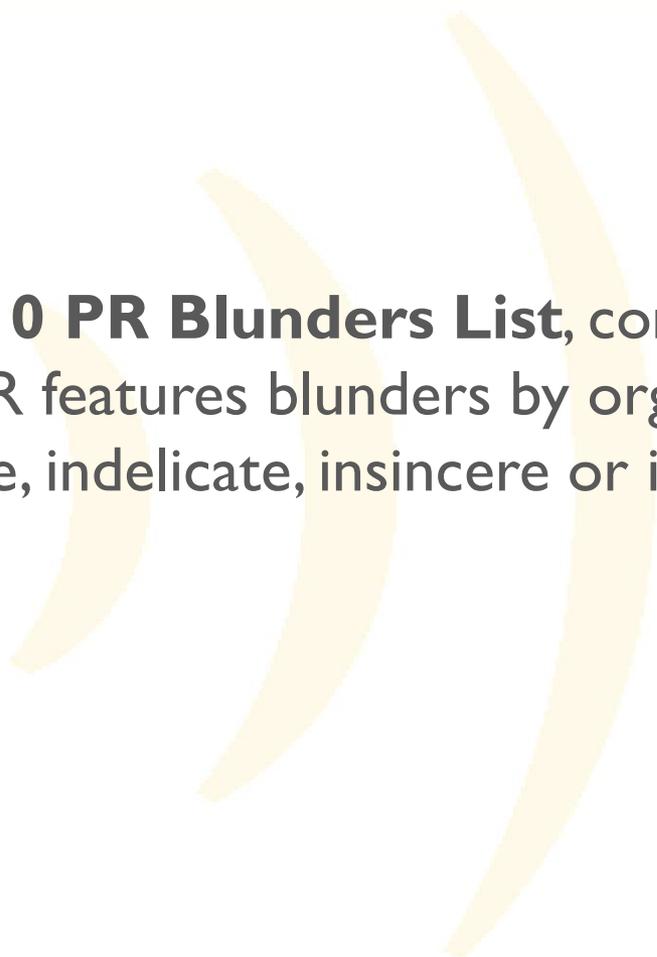
**Top 10  
PR Blunders of 2012**



## Top 10 PR Blunders – 2012

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The 18<sup>th</sup> Annual **Top 10 PR Blunders List**, compiled by San Francisco's Fineman PR features blunders by organizations that were impolitic, inappropriate, indelicate, insincere or ill-advised, and all of them preventable.



# 1. Pink Ribbon Pink Slip



When **Susan G. Komen for the Cure** announced its decision to end its longtime partnership with Planned Parenthood, the nation's leading breast cancer charity was widely criticized, particularly via social media, with many alleging that funding was cut due to pressure from anti-abortion groups and anti-abortion sentiment in the Komen executive ranks.

Meghan Casserly of [Forbes](#) reported on social media backlash from iconic women, such as author Judy Blume and U.S. Rep. Jackie Speier, the latter who tweeted that “Komen's decision hurts women – it puts politics before women's health.” Faced with massive public outcry, the foundation apologized and reversed its decision within 72 hours of the initial announcement, but the damage to its image was already done.

[The New York Times](#) cited a Harris Interactive study showing that Komen's “brand health” score fell 21 percent from the year before.

## 2. “Mice No Match for Mountain Dew” – [ABC News](#)



**Mountain Dew** maker PepsiCo misstepped in its defense against Illinois consumer Ronald Ball's 2009 lawsuit over an alleged dead mouse in a can of its popular beverage. Hoping to refute Ball's allegations, the company insisted the soda would have reduced the mouse corpse to a "jelly-like substance" regardless, as reported in numerous national media, including the [Huffington Post](#) and [Scientific American](#).

While experts cited studies indicating that Mountain Dew's unique formulation, including high levels of citric acid and controversial brominated vegetable oil, probably could jellify a mouse, the company's inexplicably off-putting statement was a far cry from enticing consumers to "do the Dew."

