ABSTRACT

Message Or Medium?

Weighing Reactionary Differences To An Explicit Apology, Corrective Action, Or Compensation Appearing On Facebook, Twitter, Or Traditional Online Media

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of Regis College, Weston, Massachusetts.

BY

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Social media usage has rapidly become an important part of many organizations' plans when it comes to reacting to a crisis that results from a transgression. Despite a lack of research on the matter, many crisis management experts often assume that traditional communication tactics carry the same impact on social media as researchers have shown those tactics to have in traditional media. This study extends recent research about response messages and social media (Schultz, Utz & Göritz, 2010; Kerkhof & Beugels, 2011) by comparing two of the most popular social media forums worldwide. This research also builds on current and past research (Coombs, 2006; Coombs, 2008; Pace, Fediuk, & Botero, 2010) by comparing stakeholders' responses to an explicit apology with their responses to similar-type expressions of regret, corrective action and compensation.

The 3 (apology vs. corrective action vs. compensation) x 3 (Facebook, Twitter-to-Facebook, online news article with response) experimental design introduced stakeholders to a fictitious supermarket facing accusations of customer overcharging. Each participant was exposed to a single condition. A pre-test/post-test design measured the increase in positive opinion of the company following exposure to that condition. Results found stakeholders' positive opinion of the organization increased for every message and medium. It does not appear that stakeholders preferred any particular medium or message over the others. This suggests that the type of response message may be most important, whereas the specifics of the message or medium may not

significantly sway stakeholders. Scholars and practitioners can use this study to better understand how to

respond to a transgression through popular social media channels and traditional media.

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BY

STEPHEN SALEEBA

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This thesis of Stephen Saleeba, entitled *Message Or Medium? Weighing Reactionary Differences To An Explicit Apology, Corrective Action, Or Compensation Appearing On Facebook, Twitter, Or Traditional Online Media* has been approved by the Faculty of Regis College in fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science Degree.

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Message Or Medium?

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When an organization is faced with a crisis situation, it is often left to deal with the threat of reputational damage as a consequence (Coombs, 2006). Because reputation can be vital to success, it is in the best interest of an organization to try to limit the potential resulting fallout. The organization's use of communication and public relations strategies to try and defend against that reputational threat is what is known as "crisis communication response," or simply "crisis communication" (Coombs, 2006; Coombs, 2008). Past study of crisis communication has explored a range of communication tactics and methods to be used to help prevent or limit the extent of that reputational damage.

However, in recent years, the swift evolution of the internet and, more particularly, the explosion of social media have forced professionals dealing with crisis communication responses to make significant adjustments (Kerkhof & Beugels, 2011). In fact, the rapid growth of social media has become revolutionary. The current largest social media site, Facebook, founded in 2004, had grown to nearly 50 million users by 2007 and had more than 1 billion active users in 2012 (Facebook, 2012). The internet's second largest social media site, Twitter, is a microblogging social media site that began in 2006 and boasts about 140 million active users (Twitter, 2012). Wright and Hinson (2009) recognized that as millions of potential consumers flocked to these sites, a social media revolution would also "bring about dramatic changes to many aspects of public relations" (p. 1). With a large majority of news organizations sharing content online, and information-sharing social network sites expanding at an extremely rapid

pace, many organizations are signing on, realizing that their success can hinge on their ability to adjust to what has become the "new normal" (Taylor & Perry, 2005).

Kirat (2007) explained that, on a corporate level, communication through social media saw such significant growth in Web 2.0's infant years in part because the medium allows organizations to bypass traditional mass media gatekeepers and encourages them to engage their publics in direct two-way conversation. Social media also offers companies an unfiltered outlet through which to influence public opinion and to answer questions or concerns of their audience (Kerkhof & Beugels, 2011). With the birth of social media, companies were suddenly able to receive instant feedback and to respond immediately to large audiences just as quickly. This dynamic of real-time two-way conversation gave corporations a powerful new public relations tool, especially during times of crisis (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel & Chowdury, 2009). Thus, it should come as no surprise that, within the first decade of the social media revolution, the number of organizations integrating the internet and social media into their crisis response planning increased sharply, and what was initially a novelty rapidly evolved into a vital communication tool (Muralidharan, Dillistone, & Shin, 2011).

