



Managing a health crisis on Facebook: How the response strategies of apology, sympathy, and information influence public relations



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ABSTRACT

Through an online survey with Internet users, this study evaluated the crisis response strategies communicated on Facebook and their impact on a hospital's reputation, credibility, as well as stakeholder trust and behavioral intentions. The findings indicate that public relations practitioners should avoid posting sympathetic Facebook posts during a health crisis since they might further damage the image of the affected organization. Conversely, undertaking a proactive approach by posting informative messages can prove more advantageous. The practical implications of the results are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The explosive growth of social media and the subsequent rapid dissemination of information required by organizations have led to a strong need to examine the new rules of communication especially during a crisis. Previous studies have demonstrated that during a crisis social media use increases as stakeholders use them for immediate access to information as well as to share updates (Glik, 2007; Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011; Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). The plethora of social networks (SNS) breeds the rapid dissemination of misinformation that can distort events and eventually tarnish an organization's image. In light of this, organizations utilize the Internet's affordances to communicate with stakeholders (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Liu et al., 2011; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011; Taylor & Perry, 2005).

Amidst this evolving media ecosystem, there is an urgent need for public relations scholars and practitioners to study what type of crisis response strategy is appropriate during an unfolding crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Schultz et al., 2011) in an effort to mitigate potential damages to the reputation and credibility but also to safeguard stakeholder's trust and behavioral intentions toward the organization.

Although past scholarship has examined crises events in various contexts (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000; Freberg, Palenchar, & Veil, 2013; Schwarz, 2012), there is lack of systematic research at the intersection of health-crisis

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communication and social media around crisis situations. Effectively managing information and communication during a health crisis is crucial since stakeholders, who tend to react rationally when confronted with risk information, might show differing levels of rationality than the organization disseminating the information (Williams & Olaniran, 1998), since their risk perceptions are enhanced when the danger is man-made (Glik, 2007).

The purpose of this article is to address the gap in the literature by comparing the crisis response strategies of apology, sympathy and information a hospital in a crisis can employ on its Facebook page. This will have both practical and theoretical implications when the crisis response strategies are analyzed in relation to the perceptions of reputation, trust, credibility, and behavioral intentions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Crisis

Crisis management has received renewed scholarly attention because of the abundance of social networks (SNS) and the fast manner information can reach large audiences (Coombs, 2014). Coombs (2007) defined an organizational crisis as the “perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes (p. 2)”. Although a crisis is temporally unpredictable it cannot be perceived as totally unexpected. Hence, a crisis management mechanism should exist to avert or mitigate damages on the affected organization and its stakeholders. This is critical in the Internet era since a crisis can rapidly unfold and proliferate due to the rich social media ecosystem which renders its management more challenging (Coombs, 2011b).

Audiences are now fragmented and expect from companies to heed their informational exigencies and interact with them by providing swift and unambiguous responses, thus preventing negative situations from becoming organizational crises (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008). It appears that stakeholder discontent or even a crisis can trigger a domino effect and tarnish the company’s image although an equivalent situation in the pre-Internet period could have inflicted less damage. Successful public relations require establishing and maintaining enduring relationships between an organization and the public, especially in volatile situations as in a crisis.

Weick (1995) suggested that the real challenge for an organization is not determined by the magnitude of the crisis but by the type of the response it provides to audiences. Hence, an initial crisis response strategy should emphasize speed, accuracy, and consistency since uncertainty can result in extra pressure to stakeholders (Coombs, 2011a). This is even more pressing these days as organizations increasingly rely on the Internet to communicate with stakeholders during a crisis (Taylor & Perry, 2005). The literature suggests that offering a quick response is advantageous during an organization’s image repair efforts (Benoit, 1997). Moreover, it provides news media with critical real-time information and helps prevent the dissemination of false information or speculations due to the paucity of official updates (Middleberg, 2001). Past scholarship views quick responses as a characteristic of active organizations in control of crisis situations, a perception that can improve their credibility (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Carney & Jorden, 1993; Hearit, 1994).

2.2. Reputation

An organization’s reputation is one of the most important intangible assets a company possesses, but it is jeopardized during a crisis (Barton, 2001; Sturges, 1994). In general, reputation is the collective public perception stakeholders have over time toward an organization (Grunig & Hung, 2002). Reputation develops by interaction with an organization (Rindova & Fombrun, 1999). Organizational reputation is defined as the “stock of perceptual and social assets – the quality of the relationship it has established with stakeholders and the regard in which the company and brand is held” (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004, p. 32). Schreiber (2011) proposed a twofold definition of reputation; from an organizational standpoint, reputation gives a company the flexibility to optimally handle the needs and expectations of its stakeholders, something that distinguishes it from its competitors. On the other hand, stakeholders assume an *emotional, intellectual, and behavioral* understanding of reputation that depends on the fulfillment of their desires and anticipations by the organization.

A good reputation reflects the company’s overall quality and services (Carmeli & Tishler, 2005) and epitomizes its care for customers (Brammer & Millington, 2005). Moreover, an enduring corporate reputation advances the long-term viability of an organization. Fombrun and Van Riel (2004) found that organizations with a good reputation perform better financially than competitors with poor reputation. Past research also showed that reputation mediates the relationship between an organization’s qualities and consumer purchase intentions. In a study on reputation and airline companies, Graham and Bansal (2007) demonstrated that for every one-point increase in airline reputation consumers were willing to pay \$18 more for airline tickets. However, a crisis undermines the reputation of a company since audiences can negatively evaluate the company based on its crisis response. Prior research suggests that negative word-of-mouth not only damages an organization’s reputation (Tucker & Melewar, 2005) but can influence future purchases even after stakeholder anger dissipates because online comments remain and can influence others (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Yet, Coombs (2007) suggested that an organization with a good reputation can make stakeholders discard unfavorable information since there is the tendency to perceive reputable organizations as less likely to be responsible for unfortunate events.

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