



Short communication

Public relations practitioners' perceptions of the use of crisis response strategies in China



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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to solicit Chinese PR practitioners' views on the veracity of identified indigenous crisis response strategies (CRSs) and examine the underpinning socio-contextual factors that contribute to the employment of these strategies. Through 20 interviews, the authors found that political power, cultural backgrounds, media nature, public idiosyncrasies, and companies' problematic status contributed to the use of indigenous strategies of "Barnacle", "Third-party endorsement" and "Setting up new topics".

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1. Introduction

In the past decades, several frameworks of crisis response strategies (CRSs) have developed in the West, with the image repair theory (IRT) (Benoit & Pang, 2008) and the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 1995) established as dominant paradigms in crisis communication research (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). However, scholars in non-Western countries argued that the employment of western paradigm in analyses of non-Western crises (e.g. Meng, 2010; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010) might not fully capture the nuances and influence of culture (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Lee, 2005). Examining crises with a focus on indigenous CRSs is much needed.

In an earlier study conducted by the authors, three indigenous CRSs, namely "barnacle", "third-party endorsement", and "setting up new topics" were uncovered. In this study, Chinese PR practitioners' and government officials' views on the veracity of these strategies were solicited.

The study is significant in two aspects. Theoretically, it aims to enrich and refine crisis response typologies of IRT and SCCT by integrating perspectives of non-Western practitioners. In practice, our findings might address context-specific problems in crisis management and improve understanding of indigenous CRSs.

2. Literature review

2.1. Unique circumstances that Chinese corporations face

China's rapid growth and its accession into the World Trade Organization is powered by both state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private-owned enterprises (POEs). SOEs operate under the State-owned Assets and Supervision and

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Administration Commission (SASAC) of the State Council at the provincial, municipal, and county levels. They control pillar industries like telecommunications, finance, transportation, and more than four-fifths of retailers (Orszag, 2014).

POEs, which are privately controlled and profit-oriented, includes limited liability corporations, share-holding corporations, partnership enterprises, and sole investment enterprises (Szamosszegi & Kyle, 2010). It is essential to distinguish between SOEs and POEs as they have different business orientations, organizational structures, corporate cultures, and communication mechanisms, which may lead to different CRSs employment during crises (Joseph, 2013).

China's rapid growth is accompanied by many social problems (see Kahn & Yardley, 2007; Ye & Pang, 2011).

2.2. CRSs and Chinese socio-contextual factors

Vercic, Grunig, and Grunig (1996) proposed that political ideology, economic system, level of activism, culture and media system are socio-cultural variables for designing country-specific PR strategies. In an earlier study conducted by the authors, three indigenous CRSs, namely “barnacle”, “third-party endorsement”, and “setting up new topics” were uncovered. In this study, we solicited Chinese PR practitioners' and government officials' views on the veracity of these strategies. The authors propose the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the Chinese PR practitioners' perceptions of the identified CRSs?

RQ2: What socio-contextual factors in China contribute to employment of the identified CRSs?

3. Method

The study interviewed 20 corporate communication or crisis management practitioners who have three to five years' experience in the top 20 PR companies in China (according to the CIPRA, 2013) or in Chinese POEs or SOEs. Interview data were analyzed and organized based on the RQs.

4. Findings

RQ 1 examined PR practitioners' perceptions of the three strategies identified.

4.1. Barnacle

The “barnacle” strategy is the tactic of “following central government closely” which occurs when SOEs rely on the central government to smooth matters over and suppress negative voices by borrowing governmental influence.

PR practitioners described the employment of the “barnacle” strategy in following ways: First, companies downplay the crisis and keep a low-profile. Second, SOEs respond through the government. Statements on official websites or announcements by the government are carefully phrased and discreet. Moreover, the government will instruct the media not to sensationalize the crisis but publicize more positive stories. Third, SOEs regard the government as a “shelter” from the crisis. Fourth, practitioners said that “depending on the government is seen as an institutional strategy”.

4.2. Third-party endorsement

In China, it is used by companies to deny accusations, minimize the severity of crisis, or make public apologies. It is employed with other strategies to reinforce or demonstrate collective power. Third-parties are regarded as experts and authorities who lend power, credibility, and voice to an otherwise floundering organization in crisis.

Seeking third party endorsement also includes relying on experts or professionals to conduct inquiries and submit reviews. Third-parties are sources that lead public opinion, commitment to problem resolution, and determination to take corrective action.

4.3. Setting up new topics

In China, instead of clear explanations, companies raise irrelevant topics, dramatize, or create a publicity stunt to divert attention. It is a strategy used by POEs in the short-run for diverting public attention and in the long-run to step out of the shadow of a crisis. SOEs employed the strategy by beginning a new project with the government to sway the public attention from the crisis and minimize crisis damages.

4.4. Socio-contextual factors

RQ2 explored the socio-contextual factors that contributed to the employment of these three strategies. First, the government's ubiquitous influences and close relationship with SOEs largely determined their reliance on government authority. Cultural features, media control, public's trust in the authorities were also mentioned when discussing the “barnacle” strategy. The strategy of third-party endorsement can be attributed to the Chinese public's culture of collectivism and obedience

to authorities, a “reflection of the old patriarchal system and autocratic monarchy”. Likewise, practitioners argue that indirect communicative styles, the media’s lack of professionalism, and audience’s shrinking attention span contribute to the application of “setting up new topics”.

5. Analysis and conclusion

Other strategies mentioned by the interviewees should also be noted. For instance, the strategy of “clarification with positive news” which highlights the positive images of government leaders or praise the leadership and “reducing media exposures by taking advantage of relations or bribing the media with money” and “settling issues privately”, which are regarded as “the hidden rules” of Chinese public relations (Gong, 2008).

Chinese crisis communication practices have much to learn from the West. Similarly, for professionals practicing in China, they should learn more about Chinese social backgrounds and apply appropriate CRSs in China. Misunderstandings might happen without considering such specific contextual or contingent factors. The explication of Chinese corporate CRSs may help practitioners and audiences better understand their crisis communication practices.

Most PR practitioners agreed that “barnacle” strategy, “third party endorsement” and “setting up new topics” are based on Chinese characteristics. These strategies are largely influenced by Chinese political structures, cultural background, media features, corporate mechanism and public’s idiosyncrasies, which are distinct from their Western counterparts. Practitioners agreed that the government plays a significant role in corporate decisions, especially in the SOEs’ strategic directions. Therefore, it is essential to consider the Chinese indigenous social context before applying any theoretical framework based on Western context.

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