



Better safe than sorry: Why organizations in crisis should never hesitate to steal thunder

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Abstract When organizations are confronted with a crisis, they sometimes have the opportunity to decide whether or not to disclose that information. Organizations may hesitate to reveal such negative events out of fear of drawing unnecessary attention to the crisis, legal liability, or other related problems. The aim of this article is to discuss the pros and cons of self-disclosure and to offer tools to public relations practitioners that will help convince management of the advantages of self-disclosure in a time of crisis—what has been labeled stealing thunder. Research repeatedly has illustrated several valuable ways in which the self-disclosure of crises can benefit organizations in trouble, the most important of which is that it allows organizations to behave in an ethical manner. The article also lists and refutes several arguments often given in favor of crisis concealment and aims to clarify why organizations should never hesitate when they have the opportunity to self-disclose a crisis.

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1. Timing is everything

An organization is likely to be confronted with a crisis during its lifetime (Shrivastava & Siomkos, 1989). Research across 43 European countries concluded that 70% of communication professionals encounter at least one crisis a year (Verhoeven, Tench, Zeffass, Moreno, & Vercic, 2014). A crisis can be defined as “the perception of an

unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2015a, p. 3). This definition stresses three important elements related to crises: (1) that a crisis is determined by the way stakeholders perceive it, (2) that it results in negative outcomes, and (3) that it is unpredictable. Most organizational crises will indeed be caused by unexpected events that immediately attract unwanted attention from the

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media and public. Often, however, organizations are aware of potential crisis situations before the media or other external parties are made aware. Management might have committed fraud, employees can conduct misdeeds, etc. When such an event occurs, timing is everything.

Timing refers to the moment at which a public statement is released acknowledging that a crisis exists or that an organization in crisis bears responsibility (Coombs, 2015b). In such instances, the organization in crisis may be tempted to conceal the crisis rather than make it public. Scientific research has offered strong and unanimous support for self-disclosure in a time of crisis, or what has been labeled *stealing thunder*. An organization that steals thunder “breaks the news about its own crisis before the crisis is discovered by the media or other interested parties” (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005, p. 425).

The importance of stealing thunder has been established in several research domains. Research in the context of social psychology, for instance, illustrates that people who are responsible for negative events in their own lives should self-disclose this information when they meet potential partners (Archer & Burlison, 1980; Jones & Gordon, 1972). If not, the potential partners are likely to consider them less attractive. Other studies further indicate that when a defendant on trial attempts to hold back incriminating information that is later discovered, jury members tend to focus on this information much more intensely than they might have if the same information had been disclosed at the proper time (Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003; Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993). The importance of self-disclosure of detrimental information is, however, especially apparent for organizations in crisis. Crisis communication practitioners argue that if organizations do not share information about a crisis openly, the public is likely to seek out information from other sources and the organization loses the ability to manage the flow of public information on the crisis (Seeger, 2006).

Even though best practices and crisis communication research stress the need for open and proactive communication in times of crisis (Huang & Su, 2009), communication professionals have conflicting views regarding the appropriateness of this kind of proactive crisis communication (Kline, Simunich, & Weber, 2009). Ulmer (2012, p. 531) claimed that “we know that these communication approaches are appropriate, yet they rarely are employed during a crisis.” Organizations often fear that communicating openly may result in litigation (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Companies in distress

might hope they will be able to keep incriminating information from leaking out. According to prior research, self-disclosing a crisis is more likely to occur when organizations are aware that the spread of incriminating information is unavoidable (Easley, Bearden, & Teel, 1995). For these reasons, organizations in crisis may feel inclined to steal thunder only when they are absolutely sure that the information would be revealed by a third party otherwise. Nevertheless, each organization should accept that all secrets will surface eventually (Coombs, 2002). Nowadays, the use of social media by both internal and external stakeholders has further increased the likelihood that crises will end up being revealed (Miles & Mangold, 2014). In this regard, Heath (2006) stresses that facts will emerge and that the harder an organization tries to hide them, the more explosive—or thunderous—the information will become once it surfaces.

Today, an organization’s attempt to conceal information is not only unethical but also nearly impossible. Covering up a crisis may have worked out fine for a few organizations in the past but now, more than ever, organizations should be aware that the truth will surface eventually. While the risks of covering up crisis information should be apparent, in this article I stress the potential benefits from self-disclosing crises. I offer practitioners rationale that can be used to convince management of the importance of stealing thunder. This is necessary because crisis communication scholars often assume that the legal department of an organization in crisis may advise against strategies such as self-disclosure (e.g., Benoit, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Tyler, 1997). To this end, I offer an overview containing a number of reasons why organizations in crisis should never hesitate to steal thunder. In addition, potential disadvantages and risks often associated with this communication strategy will be explained and refuted based on academic research.

2. Six reasons to self-disclose

2.1. Credibility

When an organization self-discloses incriminating information, it will add to its credibility (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). According to disconfirmation of expectations theory, the impact of corporate messages is affected by the perceived bias projected onto the organization’s spokesperson (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978). People expect a spokesperson’s message to be biased in two ways: (1) the

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