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WHEN IT HITS THE FAN: A PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS' GUIDE TO CRISIS
COMMUNICATION

by

JOSHUA L. SMITH

Under the Direction of David M. Cheshier

ABSTRACT

This project is designed as an aid to those interested in practicing, researching or teaching crisis communication. For public relations' practitioners, it offers a comprehensive approach for structuring a crisis communication plan. For researchers, several theoretical frameworks for the study of crisis communication are provided, with the goal of allowing them a more complete foundation for executing future research. Those involved in teaching crisis communication are offered additional resources such as a sample crisis communication plan, media guidelines and a concluding case study for educating future practitioners.

INDEX WORDS: crisis communication, systems theory, attribution theory, information integration theory, game theory and media relations.

WHEN IT HITS THE FAN: A PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS' GUIDE TO CRISIS
COMMUNICATION

by

JOSHUA L. SMITH

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2007

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Joshua Lee Smith
2007

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COMMUNICATION

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May 2007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I complete such a monumental accomplishment in my life, I would like to take a moment to thank the various people who have guided, supported, encouraged and otherwise helped me through this process.

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. David Cheshier, chair of the department of Communication, for his dedication, guidance, insight and feedback. During my graduate career, he provided me with many exciting and challenging opportunities, always improving the quality of my graduate experience. Because of him, writing this thesis was not an arduous endeavor, but rather a process that taught me as much about research as it taught me about what I am able to accomplish.

I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Arla Bernstein and Jennifer Jiles. Thank you for your service as a committee member and for spending your time reviewing this work and offering suggestions. I am grateful to my entire committee for sharing their knowledge of public relations with me during my academic career, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Those of you familiar with the study of crisis communication may recognize the title of this thesis from a book written by Gerald C. Meyers, former chairman of American Motors. This book was a pivotal part of my research and I could think of no better way to recognize its significance than to use it as part of the title to this thesis.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my friends who have all been helpful to me in many different ways. There is no way to list all of these individuals, therefore I will simply say thank you to my friends and colleagues at Delta Air Lines, IPS-Sendero, Georgia State University, University of Georgia and Stockbridge High School.

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Chapter I Introduction

Have you ever stopped to think about the many things that could go wrong for your organization? In an age of increasing technological and structural complexity, the possibility of breakdown, human error and crisis in human organizations also rises. The key to the survival of any organization in a time of crisis is its ability to manage the crisis effectively by planning, preparing, training and taking decisive action designed to protect the organization's image.

Considering the increased risks that are a part of today's corporate environment – the understanding of how and when to implement a crisis communication plan cannot be ignored. Layoffs, financial turbulence, slanderous rumors, product recalls and environmental disasters, are all of these risks are equally capable of eroding an organization's good image.

This paper focuses on one of the central elements of crisis management planning in corporate America: crisis communication. In an ideal organization, crisis communication plans are prepared as a proactive rather than a reactive measure. Planning and preparedness are essential for an organization to protect its reputation and successfully manage a crisis.

Every organization, regardless of size, should have a crisis communication plan, and there are no exceptions, merely differences of degree (Fink, 2000). Perception often takes precedence over reality in a crisis, and companies must be prepared to respond quickly and proactively manage a crisis situation.

Depending on the size and scope of the organization, crisis communication plans can vary greatly from the simplest plan to a complex analysis of a variety of crisis scenarios. While the exact type or timing of a crisis cannot be determined, preparing a crisis communication plan

as a proactive measure will provide any organization with the necessary tools needed to immediately address media inquiries, manage and control messaging, and protect its brand.

The primary goal of this paper is to provide an integrative framework for approaching crisis communication. Case study research, often criticized for lacking generalizability, comprises up to a third of published articles in public relations literature (Cutler, 2004). There is little discussion in academic literature on the shortcomings of using case studies as a research tool, but this type of research on crisis communication is somewhat fragmented. The majority of case study research focuses on end results of crisis communication planning, or the lack thereof. The problem with this type of research is that it tends to study only 'results' of crisis communication, at the expense of an analysis of the whole process. The majority of academic research on crisis communication focuses on the preparation of communication strategies and identifying and planning for possible crises. Identifying and studying only select parts of, or issues in, crisis communication is only rewarding if at some point analysts step back to see how the various parts fit into the bigger picture. Because case studies are such a dominant form of research in public relations literature, approximately 35% of research published in two public relations academic journals, Cutler (2004) emphasizes the need for successful case study research developed around a solid theoretical framework.

Rather than looking into isolated parts of crisis communication this paper, in four sections, examines the larger process, everything from beginning preparations to the end results of a failed crisis communication plan. This allows public relations practitioners to gain valuable insight from a comprehensive set of guidelines for managing and executing crisis communication and a crisis communication response analysis and media audit of an organization in crisis.

Section one presents theories in crisis communication, offering an overview of the role of communication in crisis communication and discusses the important issues and trends affecting

this area of the public relations field. Section two focuses on steps in the development of a crisis communication plan - before, during and after a crisis. Section three applies the research and information drawn from this paper to develop a general media relations guide and a generic working crisis communication plan for practitioners. The final section includes a media audit and crisis communication response analysis of the Bridgestone/Firestone-Ford tire recall of 2000-2001, examining in detail the crisis communication actions taken by Bridgestone/Firestone-Ford.

Three goals guide the writing and organization of this paper. First, this paper is intended for those practitioners who need to know the essentials of crisis communication planning. It is also intended to be used as a guide for practitioners and their organizations to use before, during and after a crisis in the creation of their own crisis communication plans. The essentials of crisis communication will be conveyed as clearly and directly as possible to aid practitioners when developing crisis communication plans in their own organizations or at least in laying a solid foundation, upon which they can later build.

Second, this paper is intended to summarize several theoretical frameworks in the study of crisis communication, as well as research on how organizations can be prepared for crisis and how such organizations can emerge from without sustaining long term negative side effects to their reputation. This will allow researchers a more complete foundation for executing their research.