Furthering the importance of social media was the fact that the rise in reliance on Web 2.0 as an information source coincided with the steady decline of trust in traditional mass media (Rashtchy, Kessler, Bieber, Shindler & Tzeng, 2007; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Trust is a major factor when selling a product, image, or information. Trust builds emotional loyalty, which, in sales and marketing, is considered a key component of brand building (Hallberg, 2003). Putnam (1993) explained that trust is also a key ingredient for growing community interaction. Palen, Vieweg, Sutton, Liu, and Hughes (2007) indicated that community interaction is one of the main driving factors behind social media, which is why it should come as no surprise that past

research has also found that consumers have begun relying increasingly on social media contacts

as trusted sources of information and that those consumers value both positive and negative

information they learn from social media about brands (Jansen, et al., 2009). In other words, a

peer-to-peer exchange of information and opinion, which is commonly known as "word of

mouth," can present both a huge opportunity and an equally large danger to organizations. As is

the case in sales marketing, where positive word of mouth is seen as a driving force in brand

loyalty, Jansen et al. (2009) explained that both positive and negative word of mouth can

significantly impact the outcome of any given situation.

Surprisingly, despite a significant amount of brand research involving social media, the

amount of research specifically dedicated to exploring social media platforms in public relations,

particularly when it comes to their impact on crisis response, has been limited (Kerkhof &

Beugels, 2011). Similar to blogs in design, social media platforms allow for fast and frequent

updates as well as a personal tone, making them a suitable tool for organizations during a crisis

situation (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Social media platforms also provide an easy avenue to

incorporate instant two-way communication into a response plan (Kerkhof & Beugels, 2011).

That real-time feedback, which can indicate levels of anger and blame that stakeholders assign in

a crisis, can provide necessary information that can provide organizations the opportunity to

create more effective secondary responses to the crisis than if they just had to guess about the

stakeholders' sentiments.

But allowing businesses to directly engage consumers through social media can also be

a double-edged sword (Muralidharan, et al., 2011). Before its rise, most consumers were forced

to rely on established journalists to break bad news. Now, anyone with a social media account

can disseminate information that can quickly blow up into a corporate crisis (Park, Cha, Kim, &

Jeong, 2012). One example of the viral nature of social media comes from a case study

surrounding a crisis involving Domino's Pizza. Park, et al. (2012) examined user response on

Twitter following a YouTube video that showed two Domino's employees performing crude and

unsanitary acts with food at the restaurant. Just a few days after the video was posted on

YouTube, it had been viewed more than a half million times. Over on Twitter, in the eight days

that followed the video's posting, the number of tweets about the video totaled 15,000.

Researchers calculated that, in that seemingly brief time, 16.5 million Twitter users were

exposed to the news through those tweets. It took less than two days after the video was posted

for word to rapidly spread to the masses. At that point, Domino's Pizza responded with an

apology from its CEO, passing along that message through a Twitter account. (The company also

filed a lawsuit against the two employees.) Following those actions, research showed that

negative sentiment went from appearing in 83% of Domino's-related tweets in the immediate

aftermath of the crisis to 55% of Domino's-related tweets following the crisis response steps that

Domino's took. The findings suggested that the CEO's apology was responsible for a significant

decline in negative sentiment (Park, et al., 2012).

       The Domino's case study is among research that has indicated that the speed of delivery

is consistently an important measure of an effective crisis response (Coombs & Holladay, 2008;

Claeys, Cauberghe & Vyncke, 2011). One effect that has been discussed as internet and social

media usage has grown in popularity is how the conditions have created a quick and easy avenue

for message delivery (Muralidharan, et al., 2011). Seemingly overnight, organizations were able

to post frequent updates containing helpful information and could immediately respond to

concerns or key issues related to a crisis. These responses were able to influence the perceptions

of the media and consumers (Taylor & Perry, 2005). In contrast to previous decades, word of

mouth now has a vehicle that allows it to spread much more quickly and easily. Before the

advent of the internet, traditional media typically controlled the flow of information to the

masses (Kirat, 2007). The information had to be processed by the media representatives and was

rarely instantly disseminated. The rise of social media became a tool for anyone looking to reach

wide audiences in a matter of seconds (Park, et al., 2012). No matter what the message was,

companies no longer needed to rely on traditional media to broadcast their message. Sites like

Facebook and Twitter not only gave organizations the opportunity to reach out directly to their

audiences in real time, but through shares, re-posts, and re-tweets, those audiences were able to

easily pass along those messages to their contacts, who in turn could pass along the message to

their contacts, significantly extending the reach of the message (Schultz, Utz & Göritz, 2010).

Organizations were able to respond more quickly and, because quick reaction to a crisis is seen

as an indication of concern and commitment to consumers who see the response, organizations

were suddenly under more pressure to do so (Schultz, et al., 2010).

