How Theory Informs Practice: Situational Crisis Communication Theory

W. Timothy Coombs, PhD
Nicholson School of Communication
University of Central Florida

Results from CCO IV

% Global CCOs Citing Crisis Management as CCO Prerequisite

- 2007: 33%
- 2008: 48%
- 2010: 61%
- 2012: 65%
Desired effect of communication
Undesired effect

![Results of Ineffective Crisis Response](image)

How do we know what makes crisis communication effective or ineffective?
Practice-Theory Relationship

Observation (Practice) → Application to Practice → Theory Testing → Theory Development

Speculation → Fact
Enter Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

SCCT is theory based approach
SCCT is social scientific principles to test relationships and predictions

SCCT

People attribute causes to events
Critical to understand the crisis situation to gain benefits and avoid problems with crisis communication
Crisis Responses

First
• Instructing Information
• (Public Safety)

Second
• Adjusting Information
• (Public Welfare)

Third
• Reputation Management

Public Safety
Public Welfare

The Ethical Base Response

- Instructing
- Adjusting
  - Corrective action
  - Sympathy
Reputation Management: Assess Threat Level

Determine Crisis Type

Check for Intensifiers

Crisis Type and Reputation Threat

Low Threat Level High

VICTIM ACCIDENTAL INTENTIONAL
Intensifiers

Crisis history

Prior reputation

Velcro Effect

- History of crises intensifies crisis responsibility
- Negative relational reputation intensifies crisis responsibility
- Positives of limited value (no real halo)
Crisis Response Strategies: Accommodation Intensity & Cost

Deny

Diminish

Rebuild

Bolstering

Matching Situation and Response

Threat

Accommodation
Why it works

Crisis response repairs trust, helps to rebuild reputation

Short Term Effects
- Lessen Reputation Damage
- Lessen Anger
- Lessen Anxiety
- Alter Media Coverage (Tone & Amount)

Long Term Effects
- Quicker Reputation Recovery
- Lessen Effect on Purchase Intention
- Lessen Negative Word-of-Mouth
- Share price
Media Coverage

Highlights

Anger

Negative

Word-of-Mouth

Revenge

Anxiety

Purchase Intention
Crisis Communication Traps

**Apology**
- Can increase damage in minor crises (overkill)
- Can increase damage in ambiguous crises such as product harm
- Similar strategies can work just as well (compensation and sympathy)

**Denial**
- Temptation to avoid the crisis
- Any responsibility intensifies damage
- Never scapegoat

Timing of Communication & Reputation

- **Best:** Organization reports crisis first
- **Worst:** Organization knew of problem but delayed action
Open questions for crises in low trust environments

• How quickly does effective crisis communication restore a reputation?
• Can a crisis enhance a reputation with effective crisis communication?
  • When and how?
• How does social media affect crisis communication?
  • More asset or liability?

Questions?

http://www.instituteforpr.org/topics/crisis-management-and-communications/
Crisis Management and Communication Entry
Institute for Public Relations