Finally, this paper should provide students and educators with additional resources for the study of crisis communication. According to Cutler (2004), the body of academic case research can be an important influence on students. Further more, case studies can also set the benchmark for best practices, and thereby influence practitioners who are undertaking case-based projects within organizations. Case study research is particularly useful in the study of crisis management

because “examples of public relations practice are defined by the issues they manage, by the approach taken or by the roles of practitioners, and are ready-made cases” (p. 366).

According to Caponigro (2000), every business will face a crisis, and only the best prepared will survive and perhaps even thrive from the crisis. While the exact type of crisis or timing of a crisis cannot be determined, preparing a crisis communication plan as a proactive measure will provide an organization with the tools needed to immediately address media inquiries and request and refute any half-truths or misconceptions. A cohesive, consistent and direct message is imperative, and a crisis communication plan will provide the framework to address this important issue.

Chapter II Literature Review

The problem of negative publicity and how to manage it is a critical issue for today's communicators. An organizational crisis of any kind can directly influence the financial health of the organization, and quite possibly its survival. Because an organization is a system of related elements, a disruption in one area of business can affect other elements of that system. A poorly managed crisis can create animosity toward a company or client, dissuade investors, slow sales, cost jobs, cost sponsorships of important cultural, civic or sporting events and even lower employee morale. On the other hand, a well-managed crisis can earn an organization the public's sympathy, respect, and loyalty while re-establishing the equilibrium an organizational system requires to grow. Stephen Fink (2000) defines an organizational crisis as: "An unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending - either one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome or one with the distinct possibility of a highly desirable and extremely positive outcome" (p. 101).

Other experts in the field of communication expand upon that definition to include specifics from today's business perspective: "A business-based crisis is an event specific episode that can make or break you, depending on the size of your organization, the number of people you employ, the products and services you sell, and the resources of people, assets and money you can aim at the problem" (Fink, 2000, p. 7). And Kathleen Fearn-Banks (2001) says that a crisis is: "A major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name. It interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization" (p. 1).

However, Robert Littlejohn (1983), who allows an organization the freedom to define “crisis” as it relates to its goals, offers the most all-encompassing definition of a crisis: “Crisis is a relative and highly subjective term that gains meaning through the individual needs of an organization and the environment in which the organization exists. Each organization formulates its own definition of a crisis by studying their environment for potential hazards and assessing the accomplishment of goals in light of them” (p. 8).

Communication is one tactic by which a potential crisis is managed. Crisis communication is “the communication between the organization and its publics prior to, during and after negative occurrence... designed to minimize the damage to the image of the organization” (Littlejohn, 1983, p. 2). Crisis management is a planned strategy, or as Fink (2000) states: “the art of removing much of the risk and uncertainty to allow you to achieve more control over your own destiny” (p. 15). It provides an organization with a systematic, orderly response to crisis situations (p. 11).

Simon Booth (1993), an author and researcher in crisis management, offers an effective working definition of a crisis as: “A situation faced by an individual, group or organization which they are unable to cope with by the use of normal routine procedures and in which stress is created by sudden change” (p. 86). But Booth himself is not entirely comfortable with this, emphasizing there is no easy way of defining crisis situations because the people charged with recognizing them may lack the objectivity or skills to do so. They may fail to recognize the signals that point to an emerging crisis and therefore may not realize that a crisis has begun to develop within their organization. According to Booth (1993), “The facts or signals that define a crisis may be ignored, repressed or misinterpreted by organizational leadership” (p. 88).

By appealing for a broader understanding of what defines a crisis, Booth and many others suggest that external crises of the sudden and more obvious variety make up only part of

the picture; other types of crises must also be considered, including those that develop slowly over time, emerge from within the organization, or repeat themselves at regular intervals.

Adding to the roster of industrial accidents, mishaps or natural disasters of past years, today's organization must be prepared to deal with many other types of crises, such as: mergers, acquisitions and takeovers; government investigations; layoffs; lawsuits; reorganization; product recalls; boycotts and strikes; bankruptcy; scandals and environmental problems (Carney, 1987).

Crisis Communication Theories

Communications between an organization and its key constituents should be viewed as a dynamic, open process, essential to the survival of the contemporary organization. Systems theory supports the position that an organization operating as an open system increases its chances of survival. "The world viewed as systems consists of interlinked sets of components hierarchically organized into structural wholes which interact through time and space, are self regulating, yet capable of structural change," according to Peter Monge (1977), a leading systems theorist (p. 90). Among the properties of natural systems, Monge counts their ability to maintain and re-create themselves in response to challenges from the environment. In an open system, exchange occurs between the system and environment, enabling the system to achieve a steady state and reduce entropy. In a closed system, the organization operates in isolation from the environment, increasing entropy and the likelihood of collapse (p. 21-22).

As an open system, the organization must promote constant interaction between its internal components, as well as with the external environment in which it functions, in order to achieve homeostasis. By adapting to changes in the environment, the organization insures its viability over the long term. In other words, an organization must concern itself not only with the information it is providing, but how these messages are received and interpreted by its key

internal and external audiences. Only with this feedback and attention to the continuous communication process of communication can it determine what, if any, action must be taken to correct errors in public perception.

Another theoretical concept with direct application to crisis communication is information integration theory. In a crisis, the organization's primary concern is to favorably influence the attitudes of key publics. How these publics perceive information about the organization can have a profound effect on their attitudes. "Social judgments are typically based on a culmination of various pieces of information, sometimes of the most diverse nature. Factual and hearsay evidence, rumors, prestige associations, gesture and appearance, may all bear on the final attitude. Information integration is thus fundamental in attitude change" (Anderson, 1971).

According to integration theory, information will influence the attitude system of an individual based upon its valence and weight. Valence reflects a person's perception of how good or bad the information is. "Weight is a function of reliability. If the person thinks the information is probably true, a higher weight will be assigned to the information; if not, a lower weight will be given. Valence affects how information influences attitude; weight affects the degree to which it does so" (Littlejohn, S., & Foss, 2004, p. 141).

