



Emotional crisis communication



Toni G.L.A. van der Meer*, Joost W.M. Verhoeven

Amsterdam School for Communication Research, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Organizational crises are usually highly emotional experiences for both organizations and stakeholders. Hence, crisis situations often result in emotionally charged communication between the two parties. Despite the attention of organizations and scholars to the emotions of stakeholders during crises, little is known about the effects of the emotions communicated by organizations on corporate reputations. Through the use of vignettes, this experiment reveals that besides crisis-response strategy (diminish vs. rebuild), the communicated emotion (i.e., shame and regret) has a positive effect on corporate reputation. Mediation analyses showed that this effect of communicated emotion could be explained by the public's (negative) affective as well as cognitive responses (i.e., account acceptance). This study confirms that emotional signals embedded in crisis responses may affect corporate reputations by reducing feelings of anger and by increasing the acceptance of the organizational message. In doing so, this study provides a starting point for further exploration of the effectiveness of other emotions in crisis communication.

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1. Introduction

Organizational crises often cause high levels of anger and outcry in the public sphere. During organizational crises, corporate reputation, a key asset for an organization, is under threat (e.g., Benoit, 1997; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Schultz & Kitchen, 2004). Through crisis communication, organizations attempt to repair their image and prevent reputational damage. To steer the sensemaking and opinions of stakeholders regarding a crisis, several crisis-response strategies are developed (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2006). Such strategies concern the information an organization should convey to the public.

In crisis communication, emotion is usually studied as a public response to crises and organizational responses (e.g., Jin, 2010; Jin & Pang, 2010). However, a crisis may not just be an emotional experience for the public, but also for an organization and its members. An organization may choose to suppress such emotions as much as possible, because expressing emotions may be deemed inappropriate. Alternatively, an organization may communicate emotions in its crisis response. For instance, in addition to using a response strategy (e.g., denial, diminish and rebuild), a spokesman may announce that the organization feels shame or regret regarding the organizational-crisis situation. Little is known about the extent to which and the way in which such communicated emotions affect corporate reputations in addition to crisis-response strategies.

The communication of emotion may provide information about the sender (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994), and, as such, provide direct information that can be used to assess the corporate reputation. Secondly, communicated emotion may affect the public's interpretation, and, as a consequence, the effectiveness of the organizational crisis response. Hence, this study

* Corresponding author at: University of Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 611755677.
E-mail addresses: G.L.A.vanderMeer@UvA.nl, tonivandermeer@hotmail.com (T.G.L.A. van der Meer).

assumes that in crisis communication, emotion communication plays an important role in assessing the effectiveness of crisis responses.

PR practitioners have been slow to recognize the importance of emotional appeals alongside rational arguments and response strategies. The thoughtful use of emotion by PR practitioners can help enhance or protect an organization's reputation (Read, 2007). Additionally, empirical research has found some evidence that communicated emotions in corporate crisis messages may affect people's response to these messages and the crisis (Choi & Lin, 2007; Kim & Cameron, 2011; Wesseling, Kerkhof, & Van Dijk, 2006). The key objective of this study is to investigate the effect of organizational communication in crisis situations. In particular, the study will address the additional effects of communicated emotion (i.e., shame and regret) on organizational reputation, in the context of post-crisis communication.

A vignette study was conducted to fill the gap in PR literature and crisis research by analyzing the effect of communicated emotions by organizations in crisis. Although, to some extent, crises are always emotional events for organizations as well as the public, only recently has emotion been incorporated into the study of crisis communication (Coombs, 2007; Jin, 2009; Yang, Kang, & Johnson, 2010). However, these studies focused primarily on the emotional responses of stakeholders rather than the communication of emotions by spokespersons of organizations.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundation of the current study begins by addressing the importance of corporate reputation in crises. Next, crisis communication will be outlined. Third, the presumed impact of the communication of emotions by organizations on reputation shall be discussed, as well as the presumed impact of communicated emotions on the effectiveness of crisis-response strategies. Finally, the processes through which communicated emotions impact corporate reputation will be explored, and mediation hypotheses will be formulated.

2.1. Corporate reputation

Numerous authors (e.g., Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Huang, 2006; Schultz & Kitchen, 2004; Sohn & Lariscy, 2012) have addressed the importance of corporate reputation. An organization's reputation is defined in the literature as the outside members' perception of corporate image (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). In this article, "corporate reputation" refers to the corporate reputation directly following an organization's response to a crisis.

In general, reputation is recognized as a valuable, intangible asset (Coombs, 2007). For example, a good corporate reputation attracts customers, top employees, and investors, improves financial performance, increases an organization's return on investment and creates a competitive advantage (Carmeli & Tishler, 2005; Fombrun & Gardberg, 2000). Moreover, reputation is a major factor that affects consumer choice between products and services, and also influences various other stakeholders (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Schultz & Kitchen, 2004).

To some extent, corporate reputation is driven by the emotions one experiences toward an organization (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever, 2000). In addition, reputations are driven by the beliefs one holds about an organization (Dutton et al., 1994). Corporate reputations are based on information about the organization available to stakeholders (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004). This information is received from direct interaction with the corresponding organization, through media coverage, and through second-hand information such as word of mouth (Coombs, 2007). However, the majority of information is received through the media (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Meijer, 2004).

2.2. Organizational crisis communication

Crisis disrupt on-going operations, cause financial and reputational damage (e.g., Coombs, 2007; Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011), and threaten an organization's interaction with stakeholders (Dowling, 2002). Crisis communication research mainly deals with the relationships between crisis situations, communication strategies and public perceptions (Coombs & Holladay, 2009; Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009). Because crises are characterized by high consequences, low probability of occurrence, high media attention and low predictability (Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Weick, 1988), these events play an important role in the formation of an organization's reputation. As a result of a negative reputation shift, stakeholders will change how they interact with the organization (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001).

Public relations efforts after a crisis are usually targeted at informing those involved and preventing or averting reputational damage caused by the crisis. Because of their complex nature, crises often defy interpretations and impose demands on sensemaking (Weick, 1988). Therefore, crisis communication aims to provide information to help stakeholders make sense of the situation. Crisis response strategies can be applied to steer the sensemaking and opinions of stakeholders and repair corporate image or prevent reputational damage, (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In this regard, Benoit (1997) emphasizes that the perceptions stakeholders form of an organization's role in a crisis are more important than the reality. Coombs' (2006, 2007) widely applied and supported Situational Crisis Communication Theory-based on Benoit's (1997) Image Restoration Theory – distinguishes three clusters of crisis-response strategies, namely: (1) *deny strategies* (confront the accuser, deny crisis existence, or scapegoat), (2) *diminish strategies* (justification or excuse) and (3) *rebuild strategies* (offer compensation or apologize). In the last two clusters, the organization acknowledges the crisis, but emphasizes that the organization does everything in its power to restore the damage caused by the organization.

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