        With social media, the public began to expect much more rapid responses from

organizations during crises. Recent research has suggested that many consumers have grown to

expect a response within a matter of a few hours (Park, et al., 2012). While "a few hours" is a

very limited amount of time in an evolving crisis, which could explain why many organizations

are still slow in publicly reacting to a crisis, past research has shown that negative implications

of a slow response certainly appear to exist. Researchers suggested that a lack of online response

would eventually come to be interpreted the same as "no comment" (Taylor & Perry, 2005). In

fact, a company could actually be furthering crisis damage by not responding online.   That lack

of response, or even a delay in response to a crisis, can result in irreversible reputation damage,

and can render previously effective strategies useless. Muralidharan, et al. (2011) found this to

be the case with BP during the 2011 Deepwater Horizon explosion and oil spill. They studied the company's crisis response to the spill on social media and discovered that BP's first crisis-related tweet did not occur until seven days after the oil well explosion occurred. In those seven days, public anger grew exponentially, and. by the time BP responded through social media, a significant opportunity to try and at least limit reputation damage appeared to have been squandered. At that point, the researchers suggested, the organization had no other logical crisis strategy but to offer expressions of regret consisting of corrective action, compensation, and mortification. BP's four social media channels were dedicated to corrective action in the months following the crisis, but a large portion of the audience was not willing to embrace dialog, and reaction to BP's messages were continually met with skepticism, anger, and personal attacks (Muralidharan, et al., 2011).

Despite its initial fiasco in not responding to a major crisis, BP's eventual decision to directly engage its audience in a constructive manner included thanking supporters and responding to suggestions for possible solutions in capping the leaking well (Muralidharan, et al., 2011). This type of two-way engagement lends itself well to a personal tone of voice. Solis and Breakenridge (2009) recognized that social media actually requires organizations to engage in more informal and human manner conversations than they may be used to doing. Kerkhof and Beugels (2011) added the suggestion that a personal response through social media seemed to be more effective in dealing with crises than using a corporate-toned response in the same situation. Their research found that personal responses led to more "communicated relational commitment and conversational human voice" than responses in a corporate tone (p. 10). In fact, they found reaction to a personal tone (compared to corporate tone) of voice consistently received a more divisive reaction than when an apology in a particular tone was compared to denial in that same

tone. This is surprising because the finding is not necessarily in line with other research on

apologies in crisis situations (Kerkhof & Beugels, 2011). Many scholars have argued that

apology is the "best" method when it comes to crisis response (e.g., Dean, 2004; Lyon &

Cameron, 1998; Bradford & Garrett, 1995; as cited in Kerkhof & Beugels, 2011). The

implications of Kerkhof and Beugels' study suggested that the apology argument may have been

too simplistic and that other layers of response may need to be considered in a response strategy.

Their findings also suggested that, because of the structure of social media platforms and the

expectation by participants to see a more casual tone being used across the medium, the effect of

tone is likely to be amplified in the particular arena.

　　Despite many convincing arguments for integrating a two-way social media conversation

into a public relations plan, what could be a tremendous opportunity for companies to adjust to

this changing world is tempered by the fact that many struggle with the appropriate way to

effectively interact with expanding online audiences (Jansen, et al., 2009). It should be clear that

social media is not necessarily conducive to certain types of businesses that deal with

confidentiality issues or legal restrictions (Taylor & Perry, 2005). But, for many others, fear and

lack of understanding appear to be two driving factors. One possible fear factor discussed in past

research is that many of the seeming benefits that social media has to offer depend on the

decision by all involved parties to engage in a civil manner and to stay focused on the issue that

is being discussed (Muralidharan, et al., 2011). Organizations face the potential for a major

hurdle when engaging consumers in two-way conversations. They are voluntarily relinquishing

some control of the situation, allowing audiences to steer the conversation to areas that an

organization may be unwilling to discuss (Muralidharan, et al., 2011). An audience member

could potentially hijack a forum and openly and defiantly challenge an organization's assertions

about a particular situation. Participating audiences can even launch personal attacks and issue other uncivil responses that the organization has limited control over, which could provoke an additional crisis situation (Muralidharan, et al., 2011; Kerkhof & Beugels, 2011). In past research, too, use of a personal voice in social media appeared to elicit more interaction than that of corporate tone. Fears of a negative response could be one of many reasons that, despite the benefits of personal tone on social media platforms, news releases and other traditional tactics are still widely relied on during crisis situations (Kerkhof & Beugels, 2011).

Unfortunately, many of those traditional public relations tactics are built on research that was developed over decades when most companies did not have mass communication distribution outlets at their fingertips. They had to rely on traditional news media to get their message out (Kerkhof & Beugels, 2011). Applying Coombs' situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) to the evolving face of crisis communication would suggest that the tactics that worked best in traditional news media may be received differently, and may have a different effect in the same situations when the responses appear in social media (Coombs, 2006; Coombs, 2008).

