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# Revisiting the Effectiveness of Base Crisis Response Strategies in Comparison of Reputation Management Crisis Responses

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This experimental study found that employing reputation management crisis-response strategies was no better than adopting only the base crisis-response strategy (i.e., instructing and adjusting information) in terms of generating positive responses from the public. Two-sided messages (i.e., sharing both positive and negative information) in crisis communication were found to be more effective than one-sided messages in a victim crisis. In addition, even in a preventable crisis, one-sided messages (i.e., sharing only positive information) were not more effective than two-sided messages. Finally, the study found little support for Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)'s recommendations for the best crisis response strategy selections.

No organizations are free from crises. A company's reputation can be destroyed in seconds by a single incident. Mishandled and sluggish corporate crisis responses often allow a single trigger event to result in a full-blown crisis, tarnishing a sterling reputation built by stellar performance and hard work. For instance, Toyota had enjoyed a positive reputation before the recall crisis in 2010. Toyota spent decades working to earn the respect of US customers through quality control and continuous improvement of its products (Goodman, 2010). However, the company confronted the biggest reputational implosion in its history after the crisis, despite its enormous reputation-repair efforts. Due to the tremendous reputational threat associated with a crisis, corporations tend to emphasize reputation repair as a main goal for their crisis responses (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2011), often resulting in negligence in providing base crisis responses (i.e., instructing and adjusting information). This predominant emphasis on reputation management also drives the crisis communication of organizations reluctant to share negative information about themselves. This is why the most common reputation management strategies adopted by organizations in crises are denial (i.e., denying any responsibility for the crisis) and bolstering (i.e., emphasizing the company's previous good deeds) strategies (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009).

The predominant emphasis on reputation management in crises can be easily found both in practices and academic research. For instance, *Fortune* 500 corporations' practitioners chose "managing reputation" as the single most important corporate communication, over "providing information to publics" or "managing relationships with all publics" (Hutton, Goodman, Alexander, & Genest, 2001, pp. 254–255). As to handling H1N1 flu crisis, a recent study suggests that corporations such as pork producers, airlines, and pharmaceutical companies predominantly focused on reputation repair over public safety or public health in their responses (Kim & Liu, 2012). A majority of crisis communication research has also focused either on content analyzing reputation management crisis-response strategies employed by organizations in crises (Benoit, 1997, 2006; Kim et al., 2009) or testing the effectiveness of reputation management crisis-response strategies (K. A. Brown & White, 2011; Coombs, 1998, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000).

Thus, there has been lack of emphasis on base crisis-response strategies (i.e., instructing and adjusting information) even though these are required for all crises, and the public expects ethical responsibility from the organizations experiencing crises (Kim et al., 2011). As yet, little research has tested the relative effectiveness of base crisis-response strategy compared to the effectiveness of reputation management strategies. Thus, this study seeks to partially fill this void. The study investigates (a) the relative effectiveness of base crisis-response strategies compared to reputation management strategies and (b) effectiveness of two-sided messages (sharing both positive and negative) compared to one-sided messages (only sharing positive).

Testing relative effectiveness of base crisis responses and two-sided crisis messages is worthy of study for several reasons, most important because it could provide the importance of dual focuses on reputation management and public safety/education in crisis communication. It helps to reassess the importance of base crisis responses required for all crises, often neglected in corporate crisis communication. In addition, the findings will add to the emerging crisis communication literature on how to effectively manage a crisis (Coombs, 1998, 2007; Coombs & Holiday, 2002; Kim et al., 2009), by providing insight regarding the importance of base strategy and two-sided messages. Perhaps most important, these findings will be valuable for academics and practitioners trying to find a better way to manage corporate reputation in drafting crisis responses.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Crisis Responses

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) matches crisis response strategies to types of crises situations and offers guidance about which strategies should be effective in which situations (Coombs, 1995, 2007). Coombs (2007) classified crisis types into victim, accident, and preventable clusters based on the levels of attribution of crisis responsibility. In the victim type of a crisis, the public tends to attribute minimal crisis responsibility to the organization experiencing a crisis. The victim crisis type includes natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence, and malevolence/product tampering. The accident crisis type has relatively low attribution of crisis responsibility placed by the public for the organization. Examples of the accident crisis type include challenges, technical-error accidents, and technical-error product harm. Last, the

preventable crisis type produces strong attributions of crisis responsibility for the organization. The preventable crisis type includes human-error accidents, human-error product harm, and organizational misdeeds.

Crisis response has two main components: (a) base crisis response (i.e., instructing information and adjusting information) and (b) reputation management crisis response (Coombs, 2007). SCCT suggests that instructing and adjusting information are base responses required for all crises (Coombs, 2007; Sturges, 1994). Instructing information tells publics what happened and what actions they should take to protect themselves from physical threat resulting from crises. Adjusting information helps publics “cope psychologically with the crisis” (Coombs, 2007, p. 135) and includes corrective actions and addressing publics’ emotional needs in crises. To reduce psychological stress, organizations should inform publics about corrective actions, which are how organizations plan to solve or prevent problems that cause crises. In addition, through disseminating adjusting information, organizations express concern for those affected by the crisis. Reputation management crisis response includes denial, diminish, rebuilding, and reinforce strategies.

