Strategic Intent and Crisis Communication
The Emergence of a Field

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Crisis communication is a relatively new applied communication field of study, with its origins traced to the 1980s. In the early days the field reflected a strong tactical focus in efforts to redress the problems created by crises. A crisis can be defined as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2012, p. 2). As its theories developed and matured, crisis communication research evolved from a tactical to a strategic focus. Crisis communication research emphasizes solving the problems organizations such as corporations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) face in a crisis. This chapter reflects the organizational-centric focus by examining the ways managers intentionally utilize crisis communication to prevent or to reduce the problems generated by a crisis. Crisis communication refers to a variety of communicative interventions that are utilized as part of the crisis management process and employed during all three phases of crisis management:

1. pre-crisis (prevention and preparation),
2. crisis response, and
3. post-crisis (learning and recovering) (Coombs, 2009).

Crisis communication is a form of strategic communication. Strategic communication is about the intentional “application of communication and how an organization functions as a social actor to advance its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Večiš & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 7). Crisis communication involves the strategic application of communication to limit the harm a crisis inflicts on an organization and its stakeholders—it is designed to advance the organization’s mission. Moreover, crisis and strategic communication share an emphasis on influence. Many applications of crisis communication do try to influence people’s reactions to a crisis and their perceptions of organizations in crisis (Coombs, 2010).

The crisis communication array provides a means of organizing the various types of crisis communication. The various crisis communication applications can be divided into: (a) managing meaning and (b) managing information. Managing information includes all efforts used to collect and to analyze information. Managing meaning includes making efforts to shape how people perceive the crisis and the organization in crisis. These two categories can be crossed with the three crisis phases to create the $2 \times 3$ crisis communication array. The six cells in the crisis communication array are:
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1. pre-crisis managing information,
2. pre-crisis managing meaning,
3. crisis response managing information,
4. crisis response managing meaning,
5. post-crisis managing information, and

The bulk of the crisis communication research examines the fourth cell, crisis response managing meaning. This chapter reflects crisis communication literature by emphasizing managing meaning during a crisis response, the dominant research area in crisis communication.

This exploration of crisis communication as strategic communication unfolds in three parts. The first part details the common outcomes associated with crisis communication. The outcomes provide a strategic focus by establishing what an organization hopes to achieve through its crisis communication. The second part discusses the primary crisis response strategies crisis managers utilize. There is a need to outline these crisis response strategies and to understand what effects they are intended to have upon their target audiences. This section builds upon the outcomes by explaining how various crisis response strategies can be used to pursue different outcomes. The third part examines how crisis communication fits with related strategic communication fields. This entails exploring the relationships of crisis communication with issues management, reputation management, and risk communication.

Crisis Communication Outcomes

Strategic communication is intentional and thus it tries to generate specific reactions from the target audiences. Crisis managers employ crisis communication as a way to lessen the negative effects of a crisis upon the organization and stakeholders. Crisis communication serves to protect the organization and stakeholders from the myriad potential harms a crisis can inflict upon it. Crisis managers do seek specific outcomes from their crisis communication efforts. The outcomes of crisis communication can be divided into three areas (Coombs, 2012): (a) attitudes and affect, (b) potential supportive behaviors, and (c) media coverage. Obviously these three areas may overlap and influence one another. The attitudes and affect shape potential supportive behaviors, whereas media coverage can influence the other two. Still the distinctions are useful for organizing the discussion of the crisis communication impacts.

Attitudes and Affect

Attitudes and affects include reputational assets (attitude) and the various emotions commonly associated with a crisis (affect). The term “reputation” can be defined as how people perceive and evaluate an organization. Reputations have an evaluative dimension to them. People assess an organization by determining if the organization is “good” or “bad” (see Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). Reputations are valuable, intangible assets that organizations seek to cultivate and to protect. Reputations have value because they can accrue any or all of the following benefits: attracting and motivating employees, attracting customers, creating positive media coverage, and generating investment interest (Alsop, 2004; Davies, Chun, da Silva, & Roper, 2003; Dowling, 2002; Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). Crises may pose threats to an organization’s reputation (Barton, 2001).

It is logical that a large percentage of crisis communication research should be dedicated to organizational reputation protection or restoration. The major research lines of corporate apologia (Hearit, 1994; 2006), image repair (Benoit, 1995), and situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 1995; 2007) all feature reputation as a primary crisis communication outcome. The desired outcome
for crisis communication is to limit or to prevent reputational damage. The idea is that the use of crisis communication reduces or even eliminates the potential reputational damage generated by a crisis.