Eric Randall of [The Atlantic Wire](#) skewered **PepsiCo**, describing the company's unusual defense as "a winning-the-battle-while-surrendering-the-war kind of strategy that hinges on the argument that Pepsi's product is essentially a can of bright green/yellow battery acid."

### 3. Unhelpful, Unfriendly, Discourteous and Unkind

# BIASED SCOUTS



# OF AMERICA

With 2012 marking its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the **Boy Scouts of America** (BSA) should have enjoyed a banner year. Instead, the organization self-righteously battled against the inclusion of openly gay scouts and leaders with widely covered incidents of organizational bigotry as reported by numerous media, including [ABC News](#), [NBC News](#), [NPR](#), [CNN](#) and the [Associated Press](#).

The other shoe dropped, though, when the [Los Angeles Times](#) reported on the court-mandated release of BSA files detailing decades of sexual abuse incidents that were documented internally but never reported to police or properly investigated. The confluence of these issues was too much to bear for many Americans: parents pulled their boys out of scouting, corporations such as United Parcel Service withheld donations and adult [Eagle Scouts](#) returned their badges.

The editorial staff of [The New York Times](#) noted that “for an organization that extols trustworthiness, these files lay bare an appalling dissonance. The Boy Scouts battled to the Supreme Court to protect their right to purge gay and lesbian leaders and to exclude gay boys, insisting that openly gay people were bad role models. It bent to bigotry while hiding sexual predators.”

## 4. That's Progressive?

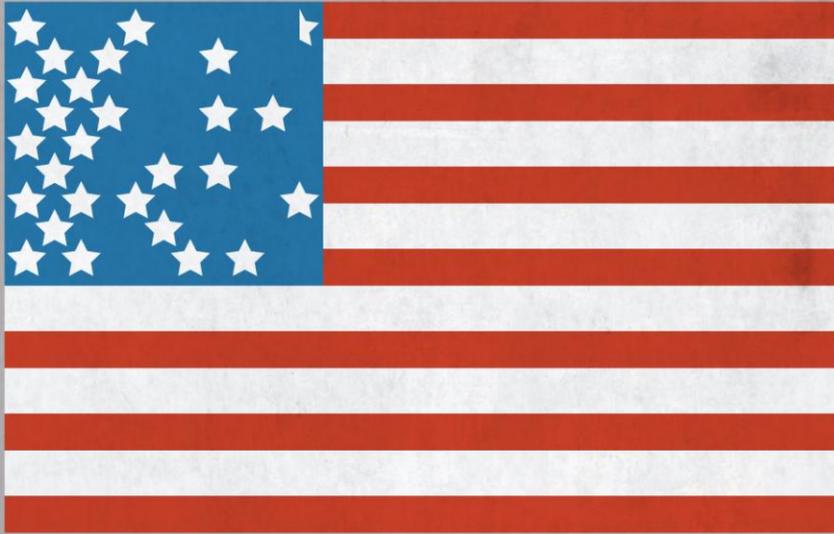


Matt Fisher's sister was insured by **Progressive Insurance** before she lost her life in a 2010 traffic accident, so when Fisher appeared in court during the trial of the under-insured driver at fault, he didn't expect to see a Progressive lawyer *assisting the defense* in an attempt to undermine his family's claim on his sister's policy.

Outraged, Fisher publicized the incident on his Tumblr page in a post entitled "[My Sister Paid Progressive Insurance to Defend Her Killer in Court,](#)" in which he claimed that "carrying Progressive insurance and getting into an accident does not entitle you to the value of your insurance policy. It just pisses off Progressive's lawyers."

The company said that it did not *represent* the defendant in the case, but court documentation showed that the company was granted permission to *participate* on the side of the defense. According to [CNNMoney](#), Progressive "didn't handle the social media replies well," sending out "stiff-sounding statements," including a clipped, repetitive [tweet](#), instead of apologizing to the family. While Progressive did eventually reach a settlement with the Fishers, the damage to its image was done: according to [The Wall Street Journal](#), more than 1,000 Twitter users claimed that the incident caused them to drop the insurer.

