Full Length Article

A knockout to the NFL’s reputation?: A case study of the NFL’s crisis communications strategies in response to the Ray Rice scandal

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 31 May 2016
Received in revised form 4 January 2017
Accepted 15 February 2017
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Sports
Crisis communication
Ray rice
Case study
Situational crisis communications theory

Abstract

The NFL was largely criticized for its mishandling of the Ray Rice controversy in 2014. This study identifies crisis communication strategies that both followed and deviated from established research-based models. Further, the study evaluates whether and how these response strategies were mismatched with the perceived level of crisis responsibility as predicted by theory. The results of this case illustrate the consequences of mismatching crisis communications strategies with perceived crisis responsibility. This study demonstrates the need for scholars to identify and study potential buffering factors that can shield organizations from short-term consequences of a crisis. Moreover, it suggests that researchers need to better understand the cumulative effect of negative reputation and crisis history that can accrue over time.

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1. Introduction

The summe and fall of 2014 were trying times for the National Football League from a public relations standpoint. Ray Rice, the star running back for the Baltimore Ravens, had been arrested late in the winter along with his fiancée, Janay Palmer, for a domestic violence incident at an Atlantic City, New Jersey, casino. The incident did not attract immediate, large-scale media attention, as professional athletes have historically been involved in numerous domestic violence cases. As a result, Baltimore Ravens management and personnel took a fairly typical approach to the situation by expressing support for Rice and turning their attention to his record of community involvement. The situation took a disastrous turn from its innocuous beginning once TMZ released security camera footage that showed Rice punching Palmer, knocking her out, and precipitating the events shown in a previous surveillance video of Rice dragging Palmer’s limp body from the elevator (Elevator, 2014). These shocking visual images elicited from the media and the American public a large-scale outcry against Rice, the Ravens, and NFL executives (particularly commissioner Roger Goodell) for poor handling of the situation and for apparently attempting to cover up potentially damaging evidence to maintain the league’s image (Van Natta & Valkenburg, 2014).

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.02.015
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This outcry made Rice a household name, and the scandal was ubiquitous across American news media during the NFL’s 2014 season. The same day the video was released, Ray Rice was released from the Ravens and suspended from the NFL indefinitely (Hirschhorn, 2014; Pelissero & Mihoces, 2014; Wilson, 2014). Rice appealed the suspension, which was eventually overturned, allowing Rice to return to the NFL (Worland, 2014). The Ray Rice scandal is particularly interesting from a crisis communication perspective because of its longevity and complexity. The unfolding of the NFL’s crisis response involved multiple stages and different strategies.

Crisis communication research has received considerable attention from scholars (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010) and has become one of the major paradigms of public relations research (Toth, 2010) focusing on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT; Avery & Park, 2016; Ma & Zhan, 2016). Research using this theory has “yielded many best practice recommendations and models for crisis management and response” (Avery & Park, 2016; p. 72). However, as Ma and Zhan (2016) assert, SCCT research has “yielded mixed findings” (p. 102) about the impact of the theory’s response strategies on organizational reputation. In particular, they noted that “matched and mismatched response strategies did not differ in protecting organizational reputation” (p. 103). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze the Ray Rice crisis, particularly the Baltimore Ravens’ and the NFL’s crisis communication strategies, from an SCCT perspective with the intent of learning how the crisis communication strategies employed either followed or deviated from established theory. This research also evaluates the impact of matched or mismatched strategies on the NFL’s reputation and offers ideas for further research based on the findings. SCCT was selected as the theoretical framework for this study because of its strategic value in using crisis management variables, such as crisis type, attributions of responsibility, and prior reputation, to predict effective communication strategies from a comprehensive list reputation repair options drawn from the crisis communication literature (Coombs, 2007a).

2. Literature review

2.1. Situational crisis communications theory (SCCT)

SCCT relies on empirical research to provide an evidence-based theoretical framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication (Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2010; Coombs, 2007a; Rousseau, 2006). SCCT provides a set of guidelines for how crisis managers can use crisis response strategies that are matched to crisis situations to protect an organization’s reputation from the effects of a crisis.

A key position of the SCCT holds that organizational communication affects people’s perceptions in a crisis. Perceptions are potentially changed by the words and actions of organizations. The three objectives of crisis response strategies to protect reputations are: (1) to shape stakeholders’ attributions of the crisis, (2) to change perceptions of the organization in crisis, and (3) to reduce the negative affect and emotions in response to the crisis (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs, 1995).

According to SCCT, stakeholders who are impacted by an organizational crisis will search for someone or something to attribute blame (Sohn & Lariscy, 2014; Coombs, 2007b). SCCT identifies different crisis types, each of which will generate certain attributions of crisis responsibility, or the degree to which a stakeholder believes the organization is responsible for the crisis (Coombs, 2006a), and “perceptions of the causality or the perceived reasons for a particular event’s occurrence” (Weiner, 1985, p. 280). Attributions of crisis responsibility by stakeholders result in affective reactions and “will inflict some reputational damage” (Coombs & Holladay, 2006; p. 124). Increased attributions can generate stronger feelings of anger toward the organization, reduced feelings of sympathy for the organization, negative word of mouth about the organization or in disengagement of stakeholders with the organization (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2004, 2005). Negative reputation and stakeholders’ negative emotions impact stakeholders’ behavioral intentions (Coombs, 1995), such as purchase intention and support for an organization (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994).

The first step in evaluating a crisis situation is to identify the basic crisis type. A crisis can be classified into one of three clusters: (1) victim, (2) accidental, or (3) intentional (Coombs, 2004b). The crisis type determines how much responsibility stakeholders attribute to the organization during the initial stages of the crisis. Research has shown initial crisis responsibility is negatively related to organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

The victim crisis type has weak attributions of crisis responsibility, and the organization is viewed as a fellow victim of the event. Examples of victim crises include natural disaster, rumor, workplace violence, and product tampering/malevolence (Coombs, 2007a). The accidental crisis type is characterized by minimal attributions of crisis responsibility, and the event is considered unintentional or uncontrollable by the organization. Examples of accidental crises include challenges, technical-error accidents, and technical-error product harm (Coombs, 2007a). The intentional crisis type has very strong attributions of crisis responsibility, and the event is considered purposeful (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2002) or preventable (Sisco, 2012). Examples of intentional crises include neglect and any purposeful action that results in harm to stakeholders.

Crisis managers craft communication intended to frame the current crisis as one of these crisis types. Coombs (2007a) posits the frames used in media reports are the frames most stakeholders experience and adopt, making it necessary for crisis managers to present their version of the events to the news media. In the Internet age, it is common for several frames to be posted to media sites as crisis managers, bloggers, critics, and victims all have forums where their voices can be broadcast (Coombs, 2007a).

The second step in evaluation of a crisis is to identify modifiers or intensifying factors, variables that can alter attributions generated by the crisis type (Coombs, 2006a). The two types of modifiers are crisis history and crisis severity. Crisis history
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