Again, the focus remains on the process and how target audiences integrate information and how their attitudes are affected by it. In practical application, information integration theory requires that organizations consider both valence and weight when preparing messages for their constituents. It is important to contextualize information and explain the degree of risk or danger presented by a crisis so that members of the target audience are able to accurately judge the significance for themselves. This will shape how persuasive they perceive the information to be. In addition, the weight, or effectiveness of an organization's messages in a crisis will clearly depend upon the reliability of the source. Organizations must therefore place a high value on

cultivating credibility among key publics if they wish to assert greater influence on the attitudes of their constituents.

A third theoretical approach to crisis communication also addresses the issue of information management by applying a branch of decision science known as game theory to the process of negotiating the release of information to the media. "Nowhere is game theory more helpful than in crisis communication, where the stakes are high, decisions irrevocable and each step in the communication process yields highly visible results. Caught in a fast moving crisis, it is a natural reaction to base decisions on instinct and emotion. In contrast, game theory offers a rational structure for strategy analysis" (Murphy, 1987, p. 19).

Game theory examines possible outcomes when two or more players engage in conflict, each pursuing their own goals. Because each outcome is associated with a particular payoff for the participants, game theory seeks to explain the likely payoff for each player when certain strategies are applied. There are zero-sum games, the simplest form of conflict resolution, in which one person's gain is another's loss. Such games of survival are typical of American culture, where the outcome is limited to winners and losers only.

Non-zero-sum games are those where no one loses and everyone gains an acceptable payoff. These games have a more practical application to media relations, particularly in crisis situations, where cooperation benefits all and the complete ruin of any one party is undesirable. In a crisis, the organization will enhance its credibility by providing information and meeting the needs of the news media to the best of its ability, even if it will have a short-term negative impact on the company's image. In exchange, the organization enlists the press in its efforts to communicate with key publics and restore trust in management. This compromise serves the interest of both players - the press receives access to information and the organization achieves greater control over the crisis. "Few public relations situations are really zero-sum. Most crises

work our best of modeled as non-zero-sum games in which there are no clear-cut winners or losers. In these situations, the object of the game is for both players to maximize their own points and this often means that during the course of play, concessions must be made to improve one's final payoff. The game thus develops into a negotiation in which information becomes a commodity to be traded strategically so that each player can live with the final apportionment" (Murphy, 1987, p. 25).

Systems theory provides a framework in which contemporary organizations can increase their potential for success and survival in difficult times. By operating as open systems, gathering information from their environment and from internal units within the hierarchy, they enhance their ability to adapt to change and respond effectively to crisis. Information integration theory and game theory also offer useful guidelines for ongoing communication with the organization's key stakeholders. To influence attitudes, information must be managed effectively; it must be pertinent, timely, and reliable. The organization must work with the media and be prepared to supply them with information, even if it means initial losses in public image, in order to have a voice in the communication process. In the end, the most essential element in effective crisis communication is the establishment of credibility; it is also the most important factor in protecting the organization's reputation over the long term.

To maintain system integrity, a healthy internal exchange of information is also needed. This includes coordination of responsibilities among units within the organization, building an interdisciplinary crisis communication team, and achieving consensus on communication objectives during the planning phase so that the company speaks with one voice at the time of a crisis. The open system approach is also vital to the learning and recovery stages of crisis management. Interaction with key stakeholders via surveys, direct mail, Internet and other means enhances the feedback received through the media to help the organization determine

how perceptions have changed as the result of the crisis and what steps are necessary to restore and protect the company's image.

The symbolic approach is another theoretical framework for studying crisis communication. The symbolic approach organizes strategies for crisis communication in relation to two theories: neoinstitutionalism and attribution theory (Coombs, 1996). Neoinstitutionalism works with the concept of organizational legitimacy, where as attribution theory works with public perception.

Fusing attribution theory into crisis management is an effort to build crisis communication research. Attribution was first studied by Heider (1958), who referred to attribution as "naive psychology" because people constantly infer the causes of other's behavior (p. 5). Kelley (1973) summarized attribution referring to the theory as merely "common sense" (p.108).

As perceivers of social behaviors, individuals are constantly trying to make sense of the world around them; we want to know why an organization chose a particular response strategy. Attribution theory is based on the belief that people make judgments about the causes of events, especially unexpected events with negative outcomes. Attribution theory suggests that when a particular behavior is perceived, the perceiver attempts to assign causality and attributes the behavior more strongly to either internal or external causes (Kelley, 1973). According to Kelley, behaviors may be attributed to internal causes such as dispositional characteristics, traits, or attitudes or to external causes such as the present situation of the organization.

During a crisis, people look for the cause of the crisis. The more a public assigns responsibility for a crisis to an organization, the more likely they are to act upon negative images towards an organization (Coombs, 2004). If the public decides that an organization is responsible for a crisis, then they will form negative impressions. Conversely, if the public feels that the

organization is not responsible for the crisis, the public will tend to view the organization as a victim of outside circumstance.

Attribution theory serves as one foundation for linking crisis communication response strategies to a particular crisis. By tapping into what the public is thinking and feeling, a company can avoid basing their actions solely on what the media is saying, and concentrate on what people really perceive as the problem. Developing the theory should improve crisis preparation. Practitioners should have lists of crisis response strategies, crisis situation factors to consider, and guidelines for matching the two.

According to Coombs and Holladay (1996), “crisis response strategies can lessen the reputational damage by mitigating the affective feelings generated by the attributions and/or altering the attributions themselves” (p. 292). The intentionality for a crisis, as well as whether the crisis was internal or external has quite a bit to do with the preparation a practitioner must have in order to choose the optimal response.

Coombs and Holladay (1996) urge to the merging of neoinstitutionalism, or the granting of legitimacy to an organization if stakeholders believe the organization is good, and attribution theory, or the relation of a situation and the selection of the communication strategy. This merge would be considered a symbolic approach, helping to shape an organization’s image by relating the crisis response strategy to the type of crisis that has occurred. As predicted by the symbolic approach, Coombs and Holladay found that “organizations suffered the least reputational damage when a matched crisis response strategy from the symbolic approach was used” and, “organizations that might be perceived as being able to prevent a crisis should have a more negative image than an organization perceived to have little or no control over a crisis” (p. 293). Therefore, when planning for a potential crisis, organizations should be aware of the potential for stakeholder backlash and negative image due to their perceived control over the situation.