Crisis can generate a wide range of emotions among stakeholders. The most common emotions associated with crises are anger, anxiety, and sympathy. Anger and anxiety represent negative affective responses. As anger from a crisis increases, people are more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth and to experience a greater reduction in purchase intention (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). The Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model presents the most detailed analyses of affect in crisis communication. The ICM uses two axes to describe responses:

1. the X-axis is the public coping strategy and
2. the Y-axis is the level of organizational engagement.

Publics cope by either acting (conative coping) or by changing their interpretations of the situation (cognitive coping). Organizational engagement is the level of resources an organization commits to the crisis and this level ranges from high to low. The two axes create four quadrants representing different types of crises and identify the emotions associated with the crisis, how publics are likely to cope, and the amount of organizational engagement. The assumption is that crisis communication should be consistent with the emotions and coping strategies of the publics. Research using the ICM model reports that anxiety is the most common emotional reaction by publics during crises, followed by anger. Conative coping was the most common public response and organizations tend to have moderate engagement (Jin & Pang, 2010).

Crisis can disrupt organizational operations and these disruptions create anxiety for employees, suppliers, and customers. Employees are concerned about their pay, benefits, and job security. Suppliers wonder if they will be paid and if the standing orders will be modified. Customers worry whether or not they will have access to products and how long that access might be denied. The outcome for crisis communication is to reduce the amount of anger and anxiety people feel as a result of a crisis.

Sympathy is a positive affect; people feel sorry for someone or something. When an organization is the victim of a crisis, such as in a product-tampering crisis, people can feel sympathy for an organization. Sympathy leads people to support an organization. This type of support can include purchase intention or positive word-of-mouth. The outcome for crisis communication is to increase or to facilitate sympathy when the organization is a victim of the crisis.

Behaviors

There are two types of behaviors that characterize crisis response: public safety and potential supportive behaviors. Many crises, such as chemical accident and product harm crises, involve a threat to public safety. In such crises, public safety is the number one priority for crisis managers. Communication is used to protect public safety. People are told that a threat exists, the nature of that threat is explained, and people are told how to avoid or protect themselves from the crisis. A product harm crisis illustrates the public safety communication. People are told what specific product could be harmful, why the product presents a danger to them, and what they should do to protect themselves from that harm. For example, people are given details and instructions on how to determine if the product they have is part of the recall and if they should return the product or seek some corrective action necessary to make the product safe to use. The outcome for crisis communication is to prevent further harm from the product and to have that product returned or corrected.

Potential supportive behaviors refer to actions people can take which serve to benefit the organization in some way. The most researched potential supportive behavior is purchase intention. Marketing-oriented crisis communication demonstrates a strong interest in how crises impact customers (see Jorgensen, 1996). This research has found that crises do decrease purchase intentions.
The outcome for crisis communication is to reduce or to eliminate the negative effects of the crisis on purchase intentions.

Word-of-mouth is another potential supportive behavior that is favored by marketing-oriented crisis communication research. Word-of-mouth can have a profound effect on customers and in how any stakeholder might view an organization. In essence word-of-mouth is related to both purchase intention and reputation. Aside from physical harm, the greatest danger from a crisis is that it stimulates negative word-of-mouth. Negative word-of-mouth can harm reputations and suppress purchase intention (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). The outcome for crisis communication is to reduce or eliminate negative word-of-mouth.

Organizations generally do not like new government regulations because regulations typically increase costs for organizations (Baker, Conrad, Cudahy & Willyard, 2009). Crises create the potential for new regulations. A crisis can become a focusing event, as illustrated by Fishman (1999), who adapted Birkman’s (1997) notion of this concept. A focusing event draws attention to some issue. In a crisis, attention is drawn to the factors that gave rise to the crisis.

Stakeholders worry that, if not addressed properly, the conditions that created the crisis will linger and the potential for additional crises remain. The focusing event can create pressure on policy makers to create policies designed to redress the conditions that created the crisis. The crisis managers need to reassure stakeholders, especially government officials, that the conditions that created the crisis are no longer a threat and that necessary corrective actions have been taken. If an organization is perceived to be in control and has adequately addressed the crisis, then there would be no need for the government to impose external corrections. The outcome for crisis communication is to prevent new regulations from emerging after a crisis.

