



Research in Brief

Are crisis communicators practicing what we preach?: An evaluation of crisis response strategy analyzed in public relations research from 1991 to 2009

Sora Kim^{a,*}, Elizabeth Johnson Avery^b, Ruthann W. Lariscy^c

^a College of Communication, DePaul University, 14E Jackson Blvd, # 1823, Chicago, IL, 60604, United States

^b School of Advertising and Public Relations, College of Communication and Information, The University of Tennessee, 476 Communications Building, Knoxville, TN 37996, United States

^c Department of Advertising & Public Relations, Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication, The University of Georgia, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 May 2009

Received in revised form 5 August 2009

Accepted 7 August 2009

Keywords:

Crisis response strategy

Crisis communication management

Image repair theory

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

ABSTRACT

Quantitative content analysis is used to evaluate crisis response strategy analyzed in more than 18 years of research published in crisis communication literature in public relations to reveal its effectiveness, nature, and contextual application. Analysis of 51 articles published in 11 different journals using two dominant theories in public relations crisis communication literature, Benoit's Image Restoration Theory and Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory, indicates a lack of diversity in cases analyzed by scholars, gaps between theory and practice, and pressing directions for future research in crisis communication.

© 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Over the past 18 years Benoit's Image Restoration Theory and Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory have provided dominant paradigms for crisis communication research in public relations. Yet, to date there is no comprehensive analysis of the vibrant bodies of research those two theoretical bodies generated. Particular attention is needed regarding the response strategy employed in the crisis situations analyzed in that body of literature and its nature, application, and overall success in managing a crisis situation.

Specifically, revealing the general characteristics of crisis response strategies in the important bodies of research using the work of those two scholars—what are the most frequently employed, most effective strategies?—provides a benchmark for assessing the current state of practice in crisis communication. Further, relationships between public relations scholars' evaluations of the success of crisis response and the strategy employed can offer important “best practice” advice for practitioners while at the same time revealing pressing areas for scholars to refine those prescriptions. Finally, a richer understand of the nature of relationships among crisis response strategy and its temporal use and crisis context may enable scholars to develop more nuanced prescriptions for crisis communication and management. Perhaps most importantly, this article assesses the entirety of voices and prescriptions offered across many years and authors of published research to draw some summary conclusions, as the totality of those voices is more telling than any single isolated case.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 312 362 6003; fax: +1 312 362 8620.

E-mail addresses: skim92@depaul.edu (S. Kim), ejavery@utk.edu (E.J. Avery), rlariscy@grady.uga.edu (R.W. Lariscy).

2. Research questions

RQ1: What are the general characteristics of crisis response strategy analyzed in crisis research?

- (a) What is the most often employed crisis response strategy by organizations?
- (b) What is the most effective crisis response strategy, as evaluated by the authors of articles, in the census of crisis communication literature examined?
- (c) Is there a relationship between the effectiveness of crisis response strategy and the overall evaluation of organizations' crisis responses?
- (d) Is there a relationship between crisis response strategy used in combination and its time being used during the crisis response period?

RQ2: What are the relationships between crisis type (victims, accident, preventable) and crisis response strategy employed and its effectiveness?

3. Methods

A quantitative content analysis was used for the study. Using the key terms “crisis communication,” “crisis management,” “image restoration strategy,” and “crisis response strategy,” from databases of communication and business related journals, a total of 51 articles using Benoit and Coombs' work from 11 journals were retrieved and are included in the analysis.

Two experts in crisis communication coded 26% ($n = 19$) of the articles for inter-coder reliability tests. Reliability estimates were strong and satisfactory for both 1st and 2nd rounds inter-coder reliability tests (Krippendorff's alpha .79–.93 for 1st test; .81–.94 for 2nd test). On the coding sheet, coders indicated the type of organization in the study, crisis type and category, crisis stages, and the authors' evaluations of the organizations' and individuals' responses based on their effectiveness. Coders based those decisions only on direct mentions by the authors.