One basic assumption of a process approach to crisis communication is that most crises can be anticipated and responses planned. In an article for the *Columbia Journal of World Business*, A. H. Reilly (1987) cites three conditions of an event which make it a crisis for an organization: it poses a threat to the institution's high priority goals; it restricts the amount of time available for response or it presents a surprise to decision-makers (p. 80).

Most experts would agree with all but the last of these characteristics. "The element of surprise is not a necessary component of a crisis," writes Ann Carney (1987). The key for public relations practitioners is to convince management that certain events can develop into a crisis if not handled effectively (p. 34). Timing may surprise the organization, according to Dilenschneider and Hyde (1985), "But crises can be anticipated, which is the next best thing to being planned. Furthermore, the firm's response to crisis can be planned and in enough scope and detail to minimize the damage of a potentially explosive situation" (p. 35).

Given the understanding that planning and preparation can alleviate some of the stress and surprise of many crisis situations, it is useful to move beyond a definition of crisis communication within the context of an open, interactive system. Joe Marconi (1997) suggests a new term, "crisis marketing," which he defines as the "strategy and technique and carrying on a successful marketing program before, during and after public or business sentiment has turned against you" (p. vii). By substituting the word "marketing" for "communication," we arrive at a definition for crisis communication that reflects the most important elements of a successful program: formulation of clear strategies and objectives, preparation and use of effective techniques and ongoing communication with key publics. Above all, the program will foster open, interactive, ongoing communication with its stakeholders to restore trust in the organization and achieve success in the wake of a crisis.

This approach to crisis communication within public relations has shifted away from the more traditional focus on damage control for a single event to the more process-oriented strategy generally referred to as reputation management. In an article for *Public Relations Journal*, Bill Patterson (1993) makes the case for communicating year-round with the same key audiences that would be affected by a crisis situation in order to build up a “reservoir of goodwill” to draw on in difficult times as part of the ongoing management of corporate reputation (p. 47).

Most of his contemporaries agree that much of an organization’s success in weathering an emergency lies not in the logistics of its crisis management planning, but in its day-to-day relationship with stockholders, employees, media and other internal and external audiences. “A company truly helps itself when it is proactive in its planning and open and candid about how it operates, its role in the community and its interaction with key publics” (Dougherty, 1992, p. 30).

Crisis communication then, is a function of reputation management. It is part of a continuous, ongoing process of communication with an organization’s most important stakeholders, upon whom the organization’s success and survival depends. The effectiveness of this communication process is determined by the level of trust and credibility created by the organization among its key audiences before, during and after the crisis.

Growth of the Crisis Communication Industry

Results of a survey conducted by the Institute for Crisis Management (ICM) in Louisville, Kentucky and reported in *Public Relations Journal*, show an increase in media coverage of business crises by 45% (1993, p. 7). The survey also reveals which industries received the most negative news reports: depository institutions, security brokers, oil producers, motor vehicle manufacturers and airlines.

Without question, a number of high-profile incidents have received extensive media attention in recent years. From the fall of the Enron Corporation to the Bridgestone/Firestone-Ford tire recall, reporting on corporate crises have captured headlines and generated a large body of writing not only on the events themselves, but also on the corporation's approach to handling each crisis.

But analysis indicates that the news media no longer are focusing on major incidents, attention is now turning more to business decisions and managerial behavior. Among the business crises examined in the ICM survey were government regulations, judicial actions, labor and management disputes and white-collar crime. "The softer types of crisis events are now much more likely and will be tougher to manage because they often involve corporate egos" (*Public Relations Journal*, 1993, p. 7). These events differ from more traditional emergencies in the past. In many instances, they develop more slowly, creating longer, drawn-out crises for the corporation. Often, they lack closure. Investigations and criminal proceedings may last years, extending the crisis long after the individuals involved have left the organization and failures in the system have already been corrected.

Studies such as these do not reveal an increase in the absolute number of business crises, only an increase in media coverage. The bottom line is that corporations must anticipate closer and more frequent scrutiny from more directions than ever before and they must deal with the possibility of a negative public image generated by media reporting on incidents of "crisis." Whether a crisis has actually occurred or is imminent is irrelevant; as long as the perception of crisis exists in the public eye, the result is the same.

The increase in public exposure for business crises can be explained by a number of factors, including a rise in citizen activist groups, expanded media space to fill, increased tracking to measure public opinion and new modes of high-speed communication (Berge, 1990). As new

technologies enter the marketplace, the upward trend in crisis coverage will likely continue. Not only does the media have more outlets for distribution, they and the general public also have more access to information via tools such as the internet, on-line databases, chat rooms, blogs, RSS feeds and electronic clipping services.

Author and crisis communication consultant John Birch (1994), for example, cautions corporate executives to review information on their companies already circulating on the internet because they may contain errors or inaccurate information that will be repeated again and again when new stories are developed recounting earlier problems or mishaps (p. 31).

Another contributing factor in the growth of crisis management, according to Birch (1994), is the globalization of many brands and products. "A company with global brands and a global image must be prepared to respond globally to defend them. A problem with one brand or formula in one country can quickly spread to other countries where it is available. The story now can spread within hours to all other markets and consumers will not discriminate between a poisoned chocolate bar in New York and one bought in Manila" (p. 31).

Perhaps the most convincing indicator of the role crisis communication plays in the corporate environment can be seen in the results of a survey conducted by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Over twelve hundred members of the PRSA corporate section were asked to report the types of services provided to corporate clients. The largest groups, 51%, indicated they had been retained to handle crisis management issues, leading every other category, including legislative affairs, product news and even media relations (Shell, 1991, p. 6).

The net effect of more media coverage on an expanded range of business issues, the introduction of new technologies and global branding is a growing need for crisis management and communication skills among executives, government officials and managers of organizations both large and small.

