Image Repair Theory in the Context of Strategic Communication

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This chapter explicates image repair theory. First, I explain why image is important and discuss the nature of image. Then I argue that it is vital to understand the nature of threats to image. Next, I present the assumptions of image repair theory and explain the possible image repair strategies. Then I discuss the importance of the audience and look at crisis preparation and response.

Image Matters

People and organizations—including companies, governments, and non-profit organizations—frequently face accusations or suspicions of wrong-doing. A glance at newspaper headlines, televised news stories, or Internet news confirms the ubiquitous nature of threats to image. For example, we have heard and read about alleged scandals including JP Morgan, which lost two billion dollars, BP’s Gulf of Mexico oil spill, or Rupert Murdoch’s newspaper’s illegal hacking of telephone messages and bribes to police. So, threats to image are common in modern society.

When such inevitable misbehavior (actual or perceived) occurs, others are very likely to criticize us and our behavior. They may object to things we said or did, complain about things left unsaid or undone, or criticize the way we performed an action or phrased an utterance. Persuasive attacks
are messages that attempt to create unfavorable attitudes about a target (person or organization) and these messages have been investigated in several studies (see, e.g., Benoit & Delbert, 2010; Benoit & Dorries, 1996; Benoit & Harthcock, 1999; Benoit, Klyukovski, McHale, & Airne, 2001; Benoit & Stein, 2009). An organization does not have to be the target of an explicit attack to need image repair, because it can respond to anticipated image problems, but attempts to rehabilitate reputation are often prompted by criticism.

These attacks on our reputation are serious matters, for our image or reputation is extremely vital to us. A damaged reputation can hurt our persuasiveness because credibility generally and trustworthiness in particular are important to persuasion (see, e.g., W. L. Benoit, & P. J. Benoit, 2008; Benoit & Strathman, 2004) and credibility can be impaired by fallout from actual or perceived wrong-doing. We may be liable to punishment such as fines or even jail time for misdeeds. Although organizations, including companies, may not feel embarrassed, officers, workers, and shareholders do have feelings and those feelings can be hurt when their organization is the target of accusations. Furthermore, other companies or organizations could take their business elsewhere when an image is damaged. People and companies jealously guard their reputations and work hard to repair tarnished images. Hence, attacks on an image can be very serious concerns, and most people recognize the importance of these threats to reputation.

When image is threatened, we usually feel compelled to offer explanations, defenses, justifications, rationalizations, apologies, or excuses for our behavior. This chapter focuses on messages that respond to perceived damage to reputation—image repair strategies—because threats to image are pervasive, reputation is important, and communication has the potential to mend our face or reputation.

Defensive utterances or image repair messages are persuasive attempts to reshape the audience’s attitudes: creating or changing beliefs about the accused’s responsibility for an act and/or creating or changing values about the offensiveness of those acts. Human behavior includes both physical acts and communication. Communication includes a variety of contexts, including health communication, political communication, and crisis communication. Image repair discourse can be distinguished from crisis communication, a broader category. Crisis communication includes image repair discourse, but it also includes messages about other kinds of crises, such as natural disasters and terrorism. Image repair discourse consists of messages intended to improve images tarnished by criticism and suspicion (it is also possible for an organization to try to preempt anticipated criticism).

The Nature of Image

Image is all about perceptions—it is the impression others have about us. Saying this does not necessarily mean that image is false or does not reflect reality. Our perceptions of people and organizations are shaped by our direct experience with the organization and by what others say about the organization and how they behave toward it (vicarious experience). Furthermore, organizations and people are very complex and we rarely, if ever, know everything about them. Incomplete knowledge means that our impressions are limited. For example, before the BP Gulf of Mexico oil spill, many people knew BP from its gas stations. Those who live and work in the Gulf area learned about the spill from their first-hand experiences, but most of us watched it on television or read about it in newspapers or on the Internet (residents also learned about this vicariously through word of mouth, watching TV, reading newspapers, and other communication means). These messages (news stories and reports) shaped our knowledge about the oil spill and BP and influenced our attitudes toward the company. Many had an unfavorable impression of the company based on news reports. These unfavorable impressions were a threat to BP’s image and in fact BP responded in many ways, including a series of television and newspaper advertisements designed to counteract the public’s negative impressions. The fact that our knowledge of a person or organization is usually incomplete also
means that different people will often have somewhat different impressions because each has some information that the others lack.