## 5. "'47 percent' speech is 100 percent offensive" – [Philadelphia Daily News](#)



# WRONG.

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When 2012 Republican presidential nominee **Mitt Romney** starred in a secretly taped [video](#) taken at a May fundraiser, in which Romney said that 47 percent of Americans don't pay federal income taxes and think of themselves as "victims" – and that he couldn't care about them – Romney was savaged by both the media and his political opposition.

Kasie Hunt of the [Associated Press](#) wrote that Romney's statement "provided fodder to those who portray him as an out-of-touch millionaire oblivious to the lives of average Americans." For weeks thereafter, Romney repeatedly defended his view, telling reporters that it was "not elegantly stated." Not only was Romney's statement inelegant, but fact-checking by [CBS News](#) and other media indicated that it was patently incorrect and misleading.

Romney later admitted that he was completely wrong, but to many that admission seemed disingenuous. Editorial staff at [The Week](#) noted that "the fact that Romney made his '47 percent' remarks at a private fundraiser, unaware that he was being filmed surreptitiously, only bolstered the impression that these were his real views." Jon Gelberg of [PR News](#) summed up Romney's blunder, writing that "in our age of smartphones, all notions of private or off-the-record conversations should be tossed out the window."

## 6. “Hurricane Sandy Sale” a “major marketing fail” – [Alaska Dispatch](#)



Social media sites erupted in outrage when both **American Apparel** and Gap urged consumers in states affected by Superstorm Sandy to shop online during the disaster, and [Adweek](#) blasted the companies for “forgetting that death and loss make a poor springboard for promotional messaging.”

Gap quickly apologized while American Apparel stood behind its misguided [marketing](#), with remorseless CEO Dov Charney stating that “part of what you want to do in these events is keep the wheels of commerce going.”

Charney also noted that some consumers did use the discount, generating “tens of thousands of dollars.” Apparently not enough dollars, however – Charney later stated in an SEC disclosure that “we were blindsided by Sandy, and with greater New York being our largest market, we estimate we lost in excess of \$1.5 million in retail sales due to the storm.” Jessica Phelan of [GlobalPost](#) called it in advance, writing that “we wouldn’t be surprised if [American Apparel’s] sales figures – or possibly its marketing peeps – were Hurricane Sandy’s latest victims. Excuse us if we don’t feel too sorry for them.”