As to matching reputation management crisis-response strategies with different types of crises, SCCT recommends that denial strategy option (denial, shifting the blame, and attack the accuser strategies) can be employed when the challenge is unwarranted (i.e., a victim crisis type) (Coombs, 2007). The diminish response strategy option (excuse and justification) is recommended to reduce organizational responsibility, thus being useful for the accident crisis type that has low crisis-responsibility attribution. The rebuilding response option (compensation and apology) is recommended for cases of the preventable crisis type (Coombs, 2007). In the case of preventable crisis type, rebuilding response option strategies may be warranted because organization misdeeds and human-error product harms have strong attributions of crisis responsibility. Last, bolstering response strategies (bolstering, ingratiation, and victimage) are supplemental to the other three response options (Coombs, 2007; Heath & Coombs, 2006), so should be used in combinations with denial, diminish, and rebuilding strategy options.

Although the base crisis response strategies are required for all crises, because they meet organizations’ fundamental ethical responsibilities for crisis responses, research found lack of emphasis on the base crisis response strategies in organizations’ crisis communication (Kim et al., 2011; Kim & Liu, 2012). Kim et al. (2011) found that reputation repair was the primary goal of the crisis responses for the organizations included in their research, but public safety or public health was neglected in the organizational responses. They argued that “the strategic focus on reputation at the expense of providing instructing and adjusting information is problematic, given publics evaluate crisis responses based on how well organizations prioritize public good or serve public interest” (pp. 192–193). In addition, Kim and Liu (2012) exploring both government and profit organizations’ crisis responses during H1N1 crisis in 2009 suggested that profit organizations focused more on reputation management crisis responses, neglecting instructing and adjusting information, whereas government organizations emphasized providing instructing/adjusting information more. They argued that corporations may be damaging their long-term reputations by predominantly focusing on reputation management. Based on the review, the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: Among the three response strategies (base crisis response strategy, denial- and rebuilding-reputation management strategies), which one is most effective in lowering the public’s

attribution of crisis responsibility and generating more positive responses from the public (i.e., company evaluation [CE], product evaluation [PE], supportive behavioral intentions [supportive BI], and purchase intentions [PI])?

In addition, SCCT recommends that base responses are required for all crises and should be combined with denial reputation management crisis response strategies for handling a victim crisis and should be combined with rebuilding reputation management crisis response strategies for a preventable crisis. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1a: In a victim crisis, the combination of the base crisis response and denial reputation management crisis-response strategies will be more effective in lowering the public's attribution of crisis responsibility than other response strategy conditions.
- H1b: In a preventable crisis, the combination of the base crisis response and rebuilding reputation management crisis response strategies will be more effective in lowering the public's attribution of crisis responsibility than other response strategy conditions.
- H2a: In a victim crisis, the combination of the base crisis response and denial reputation management crisis-response strategies will be more effective than other strategies in generating positive responses from the public (CE, PE, supportive BI, and PI).
- H2b: In a preventable crisis, the combination of the base crisis response and rebuilding reputation management crisis-response strategies will be more effective than other strategies in generating positive responses from the public (CE, PE, supportive BI, and PI).

### One-Sided and Two-Sided Messages

One-sided messages contain arguments only in favor of an organization, whereas two-sided messages are defined as containing arguments of both in favor of the organization and the negative arguments (Allen, 1991). When it comes to drafting corporate messages, organizations tend to incorporate only favorable messages about themselves under the belief of positive messages will induce more positive attitudes from their publics. In normal situations, it would be true. Research supports that consumers are more likely to have positive attitudes toward brands when there is only positive information about the brands (Alba & Marmorstein, 1987). However, there are certain situations that when delivering two-sided messages can be more effective than one-sided messages. Those situations include when the public already has negative attitudes or beliefs about the organization (Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949) and when the public is triggered by negative counter-arguments by the organization's competitors (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994). This study argues that when the public is exposed to publicity about the organization's crisis (i.e., learn about a crisis involved with the company) would also be the case that two-sided messages might be more effective than one-sided messages.

Theoretical frameworks used in testing the effectiveness of two-sided messages include inoculation theory (McGuire, 1961; Pfau, 1992) and attribution theory (Jones & Davis, 1965). Inoculation theory posits that by providing refutational two-sided messages (both positive and negative arguments) preemptively to audiences, any possible negative attitudes or beliefs caused by negative arguments could be lessened more than just providing one-sided messages since refutational two-sided messages operate as an inoculation to increase audiences' resistance to attacking messages (McGuire, 1961; Pfau, 1992).

In addition, attribution theory has been used to explain why two-sided messages can be more effective than one-sided message in advertising research. Attribution theory proposes that people tend to attribute reasons (causes) to why an organization says a certain thing (actions). For example, when advertising delivers only positive messages about a brand (one-sided messages), consumers tend to think the reason for such action would be the advertiser's desire to sell the product. On the other hand, when advertising conveys two-sided messages, including both positive and negative messages about a brand, people tend to think the company is being honest, thus telling the truth, as such activity is not common or normative (Settle & Golden, 1974). Thus, through this attribution process, two-sided messages could enhance credibility of the company (i.e., the company is trustworthy because it honestly shares negative information about the company with its consumers; Eisend, 2007; Golden & Alpert, 1987).