A final behavior is media coverage. We are using the term media broadly to include both traditional media and digital media. Media outlets are drawn to crises because they have the dramatic elements that appeal to media consumers. Crisis managers are concerned about the quality, quantity, and duration of the media coverage. The starting point should be the quality of crisis media coverage. The quality of media coverage is whether the “story” portrays the organization in a negative light. In most cases, crisis media coverage is negative for an organization because it is associated with a negative event (Barton, 2001). The quantity of the media coverage is represented by the number of stories generated by the crisis. Obviously, if most crisis stories were negative, crisis managers would prefer to attract as little media coverage as possible. Reputation management dictates that organizations should minimize negative media coverage while maximizing positive media coverage (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Meijer, 2004). In general, if people are talking about the crisis, that is negative for an organization. However, some crisis response strategies can seek to place positive information about the organizations into the stories. The duration is the length of time the media covers the story. Media coverage of a crisis keeps the story alive for stakeholders and will perpetuate the discussion of negative information. Ideally, the duration of the crisis media coverage will be short. The outcome for crisis communication is to limit the amount and duration of negative media crisis coverage. In a few cases, the outcome for crisis communication is to add positive information about the organization to the media coverage.

### Crisis Response Strategies: Dynamics and Types

As noted earlier, crisis communication is a complex process when viewed as strategic and therefore crisis managers may choose from a variety of crisis response strategies. The choices should be guided by the desired outcomes. Informing this choice are the dynamics that underlie crisis communication. This section begins by detailing the basic dynamics involved in crisis response communication and then examines the specific crisis response strategies and their relationships to various outcomes.
Strategic Intent and Crisis Communication

Dynamics

Attribution theory has contributed significantly to our understanding of crisis communication. Attribution theory posits that people seek to find causes for events they experience. When something like a crisis happens, people naturally try to explain why it happened. People tend to attribute the cause of an event to internal or external factors (Weiner, 1986; 2006). For instance, did the person spill the red wine because he was drunk (internal) or because someone bumped his arm (external)? People naturally generate attributions of crisis responsibility when they are engaged with a crisis. Crisis responsibility is the amount of responsibility for the crisis people attribute to the organization.

Marketing researchers were the first to identify the importance of attributions of crisis responsibility to crisis communication (e.g., Mowen, 1980). Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) has refined and extended the role of crisis responsibility in crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Experimental research consistently finds that increased crisis responsibility produces greater reputational damage and more anger, and creates a strong reduction in purchase intention (Coombs, 2007; Schwarz, 2008).

When crisis responsibility is the key variable, three dynamics can be identified for understanding how crisis response strategies are related to the desired outcomes. First, crisis response strategies can be used to separate the organization from the crisis. If an organization is perceived to have no responsibility for the crisis, it suffers no harm, and crisis damages are avoided. Second, crisis response strategies can seek to reduce attributions of crisis responsibility. If stakeholders perceive the organization has little responsibility for the crisis, the crisis damages are minimized. Third, crisis response strategies seek to provide positive actions to counter the negatives created by the crisis. The crisis response strategies attempt to buffer the crisis damages (Coombs, 1995).

Types of Crisis Response Strategies

Crisis managers have a number of crisis response strategies at their disposal during a crisis. Typically each crisis communication effort combines a number of crisis response strategies. Sturges (1994) recommended dividing crisis response strategies into three categories:

1. instructing information,
2. adjusting information, and
3. reputation management.

Our discussion of the types of crisis response strategies begins with these three message categories. As we discuss the crisis response strategies, we will return to the outcomes because specific strategies are linked to particular outcomes.

Instructing information involves messages designed to physically protect stakeholders from the harm produced by the crisis. Stakeholders must know what actions they can take to protect themselves from the physical harm a crisis can generate. There is a strong connection between instructing information and the public safety outcome derived from this focus on physical safety. Examples of instructing information include alerts about product recalls, public health warnings, and orders or alarms to evacuate an area or to shelter in place (Coombs, 2012).

Adjusting information, the second category of strategies, includes messages intended to help people cope psychologically with a crisis. Crises can be traumatic for victims (those affected by the crisis). Crisis managers can take actions to ease the burden on victims. Expressions of sympathy, corrective actions designed to prevent a reoccurrence of the crisis, and information about what happened in the crisis are examples of adjusting information. People expect organizations to express sympathy and show concern for the crisis victims (Patel & Reinsch, 2003). Research shows expressions of concern
reduce anxiety and anger (Cohen, 2002). Corrective action refers to the steps taken to prevent a repeat of the crisis. The corrective action reassures stakeholders by demonstrating the organization’s commitment to their safety (Sellnow, Ulmer & Snider, 1998). Simply providing details that reduce uncertainty about what happened in a crisis produces reassurance as well. Providing information about the crisis event reassures people by reducing their uncertainty (Ammerman, 1995).

