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## Full Length Article

## Believe me, I am one of you! The role of common group affiliation in crisis communication

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## ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the effectiveness of a CEO spokesperson's affiliation to a social group during a crisis. Specifically, it addresses the question of whether a group affiliation with a large heterogeneous group, such as parents, can engender similarly positive effects in members of the same social category, compared with a smaller distinctive group, here an amateur sports community. An experimental study using a product harm crisis by a bicycle manufacturer as stimulus was conducted to answer the research question. The results reveal positive effects when the CEO signaled his/her affiliation with a social group that is distinctive and rather homogenous. In this case, corporate trustworthiness, purchase intentions, and abstaining from negative word-of-mouth are directly impacted by stakeholders' identification with the CEO spokesperson, and indirectly through identification with the CEO and message credibility. However, when the CEO spokesperson communicated his/her affiliation with a large and heterogeneous group, in this case parents, the company did not benefit. The results yield implications for both crisis communication research and practice.

## 1. Introduction

When Fonterra, the New Zealand based multinational dairy company experienced a crisis involving a botulism scare in whey products in 2013, the company's CEO Theo Spierings apologized for the crisis with the following words: "It has caused a lot of anxiety among consumers, with moms and dads. Understandable, because, if you have children, I have children myself, and you hear these kinds of messages, there is anxiety. And I apologize for that."<sup>1</sup>; Research in crisis communication has shown that it is crucial that the CEO steps up when the integrity of the company is questioned, or when the crisis becomes prohibitive to the company's reputation (Lucero, Kwang, & Pang, 2009). While the Fonterra crisis management did the right thing by bringing Mr. Spierings to the front, his crisis communication contained another remarkable detail: In his apology, the CEO mentioned having children himself, like many anxious parents who were fearing that the contaminated whey may harm their children when processed for example in baby food.

By communicating his parenthood, Spierings signaled his affiliation with an important stakeholder group of Fonterra: parents. By doing this, he – intentionally or unintentionally – applied the psychological technique of similarity, which has been shown to positively affect the persuasiveness of the source (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Thus, when the CEO spokesperson describes him or herself as belonging to a specific group, company stakeholders who belong to the same social category may feel a sense of membership similarity (Simons, Berkowitz, & Moyer, 1970). During a crisis, this can bring positive effects as common group affiliation can

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enhance the level of identification with the spokesperson (Basil, 1996) and the credibility of his/her crisis message (Simons et al., 1970). This can in turn positively influence other outcomes like company trustworthiness, purchase intentions and word-of-mouth communication.

However, membership similarity through group affiliation can only engender such positive effects if it is perceived as relevant (Simons et al., 1970). The characteristics of the social group have been found to play a role in this regard: While groups which are very large or heterogenous were shown to become less loyal in their membership, smaller homogeneous and “optimally distinctive” groups were better suited to foster loyalty and favoritism towards the group and its members (Brewer, 1991, 1999). Therefore, when choosing a social group to affiliate with during a crisis, communication managers need to carefully consider the attributes of the group in order to assess whether having the CEO publicly affiliate him or herself with it will bolster crisis communication or not.

This research analyzes the effectiveness of group affiliation by a CEO spokesperson during a crisis. Specifically, we address the question of whether a group affiliation with a large heterogeneous group, such as parents, can engender similarly positive effects in members of the same social category, compared with a smaller and more distinctive group, here an amateur sports community. An experimental study using a product harm crisis by a bicycle manufacturer as stimulus was conducted to answer the research question. The research results yield important implications for both crisis communication theory and practice.

## 2. Literature review

In a crisis situation the choice of the company spokesperson is one of the crucial strategic decisions to make, over and above deciding on types and timing of crisis messages. Leadership has been said to play an important role in framing the meaning of a crisis, and it is argued that the top manager's visible involvement in the crisis response signals that the event is taken seriously, which helps to reduce some of the crisis-induced negative reactions (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). The positive effects of the CEO stepping up during a crisis may however be hampered by the psychological distance stakeholders' perceive between themselves, the “ordinary people”, and the person at the helm of a large company. One strategy to bridge this distance is to create some form of psychological connectedness between CEO and stakeholders. This can be achieved by emphasizing an aspect the CEO and his/her audience have in common, like membership in the same social group.

### 2.1. Membership similarity and identification

The positive effects of establishing a personal connection between the message source and the audience is a common belief in practice, and can be vividly observed in salespeople or in politicians. By claiming some degree of similarity in background or interest, these communicators aim to establish a psychological bond between themselves and the audience in order to accomplish their persuasive goal (Stiff & Mongeau, 2003). The same technique may be applied in crisis communication. As the introductory example shows, by signaling affiliation to a social group, the CEO spokesperson tries to establish a sense of connectedness and identification with those belonging to the same group to increase the persuasiveness of his message.

Simons et al. (1970) distinguish between two dimensions of a message source's similarity: membership similarity and attitudinal similarity. In this study, we focus on membership similarity, which is created through references to demographic and social characteristics, personal experiences or affiliations with groups that a spokesperson shares in common with the audience (Stiff & Mongeau, 2003). By creating membership similarity the company makes use of another psychological principle, i.e. social identity, which is the part of an individual's self-concept that stems from the perceived membership in certain social groups<sup>2</sup> (Tajfel, 1982; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1986) introduced the concept of social identity as a way in which to explain intergroup behavior. They propose categorization, social identification and social comparison as key processes. While categorization is the process by which people assign themselves and others to social categories or groups, social identification is the process by which an aspect of self-concept is developed based on in-group preference and a perception of belonging to a social group. There is also an emotional significance to the identification with an in-group, i.e. a social group with which a person psychologically identifies as being a member, and a person's self-esteem becomes connected with in-group membership. Through social comparison with other groups (out-groups) individuals aim to maintain their self-esteem.

Because social categories have similar meanings for the people who use them, people will see themselves as more similar when they define themselves in terms of the same group. Consequently, the process of social identification with the group gives rise to individuals' identification with others who share a common group affiliation. By sharing membership in the same group, in-group members perceive parts of their social identity to overlap with that of fellow group members, and “[p]sychological expectations of cooperation and security promote positive attraction toward other ingroup members” (Brewer, 1999, p. 433).

Thus, by signaling affiliation to a specific social group a CEO spokesperson creates membership similarity, which can engender identification with the spokesperson in those stakeholders who belong to that same social group. Unlike social identification, which refers to developing a self-concept based on belonging to a social group, identification with a group member refers to the perceived connectedness with and attraction to another in-group member. Kelman (1961) considers the identification with a person who is liked and respected as a variety of social influence. He proposes that identification entails being influenced by the other person, i.e. adopting his/her attitude or behavior, in order to establish or maintain the relationship. Advertisers frequently make use of this

<sup>2</sup> A social group is, at the psychological level, a cognitive-structural entity (a self-description in terms of a group or category label), and at the formal level “a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 15).

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