Weathering the crisis: Effects of stealing thunder in crisis communication

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Crisis communication research has generally focused on how to respond to public's reaction after a crisis is known to various stakeholders. *Stealing thunder* is a proactive crisis communication strategy by which an organization releases crisis information before media gets a hold of the crisis. This study investigated the effects of stealing thunder and moderating effect of organization's persuasive intent and consumers' attachment on stealing thunder. Stealing thunder was effective when participants were not explicitly aware of the persuasive intent in the crisis message. When participants were aware of persuasive intent, stealing thunder effects disappeared. Brand attachment also moderated the effects of stealing thunder. Participants with high brand attachment evaluated stealing thunder information more positively compared to those with low brand attachment.

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1. Introduction

An important aspect of crisis communication is to minimize the damage to the reputation of organization. When facing a crisis, one crisis communication strategy an organization can adopt is to step forward and proactively release the crisis information before the media publish the crisis news. This proactive communication strategy is called *stealing thunder*. Compared to reactive strategies with which an organization is asked to provide explanations, stealing thunder can provide advantages to the organization in minimizing the potential damage. By providing the crisis information in a proactive and timely manner, the organization can control the flow of the information and reduce the possibility of sensationalizing the crisis by media. More importantly, various stakeholders can react more positively to the organization's proactive release of the crisis information rather than to media's reports. Existing research on crisis communication has shown that information provided by stealing thunder, rather than information released by another source, such as media, a government agency, or a consumer group, leads to more favorable views by public and journalists because the organization is likely to be portrayed as more honest and credible (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

Like any crisis communication strategies, stealing thunder can implicitly and explicitly contain persuasive intent of the organization in the crisis communication message. The effectiveness of stealing thunder can depend on whether stakeholders detect persuasive intent and how such detected intent is perceived. The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM, ; Fiestad & Wright, 1994) suggests that when people detect persuasive intent in a persuasive message, they activate persuasion knowledge and become suspicious about the motive of the message. Thus, if persuasive intent is apparent in the crisis communication message, the organization's honesty may be obscured, and the credibility of the information may be compromised.

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Individuals' personal attachment to a brand may also affect the manner in which the crisis information is processed. People who have favorable opinion toward the brand are likely to respond positively to the organization's proactive efforts while those who have unfavorable opinion are likely to react negatively. Research has shown that people who are highly committed to a brand tend not to be affected negatively by negative publicity (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000). While negative information about a brand or organization tends to be perceived as more useful and diagnostic compared to positive information, people who are committed to a brand are not easily swayed by negative information about the brand (Ahluwalia, 2002; Ahluwalia et al., 2000).

Studies on stealing thunder have mostly been conducted in the legal contexts (see for examples, Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003; Williams & Dolnik, 2001; Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993) while studies in the crisis communication contexts are rare (e.g., Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Claeys, Cauberghe, & Leysen, 2011). Given that stealing thunder is increasingly used by various organizations as a strategy to manage a crisis, the lack of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of stealing thunder in the crisis communication contexts is rather surprising. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to add empirical evidence on the effectiveness of stealing thunder by examining how persuasive intent of an organization and consumers' attachment to a brand moderate the effect of stealing thunder. The results of this study expand our knowledge about how consumers utilize persuasion knowledge when processing stealing thunder information in a time of crisis.

2. Literature review

2.1. Stealing thunder

Stealing thunder as a crisis communication strategy involves revealing negative, potentially damaging information by an organization before it is revealed by a third party, such as media (Williams et al., 1993). Stealing thunder is about being the first to initiate the crisis communication with consumers and the media (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). From an organization's point of view, while moral responsibility can be one of the reasons, there are other practical advantages to use stealing thunder in managing a crisis. First, it can reduce the journalists' likelihood of using the crisis news contrary to the organization's interests. In a crisis, the interest of an organization and that of journalists can often conflict. While the management of the organization hopes to minimize the negative impact of a crisis, journalists' goal is to get the news, albeit negative, before it loses news value (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). However, when the organization proactively releases the information, it is less of a breaking news story to journalists. Further, since journalists are looking for a fresh story, once the crisis information is released by an organization, it diminishes freshness at least to some extent. Accordingly, the competition between each of the news outlets may be reduced, which can also reduce the likelihood of sensationalizing the crisis news. Second, by proactively self-disclosing the crisis, stealing thunder can provide the organization with an opportunity to control the flow of information (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Fennis & Stroebe, 2014). Since the organization willingly discloses negative information, journalists will also try to get more information from the organization rather than acquire further information on their own. Thus, the organization can become the source of the information rather than an object of investigation. As a result, stealing thunder may offer the organization an important venue for developing strong relationships with journalists during a crisis. Recent research in fact suggests that stealing thunder may help practitioners develop a partnership with journalists (Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

Importantly, stealing thunder can be an effective strategy to minimize a negative impact of a crisis to various stakeholders. For example, consumers tend to positively react when an organization proactively releases potentially negative information for that organization (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Fennis & Stroebe, 2014). In doing so, the organization could steer the situation, such that it can influence specific issues of the crisis that the media address as well as the ways in which various stakeholders perceive them in time of a crisis. Research has shown that an organization that proactively discloses crisis information can gain increased credibility from the reporters (Arpan & Pompper, 2003), as well as consumers (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Claeys et al., 2011; Fennis & Stroebe, 2014). When the information provided by the organization is perceived to be more credible, there is less room for the stakeholders and journalists to perceive the crisis from a different angle.

Impression formation research has shown that negative information is more attention getting (Fiske, 1980) and usually results in negative reactions in information processing (Ahluwalia et al., 2000). The extensive use of negative advertising in political campaigns illustrates the attention getting effect, as well as the message effectiveness of negative information. Research has further shown that people give negative news more weight, compared with positive news (Kroloff, 1988). This negative effect or negativity bias has been demonstrated in the person perception research (e.g., Fiske, 1980) as well as in the consumer behavior research (e.g., Ahluwalia et al., 2000).

Crisis communication essentially contains negative information about an organization, and stakeholders perceive a crisis in a negative light (Coombs, 2007; Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, & Johansen, 2010). Thus, why would a proactive release of negative information be perceived more credible to stakeholders? Research on impression formation has also demonstrated that when a person voluntarily reveals negative information against himself or herself, the person is perceived to be more credible and persuasive (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978; Williams et al., 1993). Likewise, when an organization steps forward and reveals potentially damaging information, stakeholders tend to perceive the information as more credible and persuasive,