So, image is an impression we have of a person or organization. Our image is a perception that develops out of what the organization says and does as well as by what others say about the organization and how others behave toward it: for example, fines assessed against a company by the government. Many of our images are based in large part on messages about the target (vicarious experiences). Image repair theory is about using communication to improve images threatened by bad behavior and/or reports of bad behavior.

The Nature of Threats to Image

An unfavorable image has two key components: responsibility and offensiveness. For example, BP’s oil wells in the Gulf of Mexico leaked. This spill was, at least in part, BP’s fault. Other companies (e.g., those who supplied equipment) may have been partly to blame. But BP was definitely responsible. Other companies, such as Mobil Oil or (to stress the point of organizations totally unrelated to the act in question) Microsoft or Bank of America did not face threats to their images because the oil spill was in no way their fault. Responsibility for an act is essential for a threat to image to occur.

Second, the act for which an organization is responsible must appear offensive before image is at risk. If BP had not had an oil spill, but had done a completely different kind of act (distributed food to the poor, hired workers, helped with Hurricane Katrina—or, again, to stress the point, did something innocuous such as repainted its offices) that was not offensive, its image would not be at risk. But the oil spill depressed tourism, hurt wildlife, and damaged businesses, so it was offensive. BP’s image was damaged because it was (at least partly) to blame for an offensive act. This analysis gives an insight into how image repair works. If the organization can persuade the audience that it was not to blame (difficult in BP’s case but sometimes possible) or that the action it performed was not offensive (again, difficult in BP’s case), its damaged image might be helped.

Understanding the accusations or suspicions that threaten an image is vital to image repair. First, you must know what the threats are to be able to attempt to counteract them. An organization may decide an accusation is too trivial to address, but it is a mistake to ignore an important accusation. You must know the accusations to decide which require defense. Second, you need to understand both blame and offensiveness for each accusation in order to decide how to respond.

Assumptions of Image Repair Theory

Image repair theory rests on two key assumptions. First, communication is a goal-directed activity. Second, maintaining a positive reputation is one of the central goals of communication. Each of these assumptions will be discussed separately here.

Communication is a Goal-Directed Activity

The first assumption made by this theory is that communication is a goal-directed activity. With few exceptions, most rhetorical theorists consider rhetoric to be the art of persuasion, a declaration typically carrying with it the assumption that rhetorical discourse is purposeful (see, e.g., Arnold & Frandsen, 1984; Bitzer, 1968; Richards, 1936; Rowland, 1982; or Scott, 1980). The assumption that communication is goal-directed can also be found in the literature on communication theory (see e.g., Halliday, 1973). H. H. Clark and E. V. Clark, for example, declare that “speaking is fundamentally an instrumental act” (1977, p. 223). Craig (1986) even declares that “a practical discipline of communication in which the concept of goal would not be central is difficult to imagine; and the pragmatic language of goal, decision, and consequence is in fact the common coin of the discipline.
of speech communication that has emerged in the United States in this century” (p. 257). The key point here is that the view of communication as goal-directed pervades writing in communication, transcending particular contexts of interpersonal communication or rhetorical theory. Hence, it is appropriate to construe communication and rhetoric as goal-driven activities.

Any assumption as broad as this one is likely to require qualifications, and this one is no exception. First, an organization can have multiple goals that are not completely compatible. In such cases, messages that further one goal may well interfere with other goals. Still, people and organizations try to achieve the goals that seem most important to them at the time they act, or to achieve the best mix of the goals that appears possible (considering the perceived costs of the behavior enacted in pursuit of the goals, and the importance of those goals).