By applying the previous literature testing the effectiveness of two-sided messages and the theoretical frameworks to corporate crisis situations, we argue that the base crisis responses in a crisis can be considered two-sided messages. It is because base crisis-response strategies include both favorable and unfavorable information about the company. Negative information about the company in the base response strategies include information about what happened (e.g., E-coli contamination crisis happened due to the company's unsanitary product system), how it affected consumers (e.g., two people died and 58 became ill), and how it will affect consumers (e.g., consumers are advised to dispose of the crisis-affected product). The base crisis responses also include favorable information about the company by providing corrective actions (e.g., to prevent the likelihood of reoccurrence, the company sanitized the entire area and secured the supervision of sanitary conditions, taking all precautions to ensure the safety of its products) and addressing consumers' emotional needs (e.g., offer condolences to victims and address the company understands the crisis is distressing to its customers).

On the other hand, providing only rebuilding reputation management crisis-response strategies without incorporating instructing and adjusting information would only contain positive information about the company (i.e., one-sided messages). An example for rebuilding reputation management strategies supplemented with a bolstering strategy would be "the company has prided itself on providing consumers with high quality, fresh food products for over 50 years and the company is offering free coupons to its customers." Thus, in a crisis situation where the public is already exposed to negative crisis information related to the organization, two-sided messages would be more effective in offsetting negative impacts of a crisis than one-sided messages. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H3: Two-sided crisis message will be more effective than one-sided crisis message in lowering the public's attributions of crisis responsibility and generating positive responses from the public (i.e., CE, PE, supportive BI, and PI) in corporate crises.

## METHOD

### Design and Procedure

To test relative effectiveness of the base crisis response and reputation management crisis-response strategies, five different options were created. Base crisis response option included

instructing and adjusting information. Denial reputation management response strategy condition included a shifting-the-blame strategy, whereas rebuilding reputation management response condition contained a compensation strategy. Bolstering strategy from reinforce reputation management crisis options was included as a supplement to both denial and rebuilding response conditions as it is the most common supplemental reputation management strategy used by organizations in crises (Kim et al., 2009).

Thus, a  $2 \times 5$  between-subjects experimental design was used for this study: Two crisis types (victim crisis and preventable crisis)  $\times$  five crisis response strategies: (a) base crisis response, b) denial reputation management crisis response, c) rebuilding reputation management crisis response, d) the combination of the base and denial reputation management crisis-response strategies, and e) the combination of the base and rebuilding reputation management crisis-response strategies). All 10 crisis-response strategies were reviewed by 12 graduate students who were trained in a crisis communication management class to ensure that all message strategies were properly operationalized. After that, experts in crisis communication reviewed the crisis-response strategies before a pretest. A total 60 students participated in a pretest for message strength and clarity across the 10 strategies. There was no significant differences found across the crisis response conditions,  $F(8, 52) = .68, p = .68, \eta_p^2 = .11$ .

In the main study, all participants were randomly assigned to one of 10 experimental conditions. A fictitious company, Haley & Schumann Foods was used to exclude possible effects of previous attitudes toward the company. At the outset, respondents were provided with a news article about the company's recent crisis. For a victim crisis type, a product-tampering crisis created by unknown outsiders was used (i.e., malicious tampering led to Haley & Schumann Foods' Cup-A-Soup cyanide poisoning). An E-coli contamination created by the company's unsanitary production system was used for the preventable crisis type (i.e., dirty conditions led to E-coli in Haley & Schumann Foods' Cup-A-Soup Product). Crisis severity was kept consistent throughout the conditions (i.e., two victims died & 58 became ill).

After reading the crisis news article, respondents completed the questionnaire that included questions concerning the attribution of crisis responsibility to the company (blame), company evaluation (CE), product evaluation (PE), supportive behavior intentions (supportive BI), and purchase intentions (PI). For crisis type manipulation checks, questions of whether (a) the company is the victim of the crisis and (b) the crisis occurred due to the company's mismanagement were included in the questionnaire. For one-sided versus two-sided message manipulation checks, if the company response is one-sided, only providing positive information about the company was asked to respondents with a seven-point Likert scale. On average, the survey took 15 min to complete.

## Participants

A total of 242 students at a major public university in the southern region of the United States participated in the study in exchange for extra credit. The average age for the sample was 20.02 ( $SD = 1.70$ ). According to a recent market report, among all age groups, adults between 18 and 24 years old consume convenient meals most often (Packaged Facts, 2010). In addition, college students are reported to rely heavily on convenience foods due to limited time and lack of money (K. N. Brown et al., 2011). Because crises used in our study were related to a ready-to-eat meal

Cup-A-Soup product, the sample of college students deemed to be appropriate considering college students match the demographics of those who consume convenience foods. Of the total of 242 respondents in this study, 170 (70.2%) were women and 72 (29.8%) were men. On average, 24.2 students were exposed to each of the 10 conditions.

## Measures

For the attribution of crisis responsibility variable, four items were included: (a) the company is highly responsible for the crisis; (b) the company should be accountable; (c) the crisis is the fault of the company, and (d) I blame the company for the crisis. For CE and PE variables, the study adopted five items respectively from previous studies (e.g., Kim, 2011; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). They included respondents' evaluations about a company's or products' reliability, trustworthiness, attractiveness, likeability, and an overall impression.