SCCT determined that there did not necessarily appear to be any one particular fix-all crisis response tactic. Coombs (2006; 2008) laid out guidelines explaining different types of crises and offered suggestions on how to match crisis response strategies with particular crisis types. Types of crises were identified by extent of responsibility. The victim cluster covered natural disasters and other events where the organization is the victim. In these instances, the organization was usually perceived as only having a very low level of responsibility, if any at all, for the crisis. The accidental cluster covered technical errors and other uncontrollable or unintentional crises, and crisis responsibility was typically seen as minimal in these cases. The

intentional cluster included factors like human-error and intentional violations, and an organization typically saw significant blame in these instances.

Coombs' three types of response strategies were deny, diminish, and rebuild. Deny strategies attempted to prevent reputational damage by avoiding any responsibility for the crisis, by attacking the accuser, or by challenging that a crisis actually exists (Coombs, 2006). Coombs suggested that deny strategies worked best when the organization bore little or no responsibility, as in the accidental cluster. A diminish response tried to frame a crisis as not being as bad as others may perceive it. Particular tactics included attempting to justify the situation or making an excuse. The reasoning behind this strategy was that a small-scale crisis would have less of a harmful impact on an organization than a large-scale crisis would. Offering excuses or attempting to show lack of intent were two examples that Coombs gave for trying to diminish a crisis. Diminish responses lined up best when trying to reinforce an assertion that a particular crisis situation was accidental. The research noted that type of response to accidental crises could also be contingent on previous reputation. A company with a history of accidents or transgressions would be less likely to receive the benefit of the doubt when it comes to public opinion. Rebuild strategies may be better suited for these cases, as they attempt to offset negative effects of a crisis. Apology, concern, compassion, regret, sympathy, and compensation were some of components of a rebuild strategy. The goal is to rebuild a damaged reputation. Coombs identified intentional crises, particularly those involving organizations with good reputations, as suitable matches for rebuild strategies. The suggestion was that stakeholders are forgiving by nature, especially if an entity gives them a reason to forgive. Turk, Jin, Stewart, Kim, and Hipple (2012) experimented with this premise by looking at reactions to crises involving major corporations with established reputations, both good and bad. The list included

Toyota, Chrysler, Citigroup, Bank of America, Southwest Airlines, Johnson and Johnson, and others. Their conclusions suggested stakeholders would rather stick by a company with a good past reputation than a company with a bad reputation, regardless of response tactic, and even regardless of whether a crisis exists.

Schultz, et al. (2010) tested that SCCT theory by looking at reputation, secondary crisis communication, and reactions, while also considering the roles of different traditional and new media, including social media. Their findings indicated that the medium may actually matter more than the message. They suggested that information-only crisis response messages (messages that just state the facts on the case) on Twitter appeared to receive less of a negative reaction than when the same messages appeared on blogs or in newspaper articles. That same research suggested that secondary crisis reactions actually fared better in traditional media situations, despite the viral character of social media, which allows people to forward corporate responses with a single mouse click. While SCCT research didn't outright destroy previous research findings, it exposed significant shortcomings.

For instance, a number of researchers suggested that an organization can almost never go wrong with an apology, and it is the most effective tool in every case (Dean, 2004; Lyon & Cameron, 1998; Bradford & Garrett, 1995; as cited in Kerkhof & Beugels, 2011). Coombs (2008) not only argued that cases should be looked at on an individual basis, but he also suggested that those "apology" studies pitted "widely diverse strategies" against each other. They compared an apology, which is a victim-centered response, to denial, a much less victim-accommodative response. Apology almost always wins out when compared to denial as a strategy, so the researchers who argued for an apology were correct to a point. But those researchers ignored other victim-accommodative responses like sympathy, corrective action, and

compensation…all expressions of regret…essentially stacking the deck, as Coombs put it, to make a case for apology. In order to determine whether an apology was truly the most effective crisis communication response, it needed to be compared to the entire spectrum of responses, including similar victim-centered or victim-accommodative responses like compensation and sympathy (Coombs, 2008).

Even the definition of apology has varied among different researchers, which may have also skewed results. In fact, Pace, Fediuk, and Botero (2010) showed that different styles of apologies can yield different results when looking at consumers' perceptions. They found that a company making explicit statements accepting responsibility and regret (i.e. I'm sorry, this is my fault and I feel terrible about it) achieved better reputation benefits than a simple apology (i.e. I'm sorry).