Reputation management crisis response strategies, the third category of strategies, are the words and actions designed to protect or to repair the reputational damage posed by a crisis. Sturges (1994) argues that instructing and adjusting information must be prioritized in a crisis, and reputation management addressed only after the other two have been provided. The concern with reputation management has produced the greatest volume of research in the crisis communication literature (Coombs, 2009). The three dynamics of crisis response communication provide an excellent framework for organizing and explaining the various reputation management crisis response strategies. The reputation management response strategies are classified into three strategies: denial, diminish, and repair. Table 32.1 provides a list of the commonly used reputation management crisis response strategies.

The reputation management strategies can be tied directly to the earlier discussion of the three dynamics that explain how crisis communication achieves the desired outcomes. Denial reputation management strategies work by disconnecting the organization from the crisis. If the organization bears no responsibility for the crisis, the crisis should not harm the organization’s reputation. Why should stakeholders punish an organization if they do not believe it is responsible for the negative events? Diminish reputation management strategies seek to minimize attributions of crisis responsibility. There is a relationship between crisis severity and attributions of crisis responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2004). By recognizing that the crisis created only minimal damage, stakeholders should perceive minimal attributions of crisis responsibility. By arguing that the organization had limited

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control over the crisis events, crisis managers claim that the organization had little responsibility for the crisis. A crisis has less negative effects when attributions of crisis responsibility are low. Lastly, repair or reputation management strategies accept responsibility for the crisis and offer positive actions as a means to offset the negatives created by the crisis (Coombs, 2012).

At this point it is useful to connect the crisis response strategies to specific crisis communication outcomes. Earlier we noted some connections between crisis response strategies and outcomes; this section elaborates on how the two are related. Table 32.2 summarizes the relationships between the crisis response strategies and crisis communication outcomes.

Instructing information is designed for the public safety outcome. Moreover, the information provided about protective actions also should help to reduce anxiety. Adjusting information directly targets anxiety by providing reassurance. Corrective action can prevent government regulation because the corrective actions indicate there is no need for action beyond the steps taken by the organization. The expressions of sympathy should serve to reduce anger by demonstrating concern for the victims.

The denial and diminish reputation management strategies should protect an organization’s reputation, reduce anger, maintain purchase intention, and reduce the likelihood of negative word-of-mouth. If there is no crisis, the reputation is unharmed, purchase intentions should remain intact,

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and there is no need for anger or negative word-of-mouth. Establishing minimal responsibility for a minor crisis limits the reputational damage and danger as well as the adverse effect on purchase intention and the desire to engage in negative word-of-mouth. In addition, the denial strategies should reduce the quantity and duration of media coverage. If there is no crisis there, then there is no need for crisis coverage in the media.

The repair reputation management strategies seek to reduce the reputational damage, the negative effect on purchase intention, anger, and negative word-of-mouth. Crisis managers realize the crisis will inflict damage in all four of those categories, but providing positive words and/or actions seeks to reduce that damage. Apology, reminding and victimage strategies can influence the quality of media coverage by indirectly encouraging media to include positive information about the organization (the apology, past good works, or how the organization has suffered from the crisis). Victimage seeks to increase sympathy by reminding people the organization is a victim in the crisis. In addition, apology can help reduce the amount and duration of media coverage. An apology ends the crisis narrative. The organization accepts responsibility and asks for forgiveness (Heatt, 2006). The villain accepts the punishment, thus ending the crisis narrative and reducing media and stakeholder interest in the crisis.

**Other Crisis Communication Variables**

Research has identified two other variables that have an impact on crisis communication that are independent of the crisis response strategies: timing and channels. Timing refers to whether the organization or some other entity, typically the media, are the first to report about the crisis. This research is known as “stealing thunder.” Experimental studies provide evidence that an organization suffers less reputational damage from a crisis when it is the first actor to report the crisis. In other words, if the first report of a crisis comes from another source, the organization suffers more damage from the same crisis than if the organization had been the first to announce the crisis (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2010).

Initial studies also suggest that stealing thunder has an effect on crisis response strategies. Essentially, no benefits, such as reputation protection, are derived from crisis response strategies if the organization is the first to report the crisis (Claeys, 2012). It appears that the favorable outcomes are achieved with either timing or crisis response strategies. However, combining the two does not increase the benefits associated with stealing thunder.

An emerging area of research has begun to examine the channel effects of crisis communication. This research tries to determine if the channels that are used to deliver the crisis information and crisis response strategies have an effect on attributions of crisis responsibility and the desired crisis communication outcomes. Research thus far has produced only speculative results. The comparison of print and video presentations of crisis information and responses revealed little difference between the two types of presentation (Coombs & Holladay, 2011).