For the supportive BI variable, five items were adapted from previous studies (Coombs, 1998, Kim & Lee, 2012), where as a consumer the respondent would: (a) say nice things about the company to others, (b) sign a petition in support of the company, (c) contact a government official in support of the company, (d) engage in actions to support, and (e) recommend the company to my friends as their future employer. PI was measured with three items adopted from previous studies (e.g., Kim, Haley, & Koo, 2009): I would (a) purchase, (b) use, and (c) recommend the company's product. All items were measured by a seven-point Likert scale anchored where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was examined to assess reliability and internal consistency of each scale. Scale reliabilities for all measures (crisis responsibility attribution: .968; CE: .960; PE: .965; Supportive BI: .890; PI: .972) exceeded the .70 threshold of an acceptable level of reliability (Nunnally, 1978).

## RESULTS

### Manipulation Checks

Manipulation checks were successful, as intended. Participants who saw a victim crisis type ( $M = 4.3$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) considered the company as a victim of the crisis more than those who saw a preventable crisis type ( $M = 2.4$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ),  $t(240) = 12.4$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.31$ . Participants who saw a victim crisis type ( $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ) were less likely to think the crisis occurred due to the company's misdeeds than those who saw a preventable crisis type ( $M = 5.6$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ),  $t(240) = -14.4$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = -1.85$ . As intended, there was also a significant difference between one-sided and two-sided message factor,  $t(240) = -5.334$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = .72$ ). Participants who were exposed to one-sided message conditions ( $M = 4.7$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ) considered the company's response contained only positive messages more than those who were exposed to two-sided message conditions ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.10$ ).

### Test of Hypotheses

H1a posited that for a victim crisis type, employing the combination of base crisis response and denial reputation management crisis response strategy will be more effective than other



strategies in lowering the public's attribution of crisis responsibility. The results revealed that there were no significant differences in the levels of crisis responsibility attribution among the five crisis response strategies,  $F(4,116) = 2.0, p = .101, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . When comparing the mean scores, participants blamed the company the most when rebuilding reputation management strategy was used alone ( $M = 4.1, SD = 1.4$ ), whereas when the base crisis response strategy ( $M = 2.9, SD = 1.4$ ) was used, participants attributed the lowest crisis responsibility level to the company. The LSD posthoc test revealed that the difference in the blame level between the base strategy and rebuilding strategy was significant ( $p < .01$ ). However, although the combination of base and denial combination strategy was the second most effective after the base strategy in lowering the blame levels, the difference between the combination of base and denial strategies and other strategies in lowering blame levels was not significant (see Table 1). Therefore, H1a was not supported.

H1b posited that in a preventable crisis, the combination of base crisis response and rebuilding reputation management crisis response strategies will be more effective in lowering the public's attribution of crisis responsibility than other strategies. The results revealed that there were significant differences in the attribution of crisis responsibility levels across the five crisis response strategies;  $F(4,116), p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .09$ ; indicating that the public's attribution of crisis responsibility was the highest when the base response strategy was used alone ( $M = 6.5, SD = .8$ ), whereas it was the lowest when the combination of base and denial strategies ( $M = 5.7, SD = 1.0$ ) was used (see Table 2 for other strategies). The LSD posthoc tests revealed that in the preventable crisis type, the combination of base and denial response strategies was significantly more effective than the combination of the base and rebuilding strategies in lowering attribution of crisis responsibility levels ( $p < .01$ ). In addition, when the combination of base and denial strategies was used, participants blamed the company significantly less than when the base strategy was employed alone ( $p < .005$ ). In sum, different from our hypothesis, the combination of the base and rebuilding strategies was not effective in lowering the attribution of crisis responsibility in a preventable crisis. Therefore, H1b was not supported.

H2a proposed that for a victim crisis type, employing the combination of base and denial combination strategy will be more effective than other strategies in generating positive responses from the public. However, there were no significant differences across the five crisis response strategy conditions, Wilks'  $\Lambda F(4, 115) = 1.48, p = .11, \eta_p^2 = .05$ . As seen in Table 1, when the base strategy was used alone, participants evaluated the company the most favorably. However,

TABLE 1  
Mean and Standard Deviations of Dependent Variables for a Victim Crisis Type

	<i>Crisis response strategy conditions</i>				
	<i>Base</i>	<i>Denial</i>	<i>Rebuilding</i>	<i>Base + Denial</i>	<i>Base + Rebuilding</i>
Crisis responsibility	2.9 (1.4)	3.7 (1.5)	4.1 (1.4)	3.3 (1.6)	3.5 (1.8)
Company evaluation	4.3 (0.8)	4.0 (1.3)	3.8 (1.3)	4.2 (1.2)	4.0 (1.2)
Product evaluation	3.7 (1.2)	3.6 (1.4)	3.7 (1.3)	3.8 (1.2)	3.5 (1.3)
Supportive BI	3.6 (0.9)	4.0 (1.1)	3.5 (1.0)	3.7 (1.0)	3.8 (0.9)
PI	3.4 (1.5)	3.1 (1.6)	3.4 (1.5)	3.8 (1.4)	3.2 (1.5)

Note. BI = behavioral intentions. PI = purchase intention.