Second, at times a person’s goals, motives, or purposes are vague, ill-formed, or unclear. An organization can be made of many people who are not equally aware of all goals or do not accept all goals equally. Nevertheless, to the extent a person’s or organization’s goals are clear, he, she, or it will attempt to accomplish those goals. Furthermore, even when a communicator has a clear conception of a goal, that does not necessarily mean that he or she knows or is willing and able to use the most effective means for achieving that goal. However, to the extent a particular goal is salient to a communicator, he or she will pursue that goal by enacting the behavior that the communicator believes is likely to achieve that goal and has tolerable costs.

Third, I do not claim that people devote the same amount of attention to each and every communicative encounter, micro-managing all utterances and all characteristics of an utterance, constantly identifying goals and unceasingly planning behavior to accomplish them. In situations that are particularly important to us, however, we do plan aspects of our utterances as carefully as we can. In other cases we spend as much effort in developing goal-directed messages as seems reasonable and necessary.

Finally, even when an individual’s goals are relatively clear, it may be difficult for others to identify that person’s goals. Of course, multiple goals (including “hidden agendas”) complicate matters. Another problem in identifying a person’s goal(s) arises because people sometimes attempt to deceive others about their goals. Despite these reservations, communication generally is best understood as an intentional activity. Communicators attempt to develop messages that they believe will best achieve the goals that are most salient to them when they communicate.

**Maintaining a Favorable Image is a Key Goal of Communication**

The second key assumption of image repair theory is that maintaining a favorable impression is an important goal in interaction. One useful typology of communication purposes is advanced by R.A. Clark and Delia (1979), who indicate that there are three issues or objectives explicitly or implicitly present for overt or tacit negotiation in every communicative transaction: (1) overtly instrumental objectives, in which a response is required from one’s listener(s) related to a specific obstacle or problem defining the task of the communicative situation, (2) interpersonal objectives, involving the establishment or maintenance of a relationship with the other(s), and (3) identity objectives, in which there is management of the communicative situation to the end of presenting a desired self image for the speaker and maintaining a particular sense of self for the other(s).

Furthermore, Fisher (1970) distinguishes between four goals in communication about identity. He argues that there are “Four motives, or kinds of rhetorical situations: ... affirmation, concerned with giving birth to an image; reaffirmation, concerned with revitalizing an image, purification,
concerned with correcting an image, and subversion, concerned with undermining an image” (p. 132). Persuasive attacks, which can prompt image repair, are what Fisher calls subversion, or messages intended to damage an image, mentioned above. This chapter focuses on Fisher’s motive of purification, namely, messages attempting to repair a damaged image.

Thus, our vulnerability to criticism leads to (internal) guilt and (external) threats to our face, both of which motivate a reaction from the actor. What happens when we believe that negatively perceived events threaten our reputation? Goffman explains, “When a face has been threatened, face-work must be done” (1967, p. 27). Notice also that R.A. Clark and Delia (1979) identify the identity objective as a key goal in communication and Fisher (1970) suggests one of the basic motives of rhetoric is purification of an image.

Why is face or image so important that persuasive attacks motivate defensive responses? Because one’s face, image, or reputation is so significant, Brown and Levinson (1978) observe that “people can be expected to defend their faces if threatened” (p. 66). Empirical evidence confirms the claim that perceived embarrassment is positively correlated with the amount of facework (Modigliani, 1971). Therefore, when our reputation is threatened, we feel compelled to offer explanations, defenses, justifications, rationalizations, apologies, or excuses for our behavior. Because blame and criticism or complaints occur throughout human society and because face is important for virtually everyone, this phenomenon, a felt need to cleanse one’s reputation through discourse, occurs in all our lives, public and private.

Image Repair Strategies

Image repair theory develops out of the nature of persuasive attacks. One component of persuasive attack is blame: the accused is responsible for an act. This means image repair efforts can attempt to reject blame (denying responsibility, shifting blame to others, or reducing responsibility). The second element of persuasive attack is the action of the accused is offensive. Image repair messages can try to reduce perceived offensiveness of the action. Beyond responding to blame and offensiveness, it is possible to admit wrong-doing (not challenging blame or offensiveness) and ask for forgiveness or to promise to fix the problem. Table 19.1 lists the general image repair strategies and specific strategies, giving definitions and examples of each.