The research that has been discussed shows just a few of the variables that can affect the outcome of a crisis situation. The scale of the crisis and the perceived effect by the audience can also impact the magnitude of reputational damage that is inflicted on the party seen to be at fault. For instance, Pace, et al. (2010) looked at a fictional realtor that refused to return a security deposit and would not produce receipts for work that was done. These researchers suggested that two of the possible shortcomings of their study were that the crisis situation may not have been very relevant to the participants and that participants may have not seen the crisis to be severe in nature. "The consequences of the crisis may not cause significant harm to those involved," (p. 22). Pace, et al. suggested that the participants may not have seen the company's actions as particularly egregious, and thus argued that a reduced sense of violation in a crisis lessens the impact of the crisis itself and the response.

If those factors are not convincing enough that each case needs to be looked at on a relatively individual basis, another factor that can affect the outcome of a crisis situation is past reputation. Reputation can be such a powerful factor that "individuals may make unfounded attributions about other aspects of an organization based on reputation" (Payne, 1999, p. 17). Payne's research also found that participants are much more likely to forgive an organization with a good reputation that apologizes, than they would for an organization with a poor previous reputation.

The complexities do not end with the initial response to a crisis. An audience deciding not to accept the organization's initial response can spark a secondary crisis, which was the case in the BP oil spill. BP's Facebook page was battered with negative comments throughout the duration of the well-capping and clean-up efforts (Muralidharan, et al., 2011). These compounding factors show that crisis responses are hardly simple in nature. There are often many complex layers involved in each scenario.

Given the wide range in crisis scenarios, the reality, as SCCT suggested, is that there does not appear to be a one-size-fits-all solution (Coombs, 2008). And, given the rapid evolution of social media, and the growing, but still limited research that exists, crisis response teams may need to prepare for a range of scenarios and use careful consideration when applying traditional techniques in the particular medium. They should also be ready to make adjustments in line with rapidly evolving crisis situations.

The current study is designed to look further into situations where crisis response is communicated through social media. In particular, it attempts to duplicate and build on past research by Pace, et al. (2010) by comparing the positive impact of explicit apology to other victim-centered responses of corrective action and compensation, both of which express regret

but do not include an explicit "we're sorry and we take responsibility" statement in the responses. Based on the literature review, it is expected that an explicit apology will receive a more positive reaction than compensation, and compensation will receive a more positive reaction than a corrective action response.

This study further attempts to build on the past research of Schultz et al. (2010) by examining whether medium is more important than message. In other words, do victim-focused messages have a greater positive impact on perception of a company when those same messages are seen on Facebook, Twitter and Facebook combined, or in an online newspaper article? The examination of Twitter and Facebook combined has become necessary because the text involved in tweets is restricted to 140 characters. As Schultz, et al. (2010) noted, longer responses on Twitter commonly include a brief synopsis accompanied by a web link to a full response on a company blog or Facebook page. Based on a review of the literature, it is hypothesized that the messages seen on both Twitter and Facebook will receive greater positive reaction than when they are seen only on Facebook. A Facebook-only scenario would receive greater positive reaction than when it was read in an online newspaper.

Method

Participants

One-hundred-ninety four people were recruited for this study. The sample was made up of 52 percent females and 48 percent males. Racially, 99 percent of respondents listed themselves as Caucasian. The remaining one percent of respondents listed themselves as Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and Other. When asked to indicate their highest level of education, 45 percent said claimed Bachelor's degrees, 31 percent have Graduate degrees, 15

percent have completed some college, five percent have completed high school, two percent have Associate degrees, and one percent of participants have completed some high school. The group consisted of 28 percent 18-29-year-olds, 40 percent 30-39-year-olds, 16 percent 40-49-year-olds, 11 percent 50-59-year-olds, and 7 percent were age 60 or older.

A snowball technique was used to recruit participants. A request for participation, along with a link to the research webpage, was posted numerous times over the course of one week on the researcher's personal Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn pages. All of the approximately 150 LinkedIn connections, 575 Facebook friends, and 1525 Twitter followers who saw the link were asked to share and re-tweet the request for participation. A request for participation was also emailed to a number of the researcher's acquaintances and friends. The researcher asked everyone who participated to forward the link to anyone else who may be interested.

Participants had the option to quit the study at any time. At the conclusion of participation, each individual was given an explanation of the research and was informed how to obtain information about the study when it was completed. The American Psychological Association's Ethical Guidelines were followed.

Procedure & Measures

The hypotheses were tested using a 3 (crisis response: explicit apology, corrective action, compensation) x 3 (medium: Facebook, Twitter-to-Facebook, Online Newspaper article) experimental design. The experiment was conducted entirely online through www.crisiscommsurvey.com, a domain name the researcher purchased specifically for the purpose of running the experiment.

After consenting to participation, each participant was first shown an online Associated Press article about legal accusations that a supermarket had overcharged customers. The article

was duplicated from an actual 2010 Associated Press article about California supermarket chain "Ralphs" facing those legal accusations. For the experiment, the name was changed to Raps and Ralphs' actual response to the accusations was omitted from the controlled article.