## 7. “Ball-dropping blunder” for Goodell and NFL – [Fortune](#)

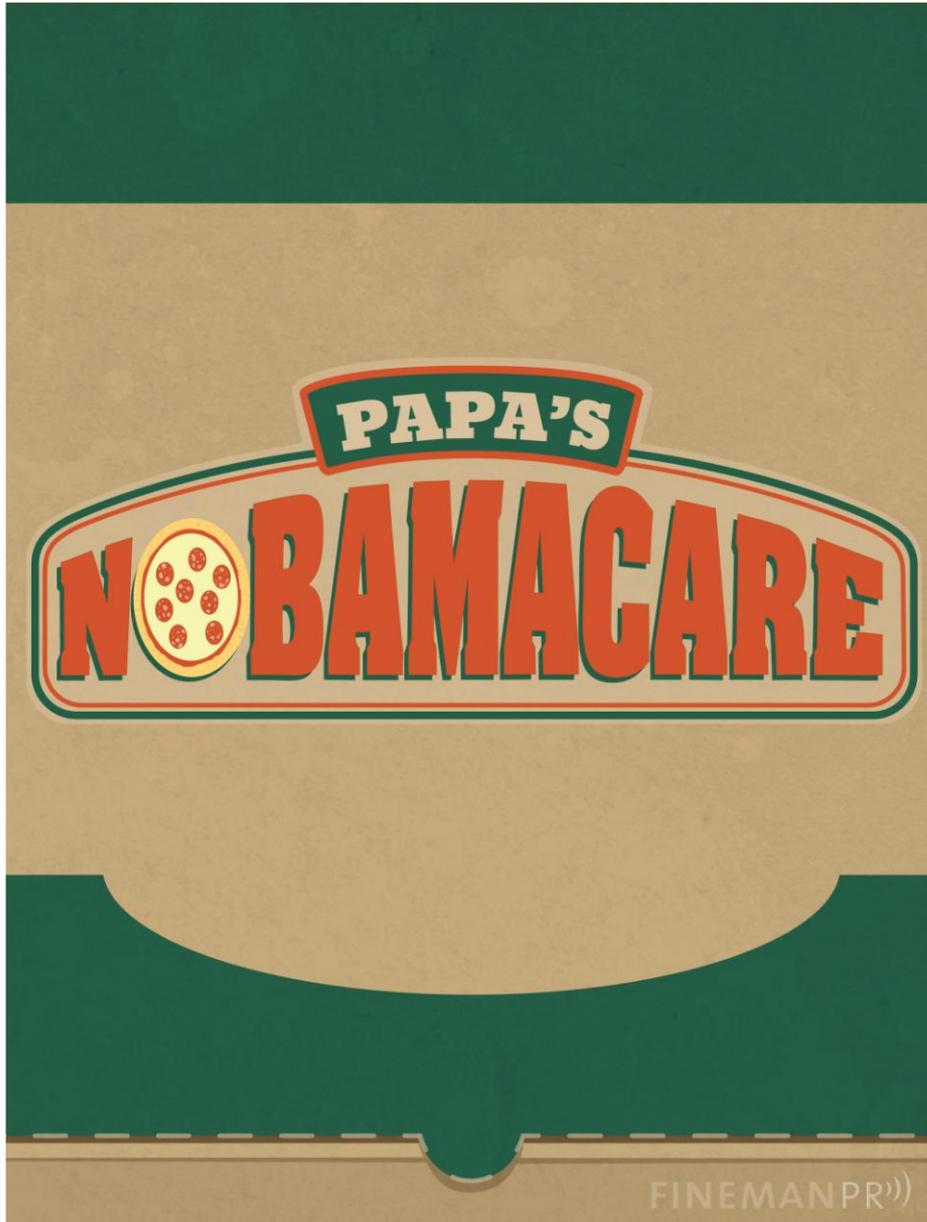


After the **National Football League** and its referees failed to come to an agreement, the NFL suffered through nearly four weeks of its regular season with some dubious replacements: high school and low-level college officials with no NFL experience, as well as, according to sports site [Deadspin](#), a crew of refs who had been previously fired by the Lingerie Football League for incompetence.

Media nationwide, including [The New York Times](#), reported on numerous instances of replacement refs taking the field as fans rather than officials and an increasing incidence of poor, often game-changing, calls. An agreement was eventually reached and the NFL refs returned, but for many the crux of the issue was Commissioner Roger Goodell’s apparent willingness to sacrifice the game’s integrity – and irritate fans – over a relatively small amount of money.

[Sports Illustrated](#) writer Michael Rosenberg wrote that Goodell “could have ended this lockout weeks ago for roughly the amount of money that NFL executives spend on dry cleaning every year.” [Fortune](#) contributors Jack and Suzy Welch highlighted a lesson for Goodell: despite the NFL’s “virtual monopoly ... you can’t aggravate your customers.”

## 8. “Nobody wants a side of politics with their pizza.” – [Huffington Post](#)



In August, wealthy pizza magnate “**Papa John**” **Schnatter** was widely criticized for his stance against the new Affordable Healthcare Act and his determination to circumvent it as reported by [ABC News](#), [Politico](#) and numerous other media.