TABLE 2  
Mean and Standard Deviations of Dependent Variables for a Preventable Crisis Type

	<i>Crisis response strategy conditions</i>				
	<i>Base</i>	<i>Denial</i>	<i>Rebuilding</i>	<i>Base + Denial</i>	<i>Base + Rebuilding</i>
Crisis responsibility	6.5 (0.8)	6.1 (0.8)	6.2 (0.9)	5.7 (1.0)	6.4 (0.9)
Company evaluation	2.2 (1.1)	2.4 (1.2)	2.7 (1.3)	2.7 (1.0)	3.1 (1.4)
Product evaluation	2.0 (1.1)	1.9 (0.9)	2.0 (1.3)	2.6 (1.3)	2.8 (1.5)
Supportive BI	2.4 (1.0)	2.4 (1.2)	2.5 (1.2)	2.8 (1.0)	3.0 (1.1)
PI	1.9 (1.1)	1.7 (1.0)	2.2 (1.5)	2.5 (1.4)	2.6 (1.6)

Note. BI = behavioral intentions. PI = purchase intention.

differences across the five response strategies were not significant in affecting the participants' CE,  $F(4, 115) = .49, p = .74, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ; PE,  $F(4, 115) = .18, p = .95, \eta_p^2 = .006$ ; supportive BI,  $F(4, 115) = 1.1, p = .34, \eta_p^2 = .04$ ; and PI,  $F(4, 115) = .68, p = .61, \eta_p^2 = .02$ . Although the combination of base and denial reputation management crisis response strategy generally generated the second highest CE after the base strategy and the most favorable PE and PI, the differences between the combination of base and denial strategy and the other strategies were not statistically significant. Therefore, H2a was not supported.

H2b assumed that for a preventable crisis type, employing the combination of base and rebuilding crisis response strategies will generate more positive responses from the public. Although the combination of the base and rebuilding response strategies revealed the highest mean scores in all four measurements of the public's responses, no significant differences across the five conditions of different crisis response strategies were found in a preventable crisis, Wilks'  $\Lambda F(4, 116) = 1.5, p = .11, \eta_p^2 = .05$ . However, there were significant differences between the highest (i.e., base +rebuilding) and lowest (i.e., base-only strategy or denial-only strategy) conditions in generating the public's responses; Roy's Largest Root,  $F(4, 116) = 3.2, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .10$ . When examining each dependent variable, the results revealed that there were significant differences among the five strategies conditions in generating positive PE,  $F(4, 116) = 2.5, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .08$ . However, no such significant differences were found in CE,  $F(4, 116) = 1.9, p = .11, \eta_p^2 = .06$ ; supportive BI,  $F(4, 116) = 1.5, p = .210, \eta_p^2 = .05$ ; and PI,  $F(4, 116) = 1.9, p = .11, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . In addition, according to the LSD posthoc tests, the combination of base and rebuilding crisis response strategies ( $M = 3.1, SD = 1.4$ ) was significantly more effective than the base-only strategy ( $M = 2.2, SD = 1.1$ ) for CE ( $p < .02$ ), and it was significantly more effective than the base response strategy ( $p < .03$ ), denial-only strategy ( $p < .02$ ), and rebuilding-only strategy ( $p < .03$ ) for PE (see Table 2). The combination of base and rebuilding strategies was significantly more effective than the denial-only strategy for PI ( $p < .03$ ) and BI ( $p < .05$ ). However, the combination of base and rebuilding strategies was not significantly more effective than the combination of base and denial strategies in generating positive CE, PE, supportive BI, and PI. Therefore, H2b was not supported. Table 3 compares the findings of our study with SCCT recommendations and presents which strategy were most and least effective one.

As to RQ1 asking relative effectiveness of base crisis response strategy compared to reputation management strategies, the results revealed that in the victim crisis type, the base crisis

TABLE 3  
Effective Crisis Response Strategies by Crisis Type

Crisis type	SCCT recommendations	Effective strategies found in the present study		
		Attribution of crisis responsibility	Company evaluation	
Victim	Base + Denial	Base ( <i>Instructing and adjusting information</i> )	Base ( <i>Instructing and adjusting information</i> )	Most Effective
		Base + Denial ( <i>Base + Shifting-the-blame</i> )	Base + Denial ( <i>Base + Shifting-the-blame</i> )	
		Base + Rebuilding ( <i>Base + Compensation</i> )	Base + Rebuilding* ( <i>Base + Compensation</i> )	Least Effective
		Denial ( <i>Shifting-the-blame</i> )	Denial* ( <i>Shifting-the-blame</i> )	
Preventable	Base + Rebuilding	Rebuilding ( <i>Compensation</i> )	Rebuilding ( <i>Compensation</i> )	Most Effective
		Base + Denial ( <i>Base + Shifting-the-blame</i> )	Base + Rebuilding ( <i>Base + Compensation</i> )	
		Denial ( <i>Shifting-the-blame</i> )	Base + Denial* ( <i>Base + Shifting-the-blame</i> )	Least Effective
		Rebuilding ( <i>Compensation</i> )	Rebuilding* ( <i>Compensation</i> )	
		Base + Rebuilding ( <i>Base + Compensation</i> )	Denial ( <i>Shifting-the-blame</i> )	
		Base ( <i>Instructing and adjusting information</i> )	Base ( <i>Instructing and adjusting information</i> )	