4. Results

Regarding RQ1a, the most frequently employed crisis response strategy by organizations was bolstering (58.8%), and the second most often was denial (56.9%) followed by corrective action and mortification (45.1% each), attack-the-accuser (36.7%), and shifting-the-blame (34.7%). The most effective crisis strategy (RQ1b) as evaluated by authors was full apology: 71.4% of full apology strategies employed ($n = 5$) were evaluated as effective, followed by mortification (52.4%, $n = 11$), corrective action (52.2%, $n = 12$), and bolstering (50%, $n = 15$). In their analyses authors evaluated denial as the least effective strategy: only 13.8% ($n = 4$) of denial strategies employed were evaluated as effective. Effectiveness of crisis response strategy, as evaluated by the authors of the articles themselves, was positively correlated with and differed depending on the overall evaluation of the organization's response to crisis (RQ1c) in the strategies of denial ($\chi^2(1, 50) = 6.67, p = .032$), shifting-the-blame ($\chi^2(1, 50) = 5.18, p = .045$), attack-the-accuser ($\chi^2(1, 50) = 9.55, p = .011$), defeasibility ($\chi^2(1, 50) = 9.0, p = .012$), bolstering ($\chi^2(1, 50) = 15.2, p = .000$), and corrective action ($\chi^2(1, 50) = 5.66, p = .029$).

Most of the crisis strategies (more than 90% of the cases) were used in various combinations with other strategies when utilized. However, when strategies were used in isolation they were all evaluated to be ineffective, regardless of the phase. With respect to the relationships between crisis strategy used in various combinations and its time of being used during the crisis response period (RQ1d), the strategy most often combined with other crisis response strategies during the initial response phase was bolstering. It was used in concert with all other strategies except excuse: denial (67%, $n = 14$), corrective action (48%, $n = 10$), mortification (43%, $n = 9$), attack-the-accuser (38%, $n = 8$). The second most popular strategy used in combination with other strategies was denial ($n = 21$). It was most often used with bolstering (67%, $n = 14$), attack-the-accuser/ corrective action (33%, $n = 7$ respectively), and mortification (29%, $n = 6$). The strategies most often combined with other strategies during the later phases were also bolstering (47%, $n = 24$) and denial (37%, $n = 19$).

The majority of crises analyzed in the articles were preventables (53%, $n = 27$), and the second most often analyzed (31%, $n = 16$) was accident, followed by victims (20%, $n = 10$). The results of RQ2 suggested that there were significant differences among three crisis type clusters in the employment of attack-the-accuser ($\chi^2(2, 38) = 6.93, p = .031$), bolstering ($\chi^2(2, 38) = 6.13, p = .047$), and mortification ($\chi^2(2, 38) = 12.8, p = .002$) strategies. The majority of crises in the preventables cluster (75%, $n = 15$) employed mortification in crisis response, while none from the victims' cluster and 4 (36%) from the accidents' cluster used mortification. About 66% of the preventables' cluster crises that used the mortification strategy ($n = 10$) were evaluated as effective. Attack-the-accuser strategy was frequently employed in the crisis type clusters of preventables (55%, $n = 11$) and victims (57%, $n = 4$) but rarely in the accident crisis type cluster (9%, $n = 1$). However more than 90% of preventable cluster crises that used the attack-the-accuser response strategy were evaluated to be ineffective ($n = 10$). Bolstering strategy was also often adopted in the preventable (80%, $n = 16$) and victim (72%, $n = 5$) crisis types but rarely in the accident (36%, $n = 4$) cluster.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Warranting further scrutiny is the finding that denial was such a frequently employed response strategy. Although the most often used strategy, in their analyses authors deemed it, from our research, as the least effective strategy with regard to outcome of the crisis situation. Despite its ineffectiveness, organizations seem to continuously engage in denial, regardless of their crisis circumstances. Denial is only useful when the crisis challenge is unwarranted (Coombs, 2007; Heath & Coombs, 2006) and/or when the organization is not held responsible for the crisis (Benoit, 1997). However, organizations analyzed in public relations crisis research seem likely to use denial without considering contextual moderators of when it should be used.