Upon completion of the article, participants were directed to a pretest survey that weighed initial reaction to the crisis, particularly the participant's negative opinion of Raps. Statements were measured on a 5 point Likert scale (1= 'totally disagree', 5= 'totally agree'). Details about demographic information and online media usage habits were also collected during the pretest.

Following the survey, participants were directed to click a link that revealed one of the nine response conditions. HTML code was built in to assign participants at random to any one of the nine conditions. The particular conditions were chosen based on results from previous research by Coombs (2008), Pace, et al. (2010), Schultz, et al. (2010), and Kerkhof and Beugels (2011). Coombs, along with Kerkhof and Beugels examined victim-centered crisis responses, while Pace, et al. looked at explicit apologies. This experiment's responses consisted of a short paragraph copied from a lengthy statement on the case issued by Ralphs in 2012, following a legal settlement with the California Attorney General's office. The paragraph detailed the allegations and offered an acknowledgement of "the seriousness of the allegations."

The final sentence of the response was altered for every condition. That sentence consisted of an explicit apology, a corrective action response, or a compensation response. The language for the corrective action and compensation responses was taken from the actual 2012 statement by Ralphs. The condition containing an explicit apology was designed to reflect the definition of an explicit apology laid out by Pace, et al. (2010), which includes some form of "we apologize" and "we take full responsibility for the situation" in the statement.

Participants exposed to the Twitter-to-Facebook condition saw a brief summary of a

response on Twitter, along with a link, before being exposed to the entire response on Facebook.

As was the case in previous research, because of character limits on Twitter, the Twitter response

consisted of a headline detailing the response, along with a link. Participants assigned to any of

the Twitter conditions were instructed to click on the link. They were redirected to the Facebook

post, which contained the full crisis response. Pace, et al. (2010), Schultz, et al. (2010), and

Kerkhof and Beugels (2011) all effectively employed similar procedures while examining

differing crisis responses on social media channels. For control purposes, participants exposed

to Facebook or Twitter conditions were not directed to pages on the facebook.com or twitter.com

domains. Rather, the pages they saw were designed to look identical to standard Facebook and

Twitter pages, but were created on the experiment website's domain.

Upon completion of the task, participants were directed to a posttest survey intended to

measure any positive impact that the response may have had on the individual's initial reaction

to the crisis.

Results

A Paired Sample T Test was used to measure the increase in positive opinion toward

Raps (*M*= 3.325, *SD*=1.09) following the manipulation compared to the baseline negative

opinion (*M*= 4.113, *SD*= 0.87), *t* (193) = 8.05, *p* < .001 of the entire sample. Increase in positive

opinion was successfully manipulated.

To determine the values and statistical significance of each group, the Paired Sample T

Test was run on each isolated group of conditions. All six condition groups presented *p* values

indicating significant correlations between baseline negative opinion and post manipulation

increase in positive opinion (See: Appendix A). Thus, the increase in positive opinion was successfully manipulated in all groups of conditions.

To determine whether any condition's positive increase was significantly greater than that of the other conditions that were being compared, T Tests were run that compared the measured difference in positive reaction among the groups. The researcher calculated that measured difference by subtracting the (inverted) post test response from the pretest response for the questions about opinion.

For hypothesis one, it was expected that an explicit apology would receive a more positive reaction than compensation, and compensation would receive a more positive increase in opinion than a corrective action response. For explicit apology ($M= 0.815$) compared to corrective action ($M= 0.893$), $t(118) = -0.33$, $p = 0.37$, the p value supports a null hypothesis, indicating no significant statistical difference. P value also supports a null hypothesis when comparing corrective action ($M= 0.893$) to compensation $(M=0.685,)$ $t(121) = 0.92$, $p = 0.18$, indicating no significant statistical difference . Thus, hypothesis one is not supported and further research is needed.

For hypothesis two, it was expected that response messages seen on both Twitter and Facebook would receive more positive reaction than when they are seen only on Facebook, and a Facebook-only scenario would receive a more positive reaction than when it was read in an online newspaper. Once again, the null hypothesis is supported, indicating the Facebook-only response ($M= 0.097$) did not score significantly higher than an online newspaper response ($M= 0.700$), $t(129) = -1.19$, $p=0.12$. Contrary to predictions, there was also no significant statistical difference between the online newspaper response and the Twitter-to-Facebook response ($M=$

0.714), $t(131) = -0.06$, $p=0.47$. Thus, hypothesis two is not supported and further research is needed.

