

# COMMUNICATION IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

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## **Abstract**

Crisis communication is an applied field that aims to provide guidance to crisis managers to limit the damage that the crisis can cause to stakeholders and the organization. In the US, crisis communication emerged as a serious research concern in the 1980s and interest in the subject has expanded rapidly since then [Coombs, W. T. (2015). Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding]. The end result is a growing body of research in crisis communication that should serve to illuminate the practice of crisis communication. The challenge is to find, evaluate and synthesize all the knowledge about crisis communication. By knowledge I mean the advice that crisis managers can trust as useful in their efforts. What we know about crisis communication that can be reliably applied when a crisis occurs.

This article aims to identify the main research results that have emerged consistently through systematic research efforts and emerging ideas that could benefit from crisis communication.

The idea is to identify evidence-based knowledge for crisis communication and areas that require additional attention from researchers and practitioners. Knowledge in applied fields such as crisis communication begins with practitioners struggling with problems. From their practitioners' work, researchers then seek to validate what factors actually work and why the problem approach does not work. The goal is to build a evidence-based approach to problem solving [Pfeffer, J., & Sutton, R. I. (2006). Evidence-based management. Harvard business review, 84]. Evidence-based means that ideas have been empirically tested. Careful research studies are not just speculations offered by researchers. The idea is to isolate the research results that can provide the greatest utility to crisis managers, as this advice has been properly verified through the research process. The first part of this article specifies the evidence of crisis communication that has emerged for crisis communication in research.

But crisis communication is a rapidly evolving practice. Practitioners have to deal with new problems and factors as they arise. Researchers in crisis communication are constantly trying to keep up with the requirements of practice. There is a gap between when a problem is identified in crisis communication and how to respond to the problem. Initial research to reduce the gap can be called the bleeding edge. Bleeding margin is a term in technology that indicates that something is still a high risk of not being trusted because it has not been fully tested. The second part of this article identifies the bleeding edge of crisis communication research and the potential implications for practice.

**Key words: Communication, crisis, pandemic, flu and other respiratory viruses**

## **Defining the crisis**

The term crisis has a wide range of definitions that include actions such as disasters and personal problems. This article restricts the term crisis to organizational crises - those experiences of organizations such as corporations and nonprofits. An organizational crisis can be defined as a significant threat to organizational operations or reputation that can have negative consequences for stakeholders and / or the organization if not treated properly [Coombs, W. T. (2015). Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding]. The crises can be divided into operational and reputational crises. Operational crises create a real or potential disruption to organizational operations. Fires, explosions, CEO criminal actions and memories caused by product damage can disrupt operations in some way. Crisis management was originally created to address operational crises. Reputational crises threaten to cause serious damage to an organization's reputation. Reputation crises include irresponsible behavior on the part of management and corporate messages that offend some stakeholders. The idea is that the crisis will cause stakeholders to perceive the organization much less favorably [Sohn, Y. J., & Lariscy, R. W. (2014). Understanding reputational crisis: Definition, properties, and consequences. Journal of Public Relations Research, 26(1), 23-43]. Clearly, an operational crisis will cause some damage to reputation. However, reputational crises do not significantly affect operations. Most crises can be classified as primarily reputational or operational. A key difference between the two crises is that operational crises usually pose a certain threat to public safety and / or the well-being of stakeholders, while reputational crises are much less likely to produce the same level of public safety or welfare concerns. stakeholders generated by an operational crisis [Coombs, W. T. (2015). Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding].

## **Selection of research for practitioners' consumption**

As mentioned in the introduction, researchers produce crisis communication research at an astonishing rate. We narrowed our research to focus on lines of research that produce consistent evidence. Consistent evidence is essential to put research into practice. Crisis managers need to be confident that the evidence presented in research is limited.

When an organization is the first to report a crisis, the organization suffers less damage than if some external sources, such as the news media, are the first to report the crisis. Again, being the one to report the first crisis is counterintuitive and has the opposition of many managers. Some managers prefer an ostrich approach - if they don't acknowledge the crisis, no one else will know about it. Just as ostriches don't really hide their heads in the sand, managers shouldn't hope that stakeholders won't find out about the crisis. Information has a way out of an organization and this ability to flow is only improved through social media. A comment or photo posted online can reveal a crisis very quickly in the digital age.

