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Exploring effective crisis response strategies

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ABSTRACT

This study examines effective crisis response strategies using Coombs' SCCT as a theoretical framework. Results of an experiment show that base responses (instructing and adjusting information) could mitigate reputational decline for a company during a severe, preventable crisis. The sole use of bolstering (reminding) strategy or no response is ineffective because it negatively influences consumers' trust in the company, attitudes toward the company, perceived corporate reputation, and supportive behavioral intentions.

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1. Introduction

A crisis is generally considered an unpredictable event that can potentially generate negative outcomes and may threaten corporate reputation (Coombs, 2007a). Companies need to effectively communicate with the public about crises to protect themselves from reputational decline. Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) outlined by Coombs (2007a) provides a framework for understanding and choosing an appropriate crisis response strategy. According to Coombs (2007a), initial crisis responses (base responses) include instructing information (what happened, how the crisis might affect the public, and what the public should do) and adjusting information (what the company is doing to prevent a repeat of the crisis). Then, reputation repair strategies can be used to repair or avoid any reputational damage. Coombs (2007a) outlined ten reputation repair strategies and grouped them into four clusters by postures: denial (attacking the accuser, denial, scapegoating), diminishment (excusing, justification), rebuilding (apology, compensation) and bolstering (reminding, ingratiation, victimage).

Although base responses are required for all crises and could be combined with reputation repair strategies (Coombs, 2007a; Kim & Liu, 2012), base responses have received little attention in previous studies. Many studies have focused more on reputation repair than on base response or no response. It is important to understand the effects of different types of crisis response strategies such as no response, base response, reputation repair, and both base response and reputation repair on the public's perceptions of a company. Regarding reputation repair strategies, this study focuses on reminding strategies to determine the effectiveness of reminding consumers of a company's prior good works (Coombs, 2007a), because many companies utilize corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies these days. Given that CSR may result in greater expectations for a company's behavior, it is important to examine how CSR influences the public's perceptions of corporate crises and responses. Specifically, the question of how a crisis could be communicated, especially when the crisis is related

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to a company's prior CSR efforts, is an important one to consider. Taking BP's oil spill crisis as an example, should BP have defended itself by reminding the public about its environmental protection campaign? Or, would it have been better to not mention its CSR activity because the perceived connection between the environment-related crisis and the main theme of the CSR campaign could have produced more skepticism? The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of CSR-crisis relevance and crisis response strategies on the public's perceptions of message credibility (RQ1), trust in the company (RQ2), attitudes toward the company (RQ3), perceived corporate reputation (RQ4), and supportive behavioral intentions toward the company (RQ5) in times of crisis.

2. Method

Research questions were tested via a 3 (CSR-crisis relevance) \times 4 (crisis response) between-subjects factorial design experiment. After pretests, 301 participants were recruited from the *SocialSci's* online consumer panel. Participants read articles about (1) a fictitious casual wear company, (2) its CSR message (relevant – environmental protection, irrelevant – child sponsorship, or no CSR), (3) an environment-related crisis (water contamination caused by leaks from its waste facility), and (4) a crisis response (no response, base only, reminding only, both base and reminding). Base responses included both instructing and adjusting information. A reminding message contained the company's prior CSR.

Finally, participants indicated their perceptions of message credibility, trust, attitudes, corporate reputation and supportive behavioral intentions related to the company. All variables were measured with multiple items on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Specifically, crisis response credibility was measured with five items (believable, convincing, unbiased, accurate and trustworthy) adapted from MacKenzi and Lutz (1989). To measure trust, the following items were used: (1) the company is trustworthy, (2) the company is honest, and (3) I trust the company. Attitudes toward the company were measured by using three statements adapted from Dean (2004) and MacKenzie and Lutz (1989): "I feel good about the company"; "My attitude toward the company is pleasant"; and "My overall impression about the company is favorable." Perceived corporate reputation was measured by using three statements adapted from Coombs and Holladay (2002) and Newbury (2010): "The company has a good overall reputation"; "The company is concerned with the well-being of its public"; and "I respect the company." Finally, supportive behavioral intentions were measured using five items adapted from Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2010) and Newbury (2010): (1) intent to purchase products from the company, (2) intent to say nice things about the company, (3) intent to recommend the company's products to others, (4) intent to invest in the company, and (5) intent to work at the company.

Findings

A two-way ANOVA showed that there was a significant effect of crisis responses on participants' perceptions of message credibility ($F(2, 204) = 26.109, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.204$). Post hoc analyses using *Scheffé* indicated that credibility is significantly lower for a reminding ($M = 2.91, SD = 1.13$) than for a base response ($M = 4.26, SD = 1.07, p = 0.01$) or a base and reminding response ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.30, p = 0.01$). Regardless of CSR-crisis relevance, participants tend to believe a message that includes detailed information about a crisis is more reliable than a reminding message.