\*The strategies with asterisk had the same mean score.

response strategy was more effective ( $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) than denial-only reputation management strategy ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ) or rebuilding-only reputation management strategy ( $M = 4.1$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) in lowering attribution of crisis responsibility ( $F(2, 70) = 4.2$ ,  $p < .02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .11$ ). LSD posthoc tests revealed that base-only response was significantly more effective in lowering the public's attribution of crisis responsibility than rebuilding-only reputation management strategy ( $p < .006$ ). However, in the preventable crisis type, there were no significant differences among the base crisis response and reputation management strategies in the crisis responsibility attributions,  $F(2, 68) = 1.5$ ,  $p = .24$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ . In other words, employing reputation management response strategies was no better than using only base crisis response strategy in a preventable crisis.

As to the other public response variables, the results revealed that there were no significant differences across the three strategies in the public's responses in the victim crisis type—CE,  $F(2, 69) = .689$ ,  $p = .510$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .020$ ; PE,  $F(2, 69) = .090$ ,  $p = .914$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .003$ ; supportive BI,  $F(2, 69) = 2.101$ ,  $p = .130$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .057$ ; and PI,  $F(2, 69) = .330$ ,  $p = .720$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .009$ —as well as in the preventable crisis type—CE,  $F(2, 68) = 1.06$ ,  $p = .351$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .088$ ; PE,  $F(2, 68) = .021$ ,  $p = .979$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .001$ ; supportive BI,  $F(2, 68) = .079$ ,  $p = .924$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .002$ ; and PI,  $F(2, 68) = .828$ ,  $p = .441$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .024$ . Therefore, our results found that reputation management crisis response strategies were no better than the base crisis-response strategy in generating positive responses from the public regardless of the crisis type.

The results of H3 asked two-sided message's effectiveness in crisis responsibility attribution and generating positive responses from the public. With regard to crisis responsibility

attribution, the results revealed that there was a significant interaction effect between message sidedness and crisis type in the public's attributions of crisis responsibility,  $F(1, 92) = 9.939$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .098$  (see Figure 1a). This indicates that a two-sided message ( $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) was more effective in lowering the public's blame level than a one-sided message ( $M = 4.1$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) for the victim crisis type, but a one-sided message ( $M = 6.2$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ) was more effective than a two-sided message ( $M = 6.5$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ) in the preventable crisis type. As to the main effect of message sidedness, our results revealed that a two-sided message was significantly more effective than a one-sided message in the victim crisis type,  $t(46) = -2.926$ ,  $p < .005$ , Cohen's  $d = -.86$ ; whereas no significant differences in the blame levels were found

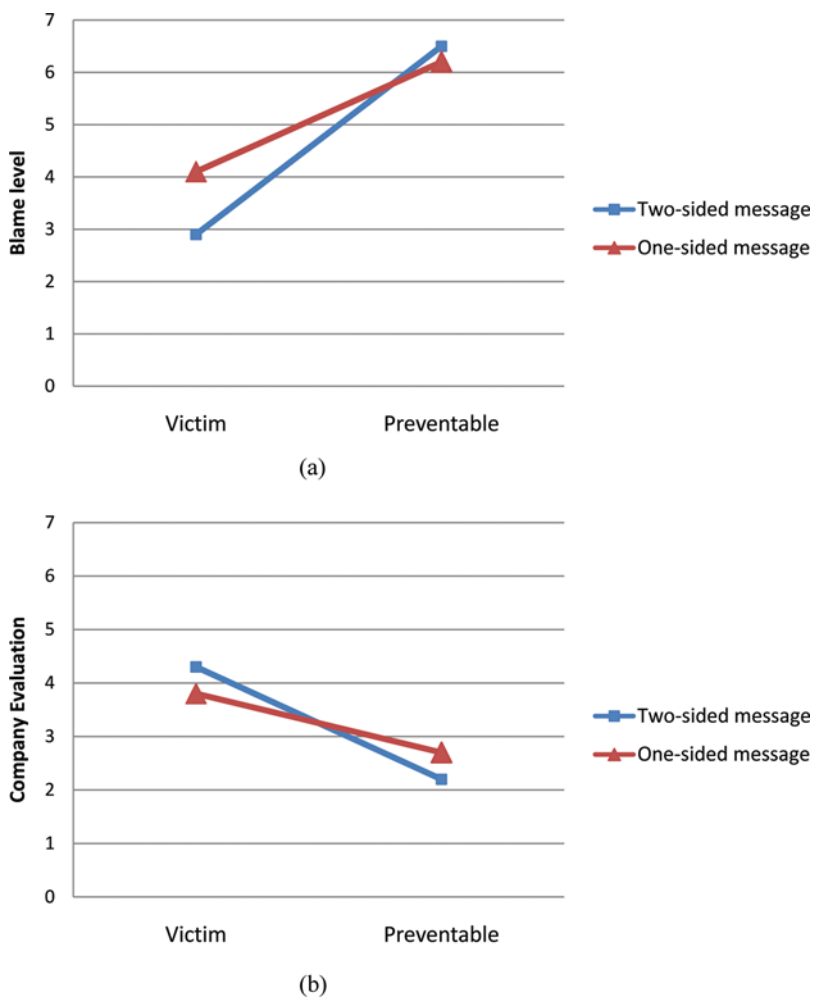


FIGURE 1 (a) The effects of message sidedness on the public's attribution of crisis responsibility. (b) The effects of message sidedness on the public's company evaluation. (color figure available online.)

between one-sided and two-sided messages in the preventable crisis type,  $t(46) = 1.238$ ,  $p = .218$ , Cohen's  $d = -.86$ .