Crisis Communication and New Technology

A growing trend in the field of crisis communication is the reliance on new media, of which the Internet is the most common, as a prominent public relations tool. With this growing relationship of public relations professionals and the Internet it is important to understand how the Internet impacts the field of crisis communication.

When the Internet was developed over thirty years ago; it was a network of computers used predominantly by the government. It was not until the 1990s that the general public and the business world discovered the Internet. Individuals and businesses began using the Internet for sending and receiving electronic mail, contributing to discussion groups and gathering information (Wilcox, 2004). Business also began creating their own presence on the Web in the form of company web sites. Many of these first Web sites were simply an electronic version of a company's printed materials, such as brochures and annual reports. Now company web sites have evolved to include more detailed information, more sophisticated technologies, as well as incorporate graphics and animation throughout the site (Holtz, 1999).

Today the Internet is a tool of commercial services offering countless products and services to businesses and individuals. It is also an electronic meeting place, where people can tap into world news, entertainment, and communicate via e-mail with friends and family twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. E-mail, newsgroups, chat rooms, and the World Wide Web are all parts of the digital communication system that exists in "cyberspace."

Communication moves much faster through cyberspace than through electronic media that rely on older technologies. It operates around the world, in various time zones at all times of the day, enabling instant two-way communication. Today, the World Wide Web is the fastest growing component of the Internet (Bobbitt, 1995). With the rapid growth in popularity over the

past decade, the Internet attracts a wide variety of users. However, this medium still only reaches those who are connected to it, and not the masses that are still served by print, radio and television.

Internet demographic records show that in the last part of the 1990's Internet use has easily more than doubled in size with more than 12.8 million hosts. The number of Internet domains more than quadrupled with an estimated 9 million users domestically and 42 million worldwide, and the Internet has become one of the most popular forms of new media. Despite all the numbers, one thing remains clear - the Internet grows at an astounding rate as more users, countries and companies connect to the Internet through the schools, libraries, classrooms, and variety of mobile devices (Kantor & Neubarth, 1996).

This medium differs from more conventional media in several ways. The Internet is an open, dynamic, information exchanging media system, characterized by the unique attributes it embodies (speed, fluidity, cerebral), the relationships between the elements (company web sites, public newsgroups, advertisers, marketers and public relations professionals) and its interdependence with its environment. The Internet is timelier than conventional media. Online newsgroups can debate an issue online and move on to the next hot topic virtually overnight, long before a television or radio station can schedule, or a newspaper or magazine can go to press with a special segment to address what may already be old news.

Over the past 15 years the Internet has created a digital revolution. This new technology has had an impact across the globe on everything from whom we communicate with, to how and when we communicate with them. More important, the Internet has changed the field of public relations (Wilcox, 2004).

For public relations professionals, the Internet's significance as a medium lies in its ability to process communication: to retrieve and disseminate information quickly and easily, to

offer a new medium through which to promote their company or clients, to impact relationships with other media, to monitor competitors and to talk directly with consumers in key publics.

The introduction of new media offers public relations professionals a new opportunity to manage corporate crisis because of the wide-ranging audience and ability to provide worldwide users with information at any time. Because the occurrences of corporate crisis and the growth of new technology are certain trends for the future, this makes it extremely important to accumulate a body of knowledge through accurate observations and descriptions of a social phenomenon (Perry, Taylor & Doerfel, 2003).

Should an issue erupt into an actual crisis, its control and resolution may best be achieved by implementing the tenets of the classic model of crisis management. Some examples of crisis management policies include: One, tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Two, tell it first, tell it quickly, before the media has a chance to tell your story for you, right or wrong. Third, take responsibility, and tell the public what you are going to do to rectify the situation. Finally, promise the public that the company will exercise caution and implement appropriate measures to reduce the possibility of similar incidents reoccurring (Fearn-Banks, 2001).

As a communication channel, the Internet fits into this traditional model for crisis communication and offers several advantages: The organization under siege can author and control its messages on the Internet better than it can in conventional media. With the vast amount of online information available today, organizations conduct environmental scanning to prepare for a crisis. Organizations can search through enormous amounts of information and create effective issues management strategies to detect problems before they become crisis.

Public relations professionals are able to quickly research the background causes and effects of nearly any situations that pose a potential threat, tapping into all kinds of databases:

business, economic, financial, environmental, scientific, healthcare, government, political, public service, and manufacturing. A public relations professional can quickly gather an impressive sum of data to support the facts, thus convincing its shareholders and the public that the organization is the undisputed expert on the issue, as well as in its field, and that the organization's story is accurate. Additionally, because the Internet is the playground of choice for academic, scientific and financial researchers, savvy public relations professionals can also invite such experts into the discussion to support the organization's perspective on the issue. Computer-mediated communication can also help companies communicate decisions and messages quickly during a crisis to stakeholders and generate feedback from the public. The Internet offers organizations one more resource through which they can influence their environments (Perry et al. 2003)

Public relations professionals must be as computer proficient in this age of new media as they were in telecommunications and media savvy. "Public relations strategists long accustomed to monitoring print and broadcast media for references to their clients, now are finding they must scan the Internet as well" (Kalish, 1996, p. 30). Computers have broadened the scope and expanded the challenges of the profession, thus, "educating staff about cyberspace is a key challenge for public relations firms today" (Dorf, 1995, p. 31). Online communication can be favorable, or it can create a disaster. "As online forums have proliferated, they have become breeding grounds for public relations fiascoes. In freewheeling, anonymous online discussions, incendiary messages often blast corporations and their products" (Cahill, 1996, p. 30). Thus, the Internet must be monitored and managed regularly for the organization's safety, making today's public relations professional a twenty-four hour virus detector, ready and able to neutralize damage at the first sign of trouble.

The public relations professional has the immediate opportunity to present their client's perspective on the issues to its shareholders, customers, investors, vendors, regulatory agencies, competitors, and employees before the media can shape it, via its website and the newsgroups it monitors and hosts. The media rely heavily on information provided by public relations professionals for their stories, and would likely access the organization's website for more information. Web sites are similar to other public relations communication tools such as press releases, public service announcements, op-ed pieces or brochures (Mickey, 1998). However, it differs from these tools because it is able to deliver messages to a mass audience without being filtered or altered by a gatekeeper such as an editor or journalist (White & Raman, 1999).