The main effect of a crisis response on participants' trust in the company was also significant ($F(3, 291) = 11.764, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.108$). Participants in the base response condition or in both base and reminding condition tended to agree that the company is trustworthy and honest compared to participants in the reminding ($p = 0.01$) condition or the no response condition ($p = 0.01$). As Coombs (2007a) argued, people perceive that a company cares only for itself rather than its stakeholders if the company uses the reminding strategy in isolation. Also, communicating with the public about a crisis might be preferable to not responding to a crisis at all.

Participants indicated significantly different attitudes toward the company based on the company's crisis response ($F(3, 291) = 8.666, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.082$). The inclusion of a base response was preferable to the sole use of a reminding strategy. The base response ($M = 3.39, SD = 1.34$) or both base and reminding strategy ($M = 3.48, SD = 1.34$) were significantly different from the reminding strategy ($M = 2.61, SD = 1.18, p = 0.01$) or no response ($M = 2.76, SD = 1.15, p = 0.01$).

Participants also gave significantly different scores of corporate reputation based on crisis responses ($F(3, 291) = 14.404, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.129$). Regardless of CSR-crisis relevance, participants in the reminding condition ($M = 2.73, SD = 1.11$) or in the no response condition ($M = 2.75, SD = 1.15$) gave lower scores for corporate reputation than those in the base response ($M = 3.54, SD = 1.19, p = 0.01$) condition or in both base and reminding condition ($M = 3.75, SD = 1.18, p = 0.01$). Thus, providing base information is essential for minimizing reputational losses during a crisis.

Finally, crisis responses significantly influenced participants' supportive behavioral intentions toward the company ($F(3, 291) = 4.999, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.049$). Participants in both base and reminding conditions gave the highest scores of supportive behavioral intentions ($M = 3.41, SD = 1.14$) while those in reminding conditions gave the lowest scores ($M = 2.70, SD = 1.22$). Thus, companies should give specific information about a crisis itself and use reputation repair strategies to increase the public's supportive behavioral intentions.

3. Discussion

This study gives crisis managers some insight into selecting an effective crisis response. In previous crisis literature, the importance of base response strategies has been relatively neglected compared to reputation repair strategies (Kim & Liu, 2012). Given that disseminating base response messages could mitigate reputational decline, especially during severe, preventable crises, a company's top priority should be addressing the public's physical and psychological needs (Coombs, 2007b). The use of base responses is important not only because they satisfy the public's need for information, but also because they give impressions that the company prioritizes the public's safety and expresses concern for victims.

Although bolstering strategy is one of the most frequently employed crisis responses (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009), this study supports Coombs' (2007a) argument that a bolstering strategy should be supplemental to other crisis response strategies because the company would be perceived as suggesting that it cares only for itself rather than the public if bolstering is used alone. Also, even though Brown and White (2011) suggest bolstering strategy could lead to lower attribution of crisis responsibility, this study does not suggest that the effect carries over to other outcome variables such as trust, attitudes, corporate reputation, and supportive behavioral intentions. Thus, crisis responsibility itself may be a factor that helps to explain other outcome variables rather than a variable determining the effectiveness of crisis response. In other words, crisis managers could use crisis responsibility not to justify the effectiveness of crisis responses but to select effective crisis response strategies. Future studies should examine the different effects of base responses and other reputation repair strategies.

In addition, although some companies choose the say-nothing option, it is ineffective because it negatively influences the public's trust and attitudes as well as the perceived reputation of a company and its supportive behavioral intentions. Companies should tell the public how they are working to remedy the problem and what they are doing to prevent similar problems.

This study could not find a significant effect of CSR-crisis relevance on crisis response credibility, trust, attitudes, corporate reputation, and supportive behavioral intentions. The use of a single crisis situation might provide a possible reason for failing to find a significant effect. A severe, preventable crisis might generate a higher level of blame attribution; and hence, prompt participants to focus more on how a company responds to a crisis rather than how the crisis is relevant to the company's CSR. However, public evaluations might be different depending on the type or severity of crisis. For instance, a reminding strategy might be effective under a minor, victim crisis, while not regarded as an effective strategy in response to a preventable, severe crisis. Thus, various types of crises could be created and tested in future studies to investigate more thoroughly the effect of CSR-crisis relevance.

Finally, the lack of ecological validity might be one of the limitations of this study. During the experiment, participants were asked to read several stimulus materials (company description, CSR, crisis, post-crisis response) simultaneously. However, in a real life setting, people might not receive information in the same way as they receive it in the experimental setting. The lack of finding a significant effect of CSR-crisis relevance might result from this artificial context. Thus, future studies can further enhance ecological validity by conducting a field experiment when a real crisis happens.

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