For the research question, the study examined whether a suggestion by Schultz, et al. (2010), that medium has a greater positive impact than the actual message, was supported for the particular group of responses that were examined. Given that all of the null hypotheses were supported for T Tests comparing groups, it is suggested that there is no greater statistical significant difference in impact for medium or message.

Discussion

One major goal of this study was to build on a suggestion by Pace, et al. (2010) for future research on SCCT theory by separately examining victim-centered expressions of regret (i.e. an explicit apology that accepts responsibility, a promise of corrective action, an offer for compensation, a plea for forgiveness, etc.). Pace, et al. (2010) explained that past studies have generally paired these conditions with other components of the apology. Separating the components of an apology could offer future researchers a deeper understanding of each element of a response and its measured impact on stakeholders. In this case, separating the components of an apology suggest that the specifics of an apology or a message of remorse may not matter as much as some researchers suggest. As long as there is some type of apology or expression of regret presented, a positive impact on opinion will likely be seen.

Part of Coombs' SCCT Theory for rebuild-type crisis response strategies suggests that an apology is seen as accepting responsibility for the situation and, in turn, is the best course of action when a transgression is committed (Coombs, 2008). However, the findings of this study do not appear to support that suggestion. A survey question in this experiment did weigh whether participants felt Raps took responsibility for its actions. No statistically significant

correlation was found between participants' perception that Raps took responsibility and their positive reaction to Raps based on the response to the crisis. Instead, the results of this study suggest that when isolated from an apology, expressions of regret may hold the same weight when positively influencing stakeholders' perception of an organization.

Similar to findings by Pace, et al. (2010), the results of this study could have implications for conflicts between public relations and legal departments. Because explicit acceptance of responsibility can have legal implications, an organization's legal team may fight to prevent its public relations team from choosing that particular course of action. However, if expressions of regret can have an equal impact on swaying stakeholder perception as an explicit acceptance of responsibility for the crisis, an interdepartmental conflict could be avoided.

Of course, that impact may only be supported in certain situations. For example, overall, responses performed similarly when compared Twitter, Facebook, and in a revised online newspaper article. However, when the data from each condition in this experiment is isolated, positive reaction to certain messages may vary among different media channels. For example, an explicit apology may receive the most positive impact among participants when observed on Facebook, but it may perform worst of the three conditions when appearing in a newspaper article form. While the purpose of this study did not include isolating responses and media, isolated results may give further support to the suggestion in Coombs' SCCT Theory for situational response strategies.

Isolating data from this experiment and further analyzing fluctuations among individual conditions may also help explain why no correlation was found when examining whether medium has a greater positive impact than the actual message. Research by Schultz, et al. (2010) suggested that medium had more of a positive impact than message when examining apology,

sympathy, and information-only responses. But Schultz, et al. looked at different media channels and different combinations of media channels than those examined in this experiment. If slight variations in the language of messages were to alter the impact of the message within a particular medium as Kerkhof and Beugels (2011) suggested, measuring the impact of different media against different messages is likely to yield differing results as well.

Limitations

Limitations in this study include the fact that the experiment was run on an entirely voluntary basis and did not occur in a controlled environment. A change in demographics or media usage habits among the sample could also presumably produce different results. When examining the demographics of the data, it is noted that 24 percent of respondents who saw Twitter-to-Facebook conditions indicated they do not use Twitter at all, while 13 percent of respondents who saw articles indicated they do not use traditional online media. Ten percent of respondents exposed to a Facebook-only condition do not use Facebook, along with an additional 8 percent of respondents who saw a Twitter-to-Facebook condition.

It should also be noted that this particular experiment grouped the three media channels together when comparing each response message overall, It grouped the three victim-centered response messages together in order to compare each media channel overall. How individual messages performed on individual channels was not relevant to this experiment's hypotheses.

In addition, one possible variable could not be accounted for when measuring the compensation condition; the size of compensation ($1.1 million overall) and the beneficiary of that compensation (Attorney General, Los Angeles Food Bank). In this instance, a real-life scenario from the settlement by Ralphs was replicated to create that particular condition.

Different levels of compensation and different situations could alter opinions, and thus yield different results.

Finally, the level of the transgression that was examined needs to be taken into consideration. For instance, stakeholder reaction to allegations of a supermarket overcharging may be different than reaction to the BP oil spill. The magnitudes of the crises are different, and thus, studying each case individually may yield different results.

Further Suggested Research

As Web 2.0 rapidly evolves, people's usage habits are changing just as quickly. Constantly evolving media may require constantly evolving messages. Continued research will be necessary to keep up with changes in technology. For instance, media and social media platforms are evolving to suit mobile phones and computer tablets. With these changes, Crisis Communication researchers may need to pay close attention to whether media format changes affect reaction to particular messages.

