



Countering accusations with inoculation: The moderating role of consumer-company identification

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 December 2012

Received in revised form 24 February 2013

Accepted 1 March 2013

Keywords:

Inoculation theory

Identification

Disidentification

Involvement

Proactive crisis communication

Experiment

ABSTRACT

Accusations of wrongdoing, baseless or justified, can severely tarnish a company's reputation. Once disseminated, even baseless accusations can persist and cause considerable damage for a company. This study examines the proactive crisis communication strategy of inoculating individuals against invalid accusations before they go viral. An experiment was conducted in a real world consumer context among members of an online consumer panel using an electronics discounter as the research stimulus. Expanding previous inoculation research on the role of value-relevant involvement for inoculation and the effectiveness of inoculation in the case of different preexisting attitudes, we find that consumers' identification with a company moderates inoculation effectiveness. Consumers strongly opposing or disidentifying with the company under attack reported fewer negative beliefs and attitude change as well as fewer intentions to spread the accusation after being exposed to an inoculation message refuting the claim against the company. Consumers strongly identifying with the company, on the other hand, did not profit from such an inoculation. Their level of identification alone was sufficient to prevent attitude slippage. Implications for public relations research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Accusations of wrongdoing, baseless or justified, can spread rapidly and severely tarnish a company's reputation or even lead to a full-fledged crisis if believed by consumers and other stakeholders. The proliferation of online social media can make negative information go viral rapidly. Once out there, even baseless accusations can persist and cause considerable damage as the example of the allegation that Starbucks provided financial support to the Israeli government and/or the Israeli Army shows.¹ Individuals or groups who are opposed to an attacked company are especially dangerous because they are likely to spread a negative message (Kamins, Folkes, & Perner, 1997). Individuals who are proponents of the company could lose their faith in the company if reached by the allegation. Therefore, convincing the public about the falseness of an accusation, and doing so at an early stage before allegations become widely disseminated, is important in order to prevent damage to the company or organization.

How to respond to accusations and how to communicate in critical situations is a major focus of the crisis management literature. Much research has been devoted to analyzing the effectiveness of various post-crisis response strategies (e.g.,

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¹ Starbucks faced calls for boycotts of its stores and products in the Middle East after a rumor spread that the coffee chain supported the Israeli government and/or the Israeli Army. This had direct impacts on local economies and residents, and also led to violent situations (http://news.starbucks.com/article.display.cfm?article_id=200).

Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 1998; Coombs & Holladay, 2002a; McDonald, Sparks, & Glendonb, 2010). Proactive communication strategies have received far less attention (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Wan & Pfau, 2004), despite the notion that timely management intervention might kill a crisis before it reaches maturity stages (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996).

In the crisis communication literature, “stealing thunder” (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003; Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993) is one of the few approaches attesting to the advantages of proactive crisis communication strategies. This strategy “is an admission of a weakness [usually a mistake or failure] before that weakness is announced by another party” (Arpan & Pompper, 2003, p. 294), and it has been shown to enhance credibility and to result in perceptions of the crisis as less severe (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). In line with Coombs’ (2010) recommendation to use accommodating rebuild strategies (e.g., admitting failure, taking responsibility) when the crisis is severe and responsibility perception by stakeholders high, “stealing thunder” seems to be particularly viable when an accusation of wrongdoing is valid. In case of an invalid accusation, however, companies are advised to use deny strategies (Coombs, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2002b). Denying false information once disseminated is difficult and has turned out to be ineffective (Tybout, Calder, & Sternthal, 1981), particularly if there is no obvious external entity responsible for the situation.

More promising than post hoc denial or “stealing thunder” is to immunize or “inoculate” stakeholders against an upcoming accusation before it hits. McGuire’s (1961a, 1961b, 1962, 1964) inoculation theory maintains that people can be protected against future attitude attacks much the same way they can be inoculated against viral attacks. Inoculation involves exposing individuals to a weak attack on their beliefs about an attitude object along with arguments countering the attack. Thus, inoculation involves refuting an accusation, and it is a viable strategy only when the attack is invalid. Evidence for the effectiveness of inoculation in a crisis situation has been presented by Wan and Pfau (2004). These authors find evidence for the effectiveness of proactive communication messages when people have a positive preexisting attitude toward the company. Those neutral or negative toward the firm were not affected by the proactive message. This finding accords with Pfau’s (1997) assertion that inoculation is more effective when receivers hold a positive attitude. We argue that the reason the proactive message was not effective among those unfavorable toward the company was that these consumers lacked motivation to process the inoculation message due to insufficient involvement with the firm.

In the research presented here we revisit inoculation theory as a strategy for crisis communication. By analyzing the moderating effect of different levels of identification, positive or negative, we expand previous research on the role of value-relevant involvement and pre-existing attitudes for inoculation effectiveness (Pfau et al., 2010; Wan & Pfau, 2004; Wood, 2007). The hypotheses are tested in a real-world setting using an electronics discounter as the research object and consumer panelists as research participants.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

Inoculation theory by McGuire (1961a, 1961b, 1962, 1964), McGuire and Papageorgis (1961, 1962) and Papageorgis and McGuire (1961) postulates that individuals can be inoculated against persuasive attacks on their attitudes in much the same manner they can be immunized against a virus. McGuire reasoned that exposing individuals to a weak attack on their beliefs about an attitude object, along with arguments countering the attack, stimulates recipients to defend their beliefs by generating arguments supporting them. Refutational inoculation, which consists of a warning of a possible future attack and the presentation of arguments refuting it, is said to work because the warning elicits threat and the counterarguments are used as “scripts” to strengthen existing attitudes against subsequent influence (McGuire, 1964; Papageorgis & McGuire, 1961).

Threat, operationalized as a mild dosage of the attack or accusation, is said to elicit the motivation for cognitive activity which protects beliefs. A message lacking the threat component, that is, a supportive message, should not motivate recipients to process the message. Research evidence showing the superiority of refutational treatments over supportive treatments in conferring resistance is ample (e.g., McGuire, 1961b, 1964; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961; Sudefeld & Borrie, 1978; Tannenbaum, Macauley, & Norris, 1966; Tannenbaum & Norris, 1965). In a recent meta-analysis of research on inoculation theory, Banas and Rains (2010) confirmed the notion that inoculated individuals are more resistant to an attack than those who receive a supportive treatment or no treatment at all.

Pfau (1997) considered threat “the most distinguishing feature of inoculation” (p. 137). However, while confirming the dual roles of threat and counterarguing in the process of resistance, Pfau and his colleagues (Pfau et al., 1997, 2001) also uncovered a direct, unexplained path to resistance. This finding suggests that there is more to the process of eliciting resistance than the mechanisms of threat and counterarguing. Testing for perceived threat as a moderator mitigating the effectiveness of inoculation by means of meta-analysis, Banas and Rains (2010) could not confirm that greater levels of threat confer more resistance than lower levels of threat.² In search of alternative mechanisms, involvement, or “the importance or salience of an attitude object for a receiver” (Pfau et al., 1997, p. 190) was argued to play a role in the inoculation process (Compton & Pfau, 2005). Although Banas and Rains’ meta-analysis could not confirm that inoculation is more effective with those moderately involved compared to those of higher or lower involvement, they called for more research on the role of involvement in the inoculation process. In a recent study, Pfau, Banas and colleagues (2010) examined the relative impact of

² Banas and Rains (2010) note that the power for this test was quite low and advise to continue examining the role of threat in inoculation.

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