The web not only allows practitioners to tailor communications, but it allows the practitioner to directly reach the target audience through a mass medium. One of the most useful and valuable aspects of the web is its ability to post unfiltered messages about itself and make it available to anyone, anywhere and anytime (Marken, 2001). Using the resources of the Internet, the organization can provide the influential media with its side of the story quickly, setting the facts straight from the start. This allows a controlled message to directly reach the target audience through a mass medium, which was non-existent until the late 1990s (Hill & White, 2000).

Web sites can also be a strategic communication tool for a public relations practitioner during a crisis. The public relations professional can promote the organization's web site as the primary resource for up-to-date news on the situation as it progresses. Through the web, a public relations professional has a highly interactive medium for communication with the companies various target audiences, such as employees, media, consumers and stockholders, as well as maintain the relationship with the target audiences (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

By participating in online newsgroups or blogs that might also be carrying the story, one can continue to direct the public and organization shareholders to the web site for this purpose. This effort to be fully engaged in public discourse concerning the issue demonstrates that the organization is willing to take responsibility for the potential crisis, or at the very least, for the proper management and resolution of it. If the situation warrants, a public relations professional can bring a member of top management into online newsgroup discussions to assuage concerned parties and strengthen the perception of ownership of the situation. Although newsgroup messages are written in a first person, one-to-one format, the chief executive officer must bear in mind that an audience of thousands might be listening in. This can be an effective technique to reach the masses with the organization's message delivered personally by top management, and without the conventional media's ability to take messages out of context.

With the growing frequency of corporate crisis and with the growing trend of Internet use, this creates an opportunity for public relations professionals to build and maintain a high profile for their clients or companies. Internet communication can educate and enlighten, as well as promote ideas, products, people, and companies all at speeds faster than conventional methods. As rewarding as the Internet sounds, there are still risks involved. Anyone with access to a computer, whether professional or prankster, can represent themselves as any individual, company or organization.

The problem of negative publicity and how to manage it is a critical one for today's communicators. Negative Internet publicity, or a "cybercrisis", occurs when any online communication appears of a nature that defames or has the potential to defame, or cause emotional and/or economic distress to a person, product, or company. An Internet crisis communication strategy is defined as a plan, method or series of maneuvers implemented online

by a public relations professional to obtain a specific goal or result, such as minimizing and/or eliminating an online threat to the professional's client.

The problem of cyber-crisis management is complicated by the fact that no one entity owns or governs the Internet. Thus, control of the medium is becoming an issue for professional communicators. "Traditional information gatekeepers of all breeds: public relations, marketing communicators, and media people are losing control as ordinary folks become regular Internet users talking among themselves" (Donath, 1995, p. 6). Therefore, cyber attacks, whether accurately based, or not, can reach millions in minutes. The online public has few resources available on which to judge the validity of the attack or the credibility of the attacker. "Information is often disseminated on the Internet without being reviewed as thoroughly as in traditional media... bad news, true or not, can move so much more quickly electronically" than via any other medium (Kalish, 1996, p. 30). Fortunately this problem is observable and amenable to treatment with the right strategy or strategies.

Finally, the Web also serves as a research tool for public relations professionals. Business trends, news stories, analyst reports and background information on a particular industry can be researched through the web. The web is also useful for audience research and competitor analysis research (Ryan, 1999). Also, by keeping up to date on trends and issues, public relations professionals can also anticipate media inquiries on topics related to their client and issues before they manifest into a crisis. Because communicators can access all types of up-to-the-minute data from across the world, the Internet can be an effective tool for issues management as well as crisis communication.

Issues Management

Since by definition a crisis cannot be fully anticipated, full and complete preparation for a crisis is virtually impossible. Therefore, a good offense may be a organization's best defense:

Public Relations professionals should practice issues management, which precedes crisis management and lays the foundation for successful crisis management strategies. Issues management is part of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations excellence defined by Grunig and Hunt:

“In issues management, the public relations department anticipates the issues that are potential crises and ranks them in order of possible damage to the organization. Then strategies and tactics are developed and implemented to lessen the likelihood of crises. The crucial element here is early identification of potential crises.”

(Fearn-Banks, 2001, p. 15)

According to Lauzen (1997) those public relations practitioners involved in issues management are strongly and positively linked to involvement in dominant coalition decision making. Crisis communication literature suggests that all crises, long before they occur, send out a trail of early warning signals that indicate the likelihood of a crisis is quite strong (Mitroff, Diamond & Alpaslan, 2006). Environmental scanning is the communication activity some practitioners utilize so organizations learn about trends, signals and events in their environment. The scanning process alone does not help organizations adapt to their environments, it is only within the context of issues management that the gathering of information is translated into strategic decision making.

Chet Burchett, senior vice president of Edelman Public Relations Worldwide, suggests that both primary and secondary, and corporate and public issues must be identified. Primary issues are those that affect the public, such as the potential impact on a community, the health and safety of employees, and the perception of safety and reliability of your product or service by

local citizens and customers. Secondary issues are corporate issues, such as whether the company will be sued, how quickly business will return to normal, and the impact, if any, on stock price, customers and shareholders' confidence (Albrecht, 1996).

Veteran public relations professionals recognize value of issues management as a preventative measure. Burchett also strongly suggests "you get your ducks in a row long before any crisis occurs. This includes doing some careful planning."

Planning for a Crisis

Surprisingly, the number of corporations prepared to handle a public crisis remains relatively low. Western Union initiated a survey of public relations directors at the Fortune 1,000 industrial companies and Fortune 500 service companies to determine how many actually had a written plan to communicate quickly in a crisis. Only 54% responded in the affirmative, based on a 27% response rate. In 2000, another study was conducted with U.S. companies and produced similar results. Only about 40 to 50% of U.S. companies were found to have crisis communication plans (Penrose, 2000).