Thunder theft requires managers to take action, most of them being uncomfortable with performance. There is often a reluctance among managers to disclose negative information. However, several studies have documented the benefits of thunder theft for organizations. Thunder theft studies have used experimental models to document a cause-and-effect relationship between thunder theft and organizational benefits, such as reducing reputational damage and decreasing buying intentions created by a crisis. The research results are consistent and strong. Evidence strongly suggests that revealing the crisis is an effective response to the crisis, as it helps reduce the damage an organization may suffer as a result of the crisis. Social media is an option that an organization can use to steal thunder. Social media proximity allows an organization to report a crisis at any time and not rely on traditional media to facilitate the launch of a story.

## **Victims' attention**

When an organization is the first to report a crisis, the organization suffers less damage than if some external sources, such as the news media, are the first to report the crisis. Again, being the first to report the crisis is counterintuitive and many managers oppose it. Some managers prefer an ostrich approach - if they don't acknowledge the crisis, no one else will know about it. Just as construction will not really hide its head in the sand, managers should not hope that stakeholders will not find out about a crisis. Information has a way out of an organization and this ability to flow is only improved through social media. A comment or photo posted online can reveal a crisis very quickly in the digital age.

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## **Misinformation and denial**

At this point, it is important to discuss the strategy for responding to the crisis's rejection. Denial is the opposite of victim-centered response, as it argues that there is no or no involvement in the crisis, so the organization has no responsibility to the victims. The focus is on the organization that is not responsible, not the concern for the victims of the crisis. Academic studies often make the mistake of simply comparing the effects of a rejection response and a victim-oriented response and conclude that the rejection response is more effective. It has long been documented in the crisis communication literature that denial will reduce reputational damage because it eliminates the link between crisis and organization [Benoit, W. L. (1995). Accounts, excuses, and apologies: A theory of image restoration, Coombs, W. T. (1995). Choosing the right words: The Development of guidelines for the selection of the "appropriate" crisis-response strategies. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 8(4), 447-476, Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2001). An extended examination of the crisis situation: A fusion of the relational management and symbolic approaches. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 13(4), 321-340]. If the organization is not involved in a crisis, the crisis will not affect the organization's reputation. However, if the organization proves to have anything to do with the crisis, even minimal responsibility for the crisis, the reputational damage intensifies if a denial strategy were used. Some researchers refer to this as a double crisis in which the response creates a second crisis [Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Grebe, 2013].

However, since 2014, some academics have mistakenly compared rejection and victim-oriented responses and argue that refusal has been more effective. This is a false choice, managers do not choose between denial and a victim-oriented response [Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2001). An extended examination of the crisis situation: A fusion of the relational management and symbolic approaches. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 13(4), 321-340]. If the organization is responsible for the crisis, managers choose from victim-oriented response options. If the organization has nothing to do with the crisis, managers choose a form of denial. Crisis

responsibility is the deciding factor in the use of negative or victim-oriented responses. Even if the responsibility is ambiguous, may or may not be the fault of the organization, denial should be avoided. Managers risk intensifying the damage caused by the crisis if they use denial, then ambiguous situations become some in which the organization has a certain responsibility for the crisis.

Refusal is best reserved when a crisis is the result of inaccurate or false information (a rumor), which we can call misinformation crises. Managers must respond aggressively to misinformation crises [DiFonzo, N., & Bordia, P. (2000). How top PR professionals handle hearsay: corporate rumors, their effects, and strategies to manage them. *Public Relations Review*, 26(2), 173-190, Kimmel, A. J., & Audrain-Pontevia, A. F. (2010). Analysis of commercial rumors from the perspective of marketing managers: Rumor prevalence, effects, and control tactics. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 16(4), 239-253 ].

Especially in the digital environment, misinformation can spread and be accepted as fact. Managers need to act quickly to dismantle and deny misinformation [Rowan, K. E. (1991). Goals, obstacles, and strategies in risk communication: A problem-solving approach to improving communication about risks. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 19(4), 300-329]. It is useful if managers explain the real situation and provide evidence to support their position. Two examples will help clarify when denial is effective and appropriate. During the withdrawal of peanut paste in 2009, the American public mistakenly believed that peanut butter was part of the recall. All three major peanut butter brands have placed statements on their homepages, rejecting any withdrawal and explaining the situation to stakeholders. Proctor and Gamble have aggressively denied that their Febreze product is dangerous to dogs and cats.