Regarding the two-sided message's effectiveness in generating positive responses from the public, the results revealed that there was also a significant interaction effect between message sidedness and crisis type on public response, Wilks'  $\Lambda F(4, 89) = 3.84$ ,  $p < .006$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .147$ . This indicates that in the victim's crisis type, a two-sided message was more effective than a one-sided message, whereas in the preventable crisis type, a one-sided message seemed to be more effective than a two-sided message. When examining each dependent variable, the results revealed that the interaction effect was especially significant in CE,  $F(1, 92) = 3.952$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .041$  (see Figure 1b). Because two-sided messages seemed to be more effective than one-sided messages in a victim crisis type in lowering crisis responsibility and no significant differences between one-sided and two-sided messages in a preventable crisis, H3 was partially supported.

## DISCUSSION

This study's findings yield valuable insights regarding (a) relative effectiveness of the base crisis-response strategy in lowering the public's attribution of crisis responsibility and generating positive responses from the public compared to prevalent usage of reputation management crisis-response strategies and (b) the effectiveness of message sidedness in crisis communication.

### Relative Effectiveness of Base Crisis Response Strategy

Despite the prevalent emphasis on reputation management crisis-response strategies in corporate crisis communication (Kim et al., 2011; Kim & Liu, 2012), our study found that employing reputation management strategies was no better than using only the base crisis-response strategy in generating better responses from publics during crises. In fact, the base crisis-response strategy was significantly more effective in lowering the public's blame level than either denial reputation-management strategy or rebuilding strategy, especially in a victim crisis type. Regardless of crisis type, employing only reputation management crisis-response strategies was no better than adopting only base crisis-response strategy in offsetting detrimental damage created by crises. This provides interesting insights to those who strive to manage corporate reputations in crises. As publics expect organizations to be ethically responsible in protecting public safety during the crises, organizations should not neglect providing instructing and adjusting information (i.e., base response strategy) to its publics, and the predominant emphasis on reputation management response strategies in corporate crisis communication should be re-considered.

### Revisiting SCCT

As to testing SCCT's recommendations for the best crisis communication, this study found little support for SCCT. Although SCCT recommends the combination of base and denial strategies as the best possible option for managing a victim crisis (Coombs, 2007), following this recommendation did not reveal the best possible results in our study. In fact, the base strategy

was more effective in lowering publics' company blame levels than the combination of base and denial strategies. This indicates that adopting reputation-management strategies may not be necessary in a victim's crisis if the organization is providing detailed instructing and adjusting information (i.e., base strategy) to its publics. This particular finding implies that organizations experiencing a victim crisis, such as product tampering used in our study, should prioritize public safety over its reputation management/repair in their crisis communication.

In addition, different from SCCT's recommendation for managing a preventable crisis type (Coombs, 2007), our study found the combination of base and denial (i.e., shifting-the-blame) strategies was significantly more effective than the SCCT's recommendation (i.e., the combination of base and rebuilding strategies) in terms of lowering the public's attribution of crisis responsibility. In addition, SCCT's recommendation for a preventable crisis was not significantly more effective than the combination of base and denial strategies in generating positive responses, although it was more effective than using the base strategy, denial strategy, or rebuilding strategy.

A recent study also found little support for SCCT's recommendation regarding the selection of best crisis-responses strategies (K. A. Brown & White, 2011). For example, for a challenge type crisis, SCCT recommends the adoption of diminishment strategies (e.g., justification) when a positive relationship history is present and rebuilding strategies (e.g., apology or compensation) when a negative relationship is present (Coombs, 2007). However, different from the SCCT's recommendations, neither the diminishment strategies revealed the lowest attribution levels for positive relationships nor the rebuilding strategies revealed the lowest attribution levels for negative relationships in the recent study (K. A. Brown & White, 2011).

Based on the findings that reveal the inconsistency of crisis-response strategy effectiveness, this study argues that the link between attribution levels of crisis responsibility and publics' general evaluations of the organization should be reexamined. People may use rational judgments regarding the crisis responsibility attribution, thus when the base and rebuilding strategies are used in a preventable crisis, they tend to attribute higher crisis responsibility to the company under the belief that the company uses the rebuilding strategy because they did something wrong. K. A. Brown and White (2011) also found that adoption of rebuilding strategies did not reveal lower attribution of crisis responsibility than other strategies (denial or diminish strategies). However, higher attribution of crisis responsibility does not necessarily lead to less favorable company evaluation as SCCT suggested (Coombs, 2007). Publics tend to appreciate a company's compensation efforts (i.e., rebuilding strategy) by showing more favorable attitudes toward them. In other words, the combination of base and rebuilding strategies may not generate lower attribution of crisis responsibility than the combination of base and denial strategies in a preventable crisis, but it could still generate favorable company evaluation among the public. Thus, the relationships between the public's attribution of crisis responsibility and their attitudes toward the organization experiencing a crisis are not as simple as SCCT has previously anticipated.