His flamboyant and needlessly cold messaging seemed designed to alienate his own customers and pool of potential employees. The [Naples News](#) reported that Schnatter told a group of Florida college students that “it was likely that some [Papa John’s] franchise owners would reduce employees' hours in order to avoid having to cover them.” Even [Mad Magazine](#) got in on the action, with editors noting that “if you thought that the worst thing about Papa John’s Pizza was the pizza ... the policies ... will leave an even worse taste in your mouth!”

“A brand is just a collection of ideas,” Barbara Findlay Schenck, author of “Branding for Dummies,” told [TODAY](#). “When suddenly the brand message shifted to political stances, bottom line prices, price increases and staff cutbacks, the inconsistency rocked brand strength, confidence, and preference.” According to [MSN.com](#), “the Twittersphere appears largely elated over news that Papa John seems to be eating his feisty political words post-election.” The news site awarded “top tweet” to [Twitter user @kimbers](#) asking: “who'd the moron CEO think was eating that pizza? I%ers?”

## 9. “Dude, Where’s My Apology?” – [BetaBeat](#)



**Popchips “President of Pop Culture”** (according to Popchips marketing collateral) **Ashton Kutcher** starred in an ill-advised [online video](#) campaign in which he wore stereotypical Bollywood attire – along with skin-darkening makeup – to impersonate an Indian character named Raj.

The video did gain attention for the snack brand but for all the wrong reasons. Tech entrepreneur and [blogger Anil Dash](#) questioned the campaign’s direction, noting that “if you find yourself putting brown makeup on a white person in 2012 ... to sell potato chips, you are on the wrong course.”

Dash noted early on that “Kutcher’s apology would be the easiest and most obvious part” of addressing the brand’s blunder and Ling Woo Lee, director of the [Fred T. Korematsu Institute for Civil Rights and Education](#), agreed in an opinion piece for [CNN](#), writing that “I’m still waiting for Ashton Kutcher’s apology [and] I’m starting to lose patience.” Nonetheless, while Popchips quickly issued an apology and pulled the offending video, Kutcher has not apologized to date.

## 10. “Rigged game” at Liberty Mutual – [Boston Globe](#)



In early April of this year, [Boston Globe](#) business reporter Todd Wallack reported that Boston-based insurance giant **Liberty Mutual** was under scrutiny from the Massachusetts Division of Insurance after the discovery that longtime CEO Edmund F. “Ted” Kelly earned an average of \$50 million a year from 2008 to 2010.

As a mutual insurance company owned by its policyholders, any extra money Liberty Mutual earns should go back to customers, not executives. About a month after Wallack’s article, the *Globe*’s Brian McGrory wrote that Liberty Mutual spent \$4.5 million in 2011 to renovate incoming [CEO](#) David Long’s 1,335 square foot executive office suite, adding “woven silk wall coverings,” a private shower, exercise room and an automatic Lutron lighting system.

All this excess spending occurred in fall 2011 when unemployment was at 9.1 percent and the stock market was plunging. Liberty Mutual didn’t issue a single statement of regret in the month after the initial revelations, while Kelly explained his pay as “an accounting issue.” As McGrory explained to Ed Cafasso of [The Public Relations Strategist](#), “their lack of response made my job easier ... the best thing they could have done was gotten enough of it out there earlier so the tips dried up.”

## About the Fineman PR Top 10 PR Blunders List

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Since 1994, San Francisco-based Fineman PR, a consumer [Brand PR and crisis communications firm](#), has assembled the annual PR Blunders List as a reminder that good public relations is critical to businesses and organizations.

Selections are limited to Americans, American companies or offenses that occurred in America. Selections are limited to avoidable acts or omissions that caused adverse publicity; image damage was done to self, company, society or others; and acts that were widely reported in 2012. Fineman PR specializes in consumer public relations, [crisis PR](#), [food PR](#), Brand PR across a variety of industries.





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**Thank you.  
See you next year...**