Currently, despite its wide use, a Twitter-to-Facebook response previously had not been scientifically analyzed in a comparison to other traditional or social media channels. When compared to past research, this study's results for Twitter-to-Facebook responses indicate a need for further research when dealing with crisis responses on Twitter. Testing Twitter-to-Facebook against the Schultz, et al. (2010) Twitter-to-Blog scenario could determine whether the difference between Schultz, et al. (2010) and this experiment's results occurred because of differing messages, differing secondary media, or some other undetermined factor.

Suggestions for further research also include examining combinations of apology and particular expressions of regret across different media and social channels. Future research should focus on comparing the combination of an explicit apology and corrective action response

to an isolated apology or expression of regret. Researchers also should consider testing other types of responses when comparing Twitter-to-Facebook to Facebook and traditional media.

Conclusion

This study focused on how stakeholders react to an organization's response following a transgression. Whether that response is an apology, or one of three different expressions of regret, results suggest that any victim-centered message will lead to an increase in positive stakeholder opinion. An explicit apology, an offer of compensation, and a promise of corrective action all received significant positive response. This suggests that all of these strategies can effectively contribute to reducing the negative impact of a corporate crisis on stakeholder perception. It also appears to indicate that the specific message may not matter as much as the type of message when it comes to increasing stakeholders' positive opinion after a transgression.

The study also focused on whether different media have different impacts on victim-centered messages. A similar positive impact on stakeholders was observed with Facebook, Twitter-to-Facebook, and revised news article responses. The results indicate that, while traditional media should not be neglected, Twitter and Facebook are also strong tools for distributing a victim-centered response following a transgression and should continue to be widely for dealing with corporate crises.

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Appendix A

Organizational Responses Used in the Study: Facebook & Article

Raps is industry-leading and will continue to be when it comes to providing our customers accurate pricing and precise labeling. We understand the seriousness of these allegations and take them very seriously…

Explicit Apology:
…We take full responsibility for this situation and apologize to all of our customers who were affected.

Corrective Action:
…We have launched our own investigation and any inadvertent discrepancies were corrected immediately for our customers.

Compensation:
…That is why we have agreed to pay $1 million to the offices of the city attorney and $100,000 to the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank.

Organizational Responses Used in the Study: Twitter

Explicit Apology:
Re: overcharging accusations -- We take full responsibility for this situation and apologize. Read more: *(link to Facebook response)*

Corrective Action:
Re: overcharging accusations - We've launched our own investigation, corrected inadvertent discrepancies. Read more: *(link to Facebook response)*

Compensation:
Re: overcharging accusations – We've agreed to pay $1 million to city attny & $100K to the L.A. Food Bank. Read more: *(link to Facebook response)*

Table 1: Pre-Test To Post-Test Comparison

Condition	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Difference In Mean	T-Stat	P value
All	4.113402	3.324742	0.78866	8.553168	1.83E-15*
Article	4.071429	3.371429	0.700000	4.356507	2.25E-05*
Facebook	4.147541	3.180328	0.967213	6.170207	3.19E-08*
Twitter + Facebook	4.126984	3.412698	0.714286	4.445133	1.85E-05*
Explicit Apology	3.984615	3.169231	0.815385	5.019245	2.20E-06*
Corrective Action	4.285714	3.392857	0.892857	5.363366	8.37E-07*
Compensation	4.095890	3.410959	0.684932	4.500225	1.28E-05*

*p < .05

Table 2: Condition Comparison

Compared Conditions	Difference In Mean	T-Stat	P Value
Article vs Facebook	0.267213	-1.19038	0.11804
Facebook vs Twitter + Facebook	0.252927	1.12670	0.13104
Article Vs Twitter + Facebook	0.014286	-0.06287	0.47499
Corrective Action vs Compensation	0.207926	0.92181	0.17923
Corrective Action vs Explicit Apology	0.077473	-0.33307	0.36984
Compensation vs Explicit Apology	0.130453	0.58602	0.27943

PRE-TEST QUESTIONS

1. This article has negatively impacted my opinion of Raps.

2. This article has negatively impacted the reputation of Raps.**

3. If I shopped at Raps, I would consider switching to a competitor.

4. I would tell others negative things about Raps.

5. I would share this news article online with others.

6. I would sign an online petition to boycott Raps.

**Response numbers were inverted during measurement against post-test response. A 5 became a 1 and a 1 became a 5.

POST-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Raps took responsibility for the incident.

2. Raps expressed its sympathy with the aggrieved parties.

3. If I shopped at Raps, I would consider switching to a competitor.

4. I would share Raps response online.

5. The response by Raps has positively impacted my opinion of the company.

6. I would tell others negative things about Raps.

7. I would sign an online petition to boycott Raps.