The University of Kansas repeated the survey, with only a marginal improvement in the results: 56% answered positively and only 62.8% of these firms had actually used the plan or conducted training with it in the last 24 months (Guth, 1993). More than ten years later, a similar survey conducted in 2006 of U.S. public relations practitioners found that only three quarters of those surveyed had a written crisis communication plan and that these organizations, as a whole, were reasonably prepared to engage in crisis communication (Cloudman & Hallahan, 2006).

In the Western Union study, corporations that perceived themselves to be at a "higher risk" of industrial or environmental accidents, such as utilities and transportation companies, were more likely to have a crisis communication plan. Given the media's growing appetite for

other types of crisis stories, it is easy to see how unsuspecting “lower risk” companies could find themselves exposed to greater public scrutiny as well. The media’s broadening focus on crisis reporting requires companies to expand their own list of potential crises in order to develop an effective response.

Lack of planning can actually increase an organization’s potential for crisis, according to Ian Mitroff and Pearson (1993), Director of the University of Southern California’s Center for Crisis Management. Mitroff distinguishes between what he calls “crisis-prone” and “crisis-prepared” companies. “Executives in crisis-prepared organizations consider their firms not only as productive systems but also as potentially destructive systems... they have developed the ability to imagine the worst, the unthinkable, the unspeakable, as a way of doing everything possible to prevent such events” (p. 115).

The distinction between companies that anticipate and prepare for crisis and those that do not also extends to those that have made provisions for integrating communication into their planning: “Crisis prepared organizations recognize that unless public relations is integrated with other actions, it may backfire and cause an even worse crisis. Crisis prone organizations are often over concerned with their public images and they confuse the content of their messages with the reality of their crises” (Mitroff et al, 1993, p. 121).

It is essential, not only to have a crisis communication plan, but also to incorporate it into the organization’s overall management strategy as part of an integrated systems approach. As an open system, the organization must exchange information internally between hierarchical units and function as a single organism in order to be effective in dealing with changes in the environment such as those presented in crisis situations. Without linkage and exchange, one unit becomes isolated from the rest, increasing the potential for breakdown in communication and chaos in the organization.

Michael Regester (1989) places high value on communication planning as part of the management process. "Effective management of communication is vital as effective management of the crisis itself. After all, external perceptions about the crisis, among key audiences, will depend entirely on what they hear, see and read about it" (p. 101).

Given the advantages of crisis preparedness and the greater potential for negative media exposure in the current business environment, it is difficult to explain the lack of planning demonstrated by the more "crisis-prone" organizations, such as those in the Western Union and University of Kansas surveys. For some managers, discussions about crisis scenarios and contingencies seem to accentuate the negative and are therefore discouraged. It is also possible the others do not perceive the likelihood of crisis and therefore do not feel the need for an exceptional level of preparedness.

Yet even in the absence of crisis, most companies face a host of barriers to communication with both internal and external audiences. In a crisis, these barriers are magnified and can lead to a breakdown in the communication flow with key stakeholders. Geary W. Sikich (1993) lists a number of these barriers to effective communication in a crisis: lack of a communication plan; lack of a spokesperson; lack of a solution to the problem; fear of accountability; fear of revealing proprietary information; fear of legal implications; desire to avoid panic and desire to protect the corporation and product (p. 236-7).

The purpose of any crisis communication plan therefore must be to overcome these barriers and establish an open channel of communication with the target internal and external audiences which make up the entire system in which the organization functions. By establishing a program of response in advance, including what should be said and by whom, members of the organization will experience less conflict over questions of accountability and release of proprietary information and they will avoid the tendency to panic under stress. As Michael

Regester (1989) puts it, "Crisis management is about seizing the initiative, taking control of what has happened before it engulfs the company. Planning for a crisis is the key to corporate survival" (p. 38). Without planning and preparation, organizations in crisis face the most overwhelming task of trying to resolve major problems with a product or service while they are undergoing intense investigation by the media or other external entities.

A. H. Reilly (1987) has compiled a list of six facets to measure an organization's crisis readiness and it is interesting to note how many of these are dependent upon effective communication with internal and external audiences. Reilly evaluates readiness based upon: the organization's quick response ability; how informed the managers are; managers' access to crisis management resources; adequacy of strategic crisis planning; media management capabilities in a crisis; and managers' perceived likelihood of a crisis occurring (p. 81).

Three of the six relate directly to communications planning, including quick response ability, information to managers and media management. Access to crisis management resources should certainly include communication resources and strategic planning for crises would not be complete without taking communication issues into consideration. Even management's perception of the likelihood of crisis can be directly influenced by a communication plan that considers possible crisis scenarios and encourages management to prepare for such events.

Crisis readiness is affected by an organization's communication capabilities, the strength of its internal communication channels, its planning and preparation before the crisis occurs and its media management skills. All have an immediate impact on the organization's ability to manage a crisis effectively because of the direct influence these factors have on information flow to key publics. This information and the way it is received and integrated by the target audiences is critical in shaping the attitudes of the organization's most important constituents. Information flow is also an indicator of the openness of the organization and its ability to adjust to sudden

changes in the environment. If the organization represents an open, fluid system, it will have the resources in place to actively communicate with internal and external constituencies on a regular and consistent basis, thus increasing its chances of survival even when facing a major crisis.

In summarizing the issues related to crisis communication planning, it is important to note that despite indicators of a rise in crisis reporting by the media, nearly half of the companies surveyed in recent years continue to operate without an established plan for communicating in these situations. The absence of planning leaves these organizations unprepared to deal with the public exposure that accompanies a crisis and may in fact increase the likelihood of crisis under Mitroff's et al. (1993) definition of a "crisis-prone" organization. Rather than functioning as open, dynamic systems, these organizations have become static and closed to interaction with their environment. By avoiding or ignoring issues related to crisis communication, they face many barriers that can be overcome through the development of a crisis communication plan.

Corporate Culture and Crisis Communication

In his book on crisis management issues, Ian Mitroff and Pauchant (1990) suggest a similarity between the fall of Macbeth in Shakespeare's classic work and the equally tragic failure of some corporate executives when faced with a major crisis.