Denial has its place in crisis communication. As the crisis communication theory [SCCT] argues, denial should be reserved for disinformation crises [Coombs, W.T. (2007). *Protecting organization Reputations during a crisis*]. If there is any possibility, the organization has a certain responsibility for a crisis, the denial will only make the crisis situation worse for the organization in crisis.

### **The emergence of the crisis in social networks**

We turn our attention from what we certainly know about crisis communication to research and practice. The results here are less reliable, which means that we are not sure at this time how useful the advice is, but advice is needed to address the new concerns in crisis communication. Social networks are the driving force behind the bloody edge of crisis communication. Researchers and practitioners are struggling with what has been called the social media crisis. A social media crisis is a situation that occurs in or is amplified by social media. Unfortunately, this is a very vague definition that even the people who helped popularize the term now find it not working well at all. Social media crises are essentially risks that an organization manages for the public. These risks look like crises and often require a communicative response. These situations have been called paracrisis, because the situation is like a crisis (para means so), but it is actually a form of risk management [Coombs, W.T., & Holladay, S. J. (2012). The paracrisis: The challenges of publicly managing crisis prevention. *Public Relations Review*, 38(3), 408–415]. This section examines paracrisis / crises in social networks in detail to find out where the real gray areas for this crisis subject are.

Again, the social media crisis is a very vague concept. When you carefully study the cases called social media crises, patterns appear. An organization can create its own paracrisis through the abusive use of social channels. In 2014, American Apparel posted a picture of fireworks on social media to celebrate July 4th. However, the image was of the 1986 explosion of the Challenger space shuttle. There have been many angry posts about how insensitive American Apparel was to the posted image. The resolution of this paracrisis is simple. An organization acknowledges its mistake and commits itself not to repeat the mistake. Paracrisis can become a crisis if the organization repeatedly abuses social channels as a way to attract attention. Repeated violations could create a situation that can be considered a crisis of management misconduct.

Stakeholders are the most common source of paracrisis. There are three variants of paracrisis generated by stakeholders: customer service, ventilation and challenge. Customer service is when a customer makes public the issue of customer service they have experienced. An example would be when a person uploaded to YouTube the video of a FedEx employee throwing a computer monitor over the fence. This is a customer relationship issue, not a crisis. However, it is a risk that threatens the reputation of the organization. The organization must publicly address the issue of customer service. A crisis can occur when the identified problem persists or the problem is really a product damage, rather than a customer service problem.

If possible, release information about a crisis before it is reported in the tradition or in the digital media. Report crisis information on your organization's online communication channels. Stakeholders who depend on social media for news are likely to learn about the crisis from the organization's social networks, rather than from traditional media that provide another opportunity to steal thunder. Whenever there are victims or potential victims, tell people immediately how to protect themselves physically in the crisis. Whenever there are victims or potential victims, immediately provide people with information and actions designed to help them cope psychologically with the crisis. This would include details of the crisis event, expressions of sympathy, corrective action and advice. Organizations recover their reputation and share prices faster when they communicate aggressively (frequently and through multiple channels) than when they communicate passively (they release very little information). Refusal should only be used when an organization is facing a rumor or misinformation about the crisis. The company's website denied the rumor and received testimonies from expert third-party sources to support its claims [Coombs, W. T. (2015). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding*, Mourdoukoutas, P., & Siomkos, G. J. (2009). *The Seven Principles of WOM and Buzz*]. Denial has its place in

crisis communication. As the crisis communication theory [SCCT] argues, denial should be reserved for disinformation crises [Coombs, 2007]. If there is any possibility that the organization has some responsibility for a crisis, the denial will only make the crisis situation worse for the organization in crisis

## Conclusions

Misuse of Customer Challenges Stakeholder Ventilation Stakeholders are the most common source of paracrisis. There are three variants of paracrisis generated by stakeholders: customer service, ventilation and challenge. Customer service is when a customer makes public the issue of customer service they have experienced. An example would be when a person uploaded to YouTube the video of a FedEx employee throwing a computer monitor over the fence. This is a customer relationship issue, not a crisis. However, it is a risk that threatens the organization's reputation. The organization must publicly address the issue of customer service. A crisis can occur when the identified problem persists or the problem is really a product injury, rather than a customer service issue. Ventilation is when stakeholders, usually customers, are upset.

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