This typology (see also Benoit, 2015) has been applied to image repair messages in a variety of contexts, including corporate (e.g., Benoit, 1995b; Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Benoit & Hirson, 2001; Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeeal, 2002; Brinson & Benoit, 1996, 1999), political (e.g., Benoit, 2006a, 2006b; Benoit, Gullifor, & Panici, 1991; Benoit & Nill, 1998a; Blaney & Benoit, 2001; Kennedy & Benoit, 1997; Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004), celebrities and athletics (e.g., Benoit, 1997a; Benoit, Hanczor, 1994; Benoit & Nill, 1998b; Blaney, Lippert, & Smith, 2013; Wen, Yu, & Benoit, 2009), international contexts (e.g., Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Drumheller & Benoit, 2004; J. Zhang & Benoit, 2004; W. Zhang & Benoit, 2009; Wen, Yu, & Benoit, 2012), health care, and religion (e.g., Blaney & Benoit, 1997; Miller, 2002).

The Importance of Audience

It is important to remember that in image repair we are dealing with perceptions. The actor responds to perceived threats to her or his character. In the case of organizations these attacks are important to the organization when the attacks are believed to reduce the organization’s reputation in the eyes of a group or audience who is salient to the source. As Tedeschi and Reiss put it, “Central to the realization that one faces a predicament is the belief that others [emphasis added] attribute to oneself causality and responsibility for the event in question” (1981, p. 271). Of course, an organization’s perceptions of the audience’s image of the source may or may not reflect the audience’s actual perceptions of the
organization’s image. However, the organization’s perceptions of the audience’s reaction to attacks are all the source has available to prompt and guide image restoration efforts. Hence, when trying to understand the source’s perception of and response to an attack, critics must consider the source’s point of view—the source’s perceptions of the audience’s beliefs. If the critic elects to assess the success or effectiveness of the defensive discourse in restoring the organization’s reputation with the audience, the critic must also consider the audience’s actual perception of the source before and after the image restoration attempt if possible.

This analysis leads to the idea that, in a sense, there are at least two “audiences” for a given image restoration attempt. The organization addresses an external audience consisting of those for whom the accused is most concerned with restoring his or her face. There are three possibilities for this external audience. First, it may consist solely of the person who objected to the apologist’s behavior. For example, if Jill criticizes her husband Steve, Steve may wish to restore Jill’s impression of him (and be concerned only with Jill’s perceptions of him). Here, the source is trying to restore reputation with the accuser. Second, John may criticize Arthur in front of several coworkers, and Arthur may wish to repair John’s perceptions as well as the perceptions of the other coworkers aware of John’s charges. In this case, the source is trying to restore reputation with the accuser and others aware of the accusation. A final form of external audience occurs when a third party levels the charges before a relevant group. For example, if an activist protests against a company, that company’s spokesperson may wish to reassure customers and/or stockholders but be completely (or largely) unconcerned with the source’s point of view—these are all the source has available to prompt and guide image restoration efforts.