Next, important insight emanates from our findings regarding how to combine proper crisis response strategies. Overall, it seemed that organizations do not consider synergistic effects of the combinations of different crisis response strategies. For example, denial was the second most popular strategy, after bolstering, that was used in combination with other strategies. When used, it was often combined with not only the options from the denial (e.g. attack-the-accuser) or bolstering (e.g. transcendence) response categories but also with options from the rebuilding response category (e.g. corrective action and mortification) or diminishment response category (e.g. defeasibility). When denial is used with other accommodative strategies such as rebuilding, it creates negative consequences as it poses contradicting and inconsistent impressions to target publics (Coombs, 2007). Furthermore, when mortification was used, 56% of the crisis responses analyzed used denial simultaneously, which may reduce the effectiveness of mortification since it was used along with the defensive strategy.

The prevalence of organizations failing to choose and combine response strategies appropriately in these cases suggests that the bridge between theory and practice may not be as solid as it should be after 18 years of crisis research. Important insight is offered to crisis managers in that they should consider the synergistic consequences of crisis response strategy combinations when implementing crisis message strategy.

In addition, crises in the preventable cluster (53%) were the most often analyzed in this body of crisis research, followed by the accident and victim crisis types. Mortification was the most frequently used strategy in these preventable crisis type cases, although it was rarely used in the accident-type crises and never in the victim crisis cases. In fact, organizations involved in preventable crises were significantly more likely to employ mortification strategy than any other crisis types. This finding encouragingly indicates practice consistent with Coombs' SCCT prescriptions (Coombs, 2007); he recommends that crisis managers use rebuilding strategies (corrective action and apology) for any preventable crises. However, attacking-the-accuser was another strategy often used by organizations involved in preventable crises. Due to strong attributions of crisis responsibility for organizations involved in preventable crises, it is not recommended to adopt the position of attacking-the-accuser (Coombs, 2007; Heath & Coombs, 2006). Interestingly, attacking-the-accuser was often not adopted as a response strategy in the accident crisis type or victim crisis type, when it may be the preferred and most effective choice for image restoration according to SCCT (Coombs, 2007). SCCT recommends that when there is little attribution of crisis responsibility or when challenges are unwarranted, denial strategies (including attack-the-accuser) should be used. Again, we offer evidence that practitioners may not be heeding best practice advice based on a solid body of crisis research.

So, commonly known "best practice" advice is clearly not always heeded in practice, at least among the organizations in this sample. Perhaps this comprehensive review will serve as more compelling evidence to crisis communicators that denial, although often the easiest way out, particularly at the crisis onset, is often not the most effective. For public relations scholars, this finding issues somewhat of a warning in that more tangible, compelling prescriptions may be needed for practitioners. If practitioners are not heeding advice and directives issued by scholars based on more than 18 years of crisis research, scholars may be preaching what we should practice to a greater extent than practitioners are practicing what we preach. Thus, the disparity that emerged in several of the areas of this analysis suggests there may be a gap between crisis communication practice and prescriptions generated in the research. Although unreasonable to assume each case of crisis response will indeed follow that advice, overall levels of significance in those gaps across 18 years of analyzed crises suggest problems may be more widespread than either practitioners or scholars would prefer. This research starts dialog to that end by providing a general awareness of a gap between theory and practice, and future research should illuminate its cause.

References

- Benoit, W. L. (1997). Image repair discourse and crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*, 23, 177–186.
- Coombs, W. T. (2007). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing and responding* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Heath, R. L., & Coombs, W. T. (2006). *Today's public relations: An introduction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.