



Further explorations of post-crisis communication: Effects of media and response strategies on perceptions and intentions

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ABSTRACT

Crisis communication represents a rapidly growing body of research and is seeing an increased use of experimental methods. However, the experiments have relied exclusively on print stimuli resulting in little knowledge of channel effects on crisis communication. This study evaluates the effects of different response strategies and media channels on respondents exposed to a crisis. The study used a 2 (crisis response: sympathy and compassion) × 2 (media: print and video) design. We selected two similar response strategies that could differ in terms of the additional cues provided by video. Results revealed virtually no meaningful difference between the use of video versus print or sympathy versus compensation.

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Following calls in the literature on crisis communication (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Dean, 2004), research has moved beyond case studies to experiments designed to assess systematically how people perceive crisis situations and crisis response strategies. Increasingly, experimental research is being used to explore how people perceive crises, how crisis response strategies affect stakeholder perceptions, and how these factors shape perceptions of organizations in crisis and potential future interactions with these organizations (e.g., An & Cheng, *in press*; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Dean, 2004; Huang, Lin, & Su, 2005).

The experimental crisis response research has used print media almost exclusively for the crisis response stimuli. Many people do receive their news about organizations in print form. However, more people receive their news from television than from print (Audience, 2008). We increasingly live in a visual culture. This raises the question of whether or not the research has missed an important channel effect. It is possible that video presentation of crisis response strategies may have a different effect on stakeholders than print presentation. The primary purpose of this study is to explore if people respond to the same crisis response strategy differently in print versus video delivery conditions. This article discusses the rationale, execution, and results of the video and print crisis response study.

1. Literature review and research questions

While crisis communication is a burgeoning field, a number of questions still remain to be answered about stakeholder reactions to crisis response strategies. One of those questions is the impact of communication channels on the effects of crisis

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response strategies. Research has shown that crisis response strategies – what an organization says and does after a crisis – can affect a variety of important crisis communication outcomes including the organizational reputation, anger, negative word-of-mouth, and account acceptance.

However, previous research on people's perceptions of crisis response strategies has relied exclusively on printed stimuli for presenting information about the crisis (e.g., Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Dean, 2004; Huang et al., 2005). Between 1987 and September 2008, 17 experimental studies involving crisis communication were published in *Public Relations Review* and the *Journal of Public Relations Research*. All seventeen of the studies, even the studies that included Internet-based stimuli, used print stimuli (e.g., An & Cheng, in press; Huang, 2008).

According to The Pew Research Center for People & the Press, television remains the primary news source for most people in the U.S. The study found 57% of Americans receive their news from television while only 24% receive their news from newspapers (traditional and online newspapers combined) (Audience, 2008). For those who principally use the Internet for news, 30% rely on video to 26% for print. While growing in use, the Internet remains in the minority as a dominant news source (Audience, 2008).

Print and video differ as channels. Video messages have the ability to deliver relational, nonverbal, and verbal cues as well as to create a “face” for the message. Drawing on Meyrowitz's (1985) work, Pfau and Wan (2006) suggest televised (video) messages lead viewers to focus on the message source while print leads readers to focus on the message content. Along the same lines, the elaboration likelihood model suggests televised messages would be more likely to be processed on the peripheral route because it requires minimal involvement while print messages would be more likely to be processed on the central route (Pfau & Wan, 2006).

The question, however, is whether the additional communication cues and increased social presence provided by the organizational spokesperson (source) in the visual media benefits the presentation of the crisis response strategy. Would video offer a more effective delivery method for crisis response strategies because people would see a person speaking for the organization (rather than merely reading an organization's name) and have additional visual communication cues to guide the interpretation of the crisis message? The visual cues provided by the spokesperson would offer an additional framing function for viewers (Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999) and may reinforce the organization's concern for stakeholders. A sincere spokesperson might provide positive relational messages that reinforce the organization's commitment to those affected by the crisis.

As documented earlier, videotaped stimuli simulating televised news reports have not been used in previously published crisis communication investigations. Presenting a crisis story in a televised news report, surrounded by other news stories, would represent a significant methodological extension to the crisis communication research. It is important for crisis managers to know how media presentation affects stakeholders' reactions to their messages. If visual presentations of crisis responses produce more positive reactions, crisis managers may need to work hard to ensure the spokesperson's messages are included in media reports. However, if visual presentations of crisis response strategies are more of a liability than print presentations, this information could guide decision making about media access to spokespersons. Overall, information about channel effects would add another useful piece to the mosaic of crisis communication knowledge that crisis managers can use to guide their actions.

This study employed two different types of crisis response strategies. We felt it was important to test more than one crisis response strategy so that the results would not be limited to that one strategy. We selected sympathy and compensation strategies because both are frequently employed in crises and have been shown in previous studies to have positive effects on outcomes such as reputation, anger, negative word-of-mouth, and account acceptance (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2008). While having similar, positive effects, the two strategies differ in terms of their emotional components. The sympathy response is considered more personal and warmer. Hence, this response may benefit from the additional communication cues and greater social presence provided by the video presentation.

Organizations seek to protect reputations because they are valuable, intangible assets for an organization (Alsop, 2004; Dowling, 2002). It is important to know if the communication channels affect the ability of a crisis response strategy to protect reputation assets.

RQ1: Do print and video news reports using the sympathy and compensation strategies produce similar perceptions of organizational reputation?

Along with attributions of responsibility, crises generate affective responses among stakeholders (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2005). Anger is a threat because it can damage relationships and motivate stakeholders to end a relationship or to speak negatively about the organization to other people, generating negative word-of-mouth (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Jorgensen, 1996; Stockmyer, 1996). Word-of-mouth is very important to organizations. Management seeks to cultivate positive word-of-mouth and avoid negative word-of-mouth (Laczniak, DeCarlo, & Ramaswami, 2001).

RQ2: Do print and video news reports using the sympathy and compensation strategies produce similar perceptions of anger and anticipated negative word-of-mouth?

Finally, crisis managers should be concerned about account acceptance, how respondents feel about the crisis response offered by the organization. Greater account acceptance indicates respondents believe the crisis response is appropriate. It would be useful to know if the communication channels affect evaluations of account acceptance.

RQ3: Do print and video news reports using the sympathy and compensation strategies produce similar perceptions of accounts?

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