### Table 19.1 Corporate Image Repair Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Key characteristic</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
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<tr>
<td>Simple denial</td>
<td>Did not perform act</td>
<td>Tylenol: did not poison capsule</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shift the blame</td>
<td>Another performed act</td>
<td>Tylenol: a “madman” poisoned capsules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evasion of responsibility</td>
<td>Responded to act of another</td>
<td>Firm moved because of new taxes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defeasibility</td>
<td>Lack of information or ability</td>
<td>Executive not told meeting changed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accident</td>
<td>Mishap</td>
<td>Tree fell on tracks causing train wreck</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good intentions</td>
<td>Meant well</td>
<td>Sears wants to provide good auto repair service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing offensiveness of event</td>
<td>Stress good traits</td>
<td>Exxon’s “swift and competent” clean-up of oil spill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimization</td>
<td>Act not serious</td>
<td>Exxon: few animals killed in oil spill</td>
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<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>Act less offensive than similar acts</td>
<td>Sears: unneeded repairs were preventative maintenance, not fraud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>More important values</td>
<td>Helping humans justifies testing animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Accuser</td>
<td>Reduce credibility of accuser</td>
<td>Coke: Pepsi owns restaurants, competes directly with you for customers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>Reimburse victim</td>
<td>Disabled movie-goers given free passes after denied admission to movie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrective action</td>
<td>Plan to solve/prevent recurrence of problem</td>
<td>AT&amp;T promised to spend billions to improve service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortification</td>
<td>Apologize</td>
<td>AT&amp;T apologized for service interruption</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Benoit, W. L. (1995a, 1997b)
about whether the protester is convinced by the image restoration effort. In this third case, the source is more concerned with restoring reputation with those aware of the accusations than with the accuser. Thus, it is important to realize that an apologist’s accuser may or may not be part of the audience for whom the image restoration attempt is designed. Similarly, because the accuser may or may not be the alleged victim of the offensive act, sources may be concerned primarily with restoring their reputations with victims, or with other audiences, or both.

As suggested earlier, incomplete knowledge and different priorities or values mean that different people frequently have different impressions of a person or organization. This is exceptionally clear during a presidential election, such as the one of 2012, when Republicans and Democrats had very different impressions of President Obama and Governor Romney. Even in these extreme situations some of our perceptions overlap: Democrats and Republicans alike agreed that Mitt Romney had been governor, had run the Utah Olympics, and was married to Ann Romney. They also agree that Barack Obama had won the presidency in 2008, had participated in the auto bailouts of 2009, and was married to Michelle Obama. Audiences are complex because individuals in an audience have (some) different information and (some) different priorities. This complexity can make image repair very challenging.

Preparing Crisis Response Plans

Crisis response plans are contingency plans: Their purpose is to anticipate potential threats to image and prepare responses without stress and time pressure. In a crisis, these plans should be adapted to the specific situation and implemented thoughtfully, not followed blindly. Furthermore, crisis response plans should be reviewed periodically and revised or updated as appropriate.

First, the organization should reflect on which crises can be anticipated. We cannot know when a crisis will emerge and we cannot anticipate every possible crisis. However, some crises can be anticipated and crisis response plans developed. For example, restaurants and restaurant chains face the possibility of food poisoning. Airlines often experience delays and, unfortunately, sometimes planes crash. Utilities can have their service to customers interrupted. Organizations should anticipate potential crises and prioritize them by likelihood and importance. Crisis response plans should be developed for the crises which are highest on the list. The organization should also consider other goals, e.g., profitability, that could conflict with image repair efforts.

Second, the crisis plan should address several questions:

- What actions should be taken (e.g., shut down production)?
- Who in the organization needs to be informed, and what should they be told?
- Who outside the organization needs to be informed, and what should they be told?
- Who will be the organization’s spokesperson? Is this the same person who will design (and approves) Image Repair messages?
- How will the message be disseminated? If there are multiple messages, when and to whom will they be distributed?
- What are the precise accusations and who are the most important audiences?
- Are there conditions when the image repair message(s) should be changed?
- When should image repair efforts cease?
- Can a potential crisis be averted before it happens?

The organization should review its response in the light of the outcome, and revise it as necessary. The more contingency plans that are developed, and the more frequently they are revised and updated, the more effective the crisis response. The actual image repair messages should be created with four factors in mind: which accusations/suspicions need the most attention, what does the most
important audience believe is true, what evidence and other resources does the organization have, and what media will best connect the message with the audience. The image repair message should not lie or deceive: the truth often comes out, whereupon the organization is threatened not only by the original offensive act but also by having lied about it.

Conclusion

Image, the perceptions of a person or organization held by others, is vital in human affairs. Threats to image are inevitable. People and organizations need to understand how to deal with threats to image. Image repair theory is an approach to this situation. Research has applied this theory in many case studies to help understand this complex phenomenon.

Note

1 The rest of the citations for Benoit in this chapter are for W. L. Benoit.

References