The inconsistency of crisis response strategy effectiveness in attribution of crisis responsibility and company evaluation can be explained by the process of attitude formation and change (Bem, 1970). Publics' attribution of crisis responsibility for a certain crisis is one-time situation focused based on rational analysis of the specific crisis situations (careful weighing of evidence for crisis responsibility). However, their evaluation of the company in general is more complex, synthetic, and holistic, based on not only rational analysis of the specific crisis situations but also

social learning (e.g., when the company has high responsibility for the crisis, it is the right thing to accept the responsibility and then attempt to rebuild the damaged relationships) and affective components of attitudes (e.g., I like the company being honest and willing to accept the responsibility) obtained from their direct and indirect experiences with the company. Therefore, although publics' attribution of crisis responsibility for one crisis can influence how they evaluate the company or its reputation, they do not necessarily have positive linear relationships, as found in our study regarding the inconsistency of crisis strategy effectiveness.

Thus, we argue that crisis communication managers should consider lowering crisis responsibility attribution and generating more favorable company evaluation to be linked, yet somewhat separated tasks, especially in a preventable crisis. In other words, lowering crisis responsibility attribution can be considered a short-term goal, whereas generating more favorable company evaluation should be their long-term goal. This means that for short-term effectiveness, adopting the combination of base and denial strategies could be more effective in a preventable crisis, because it could lower the public's attribution of crisis responsibility to the company, but for long-term effectiveness, the combination of base and rebuilding strategies would be more effective because it could reveal the company's efforts to rebuild the organization–public relationships. In addition, it is important to note that adopting the combination of base and denial strategies (e.g., shifting the blame, not the simple denial strategy) for managing a preventable crisis should be carefully considered because it could result in even worse backfire to corporate reputation when the denial component of the crisis response strategies is not based on truthful information. Publics will eventually find out the company's crisis communication is not true as more crisis information is unfolded. Thus, crisis managers should be cautious when adopting the combination of base and denial strategies in a preventable crisis. Finally, crisis communication should be viewed from an ongoing management perspective (Coombs, 2007) and more of strategic conflict management (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). As strategic management refers to management to meet ultimately long-term goals of an organization, the selection of effective crisis response strategies should also be performed more strategically, reflecting both short and long-term benefits of the organization and those of the organization's main constituents.

### The Effectiveness of Message Sidedness

In corporate crisis communication, organizations are reluctant to share negative news about themselves, thus they tend to emphasize positive information while adopting either bolstering strategy (e.g., what good they have done for the public in the past) or reminding strategy (e.g., remind the public of the company's past good deeds; Kim et al., 2009). However, our study found sharing both positive and negative information (two-sided message) was more effective in lowering the public's attribution of crisis responsibility and generating positive responses than sharing only positive information (one-sided message) in a victim crisis. Even for the preventable crisis, sharing only positive information about the company was not more effective than sharing both positive and negative information about the company.

This particular finding suggests that crisis managers should carefully evaluate transparency issues in their crisis communication. In normal situations, the public would have more positive attitudes toward the company when there is only positive information about the company (Alba & Marmorstein, 1987). However, this would not be the case in corporate crises when

transparency would be the most important factor in generating positive responses from the public. In other words, when a company is being transparent with its publics during a crisis, the public will think the company is being honest by sharing both positive and negative information, thus making its messages more credible. Transparency in crisis communication would make not only crisis-response messages more credible, but also the source of the messages (i.e., the organization) more trustworthy. Ensuring the organization's credibility among its publics is one of the most important factors in sustaining the positive long-term organization–public relationships (Ledingham, 2006). Thus, this study argues that organizations should consider adopting two-sided message tactics in their crisis communication to increase the organizations' credibility.

### FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

Although our research provides meaningful implications, it also is limited by several factors. For instance, for manipulation of message sidedness, this study manipulated the base crisis-response strategy as two-sided messages and the rebuilding supplemented with a bolstering strategy as one-sided messages. Even though our manipulation was found to be successful, future research should test the effectiveness of two-sided messages after carefully manipulating the same weight on both positive and negative information. Because previous research found variations in the portion of negative information contained in two-sided messages could affect their effectiveness (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994), more accurate manipulations of negative information variations are required in future research. Because our study found the inconsistency of crisis response strategy effectiveness in crisis responsibility attribution and company evaluation, the link between the attribution of crisis responsibility and publics' attitudes toward the organization should be re-examined in future research.

Despite the limitations, the study significantly contributes to the current knowledge of crisis communication in terms of (a) the relative effectiveness of the base crisis-response strategy compared to the reputation management strategies, (b) testing SCCT's recommendations for the selection of crisis response strategies, and (c) relative effectiveness of message sidedness in crisis communication. Most important, our findings that suggested employing reputation management crisis-responses strategies is no better than the base response strategy in lowering the public's attribution of crisis responsibility and generating positive public responses call for more attention to emphasizing public safety in corporate crisis communication. This is a meaningful implication for crisis management academics and practitioners.

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