More recently researchers have compared how people react to messages delivered via social media channels and other communication channels. The examination of social media channels is embryotic and the conclusions are tentative at best. The difficulty with social media channels is that source and timing can complicate the results. In addition to examining a channel, examining the source of the information in a social media channel reveals that sources range from friends of the recipient, to the organization in crisis, to an unknown person. The research by Freberg (2012) and Schultz, Utz and Goritz (2011) provides excellent examples of work seeking to identify source factors and source effects among various social media. For example, Freberg’s (2012) research on food recall messages found that organizational sources (the government) created more compliance than user-generated content (social media). The source might be the reason for an effect. Also, people may assume that if the organization is the source of a social media message, it is the first to report about the crisis. In this
case timing might be the reason for any effects found in the study. Hence, we have some tentative evidence that the use of social media channels might change how people perceive and react to crisis response strategies (Liu, Austin & Jin, 2011).

Crisis Communication and Related Areas of Strategic Communication

The preceding discussion has linked crisis communication to reputation management and issues management. Risk management can be added as a third area of strategic communication that has close ties to crisis communication. Each of these four areas of strategic communication has an effect upon the others. Hence, crisis communication should not be considered in isolation from the other three areas of strategic communication.

Reputation management involves efforts designed to influence how people perceive and evaluate the organization. Crises can have a negative effect on reputations when stakeholders lessen their perceptions of an organization because of a crisis. Research still needs to determine the length of time a crisis suppresses the organization’s reputation. Prior reputation has an effect on how people perceive crisis responsibility. In some cases, a strong, positive pre-crisis reputation reduces the reputational damage from a crisis (Dean 2004; Ulmer, 2001). Moreover, a negative pre-crisis reputation intensifies the reputational damage from a crisis by increasing attributions of crisis responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). It is nearly impossible to separate crisis management from reputation management.

Issues management involves the identification of issues (problems whose resolution can impact an organization) and attempts to resolve the issues (Heath, 1990). Issues management can be part of crisis prevention. Efforts to manage an issue simultaneously are efforts to prevent a crisis from manifesting into a crisis. A crisis can result from a failed issues management effort (González Herrero & Pratt, 1996). As noted earlier, a crisis can become an issue. Issues can focus attention on an issue and increase pressure by policy makers to take action in order to prevent a repeat of the crisis (Fishman, 1999). For certain crisis communication efforts, there is a close connection with issues management.

The risk assessment aspect of risk management seeks to reduce the vulnerabilities an organization faces to reduce crisis threats. Risk assessment and efforts to reduce the identified risks are essential to crisis prevention. Once a crisis threat manifests itself in a crisis, there may be a need for crisis managers to engage in risk communication. Risk communication seeks to understand how stakeholders perceive the risk and to explain the nature of the risks as well as the organization’s efforts to protect people from those risks (Palenchar, 2005).

This section has emphasized the relationship between crisis communication and reputation management, issues management, and risk management and communication. Yet all four functions are strongly interrelated. Risks and issues can impact reputations, and reputations can limit or facilitate efforts to manage issues or risks. Moreover, a risk can create an issue or an issue can generate risks. All four of these strategic communication areas can be used proactively to address organizational concerns. The point is that the strategic nature of crisis communication is influenced by its relationship to the strategic communication areas of reputation management, issues management, and risk management.

Conclusion

Crisis communication began to emerge as a distinct entity in the late 1980s. The early writings were presented by practitioners who developed simple lists of what crisis managers should and should not do during a crisis. The field began with a simple tactical focus on what to do. We would argue this is a common “origins story” for an applied field of communication. As research and theory has advanced in crisis communication, the field has moved toward explaining “why” certain communicative interventions
should be initiated. This research-based movement represents significant improvement over simplistic “practitioner wisdom.” This chapter has documented the strategic focus of crisis communication with a focus on managing meaning during a crisis response. This focus was selected because the vast majority of crisis communication research examines the managing meaning during the crisis response.

The chapter began by detailing the desired outcomes for crisis communication. Strategic communication must be intentional and the outcomes for crisis communication are its intentions. The focus then shifted to how the various crisis response strategies could be used in pursuit of the various crisis communication outcomes. The analysis of crisis response strategies included an explanation of the dynamics by which crisis communication achieved its intended effects. This chapter concludes with a review of the connections between crisis communication, reputation management, issues management, and risk management to illustrate the relationships between these four types of strategic communication.

Crisis communication is developing as a unique field of strategic communication. Its research has identified a variety of crisis response strategies and offered an understanding of how each can produce certain outcomes. In crisis communication, crisis managers have a body of knowledge that guides them in their efforts to achieve a wide range of intended outcomes through the utilization of crisis communication. Crisis communication has evolved from its tactical start and should be considered a significant strand of strategic communication.

References