Macbeth was not destined to fall by ambition alone, but by his belief in his own invincibility, regardless of his actions. Many managers, especially those isolated at the highest levels, have also allowed themselves to believe their corporation, by virtue of size or reputation can remain insulated from public criticism in a crisis. And many of these same corporate leaders have had to recognize too late that their actions, or in many cases inaction, in a crisis have resulted in severe harm to the company's reputation and real losses to the bottom line (Mitroff et al. 1990).

At the center of this discussion is corporate culture and questions about how it affects a company's ability to deal with crisis or how it influences communication. Denison (1997) defines corporate culture as "the underlying values, beliefs and principles that serve as a foundation for an organization's management system as well as the set of management practices and behaviors that both exemplify and reinforce those basic principles" (p.2). In his book, *Managing the Corporate Image*, James G. Gray (1986) argues that corporate culture plays a major role in determining an organization's approach to managing a crisis. He suggests that these basic principles will influence the organization's relationship with key constituencies, define responsibilities and decide how the organization will communicate internally and externally during the crisis.

To support his position, Gray (1986) cites the landmark Tylenol case, which began with the tampering deaths of two customers in the Chicago area in September, 1982. At the time, Tylenol controlled 35% of the adult over-the-counter analgesic market, generating \$450 million in annual sales and contributing 15% to manufacturer Johnson & Johnson's overall profits. Public exposure to the crisis was widespread; studies showed that 94% of consumers were aware of problems with the product at the time.

Despite the seriousness of the incidents (seven people ultimately died from using tampered products) and the extent of the coverage, Johnson & Johnson was credited with highly successful management of the crisis, which serves today as one of the most widely studied examples of crisis imposed upon an organization from external sources. Because of the corporation's skill in handling the incident, Tylenol recovered 70% of its earlier market share within five months of the disaster (Regester, 1989).

No organization could have planned for a tragedy of this size, according to James Gray it was Johnson & Johnson's corporate philosophy that enabled the company to manage the crisis

effectively, protect their corporate reputation and return their beleaguered product to viability in the marketplace. Because Johnson & Johnson had a corporate culture and management encouraged open communication, accountability and responsiveness of constituents it was programmed for success even under crisis conditions (Gray, 1986).

As an important element in corporate culture, corporate philosophy also frequently receives prominent consideration in the crisis plans of some of the world's leading companies. Dow Canada, for example, offers the simple, five-point policy for communicating in a crisis, based on its philosophy: (1) honesty first, foremost and always; (2) express empathy and compassion toward those involved; (3) be open, accessible and candid when dealing with the media; (4) insure timeliness in all communications; (5) be proactive, not simply reactive (Reger, 1989, p. 138).

Robert Doughty, former manager of external communications for United Airlines, also believes corporate philosophy is a top priority. During his tenure at the airline, he insisted that a clear statement of the company's position appear on the first page of any crisis communication plan, describing how it wanted to be perceived by its publics as caring toward victims and as cooperative with the media (Traverso, 1993).

These examples of the favorable influences of corporate culture are often contrasted with others where negative forces in the organization (denial and lack of accountability, aloofness and restraint of public access to information, or even the dissemination of false or misleading statements) have taken control of a company's communication policy. Weaknesses and inconsistencies in corporate culture frequently contribute to the failure of a communication plan designed to restore credibility in the organization at a time of crisis.

Examples abound, reflecting a tendency among some major companies to close themselves off to open interaction with key stakeholders during a crisis, thereby exacerbating the

incident and extending the crisis beyond its initial impact. Exxon Corporation's handling of the Valdez oil spill is often cited in this context. Many analysts fault the company's slowness in accepting responsibility and the inaccessibility of its top executives for the loss of public confidence in the early stages of the crisis (Kaufmann, 1994). Like Macbeth, they seemed unconvinced of their vulnerability and unaware of the approaching public image disaster.

In Bhopal, India, a cloud of poison gas from a Union Carbide plant killed more than 1200 people in one night. Not only was it a terrible human loss, it also became an extended public relations nightmare as the chairman of Union Carbide, in an attempt to rescue his company's fallen image, arrived in India to inspect the damage, only to be arrested by local authorities and thrown in jail. The chairman's decision to go to India under the circumstances may not have been appropriate, but the disaster raised much deeper questions about the philosophy of a respected American corporation that would produce dangerous materials in a foreign plant without the usual safety precautions afforded workers at home. Suddenly, communicators were dealing not only with the effects of a major industrial accident; their entire corporate culture was coming under fire (Regester, 1989).

These and many other cases confirm the significant role corporate culture plays in an organization's approach to crisis communication. Corporate culture may have a direct influence on a organization's ability to recognize emerging crises and it may shape its relationship with the media, employees, customers and other stakeholders during and after the event.

Corporations are not monolithic structures and personalities often exert a defining influence on culture as well, especially the personalities of top executives. Managers respond differently to crisis, based on characteristics such as management style, personality, knowledge, skills and attitudes. An active manager may be quick to respond but also may be more prone to anxiety and stress than someone with a more passive personality. Judgment too can be affected

by the degree of detachment or pressure sensitivity of the individual (Milburn, Schuler & Watman, 1983a). Gerald Meyers, former chairman of American Motors Corporation, sums it up this way: "When a company gets into trouble and that trouble is made public, the way its executives manage the release of information and handle themselves in dealing with the media can be as important as their business decisions" (p. 45).

Because corporate culture evolves over many years and requires long-term adjustment to make changes, it is critical for the communications professional to evaluate and understand existing conditions and take them into account when developing a crisis communication plan. If obstacles prevent open communication or breaks in the lines of accountability these must be addressed prior to the onset of the crisis. If areas of inconsistency or ethical issues pose a threat to the organization's reputation, these should also be identified and dealt with as soon as possible to avoid undermining the organization's position in a critical situation. Although it may not be possible to accomplish changes in the organization's philosophical culture in the short term, the professional communicator must be fully aware of potential problems and take steps to reduce these barriers to communication.

Finally, in yet another example of the dynamic process of interaction between an organization and its environment, it is important to note that corporate culture not only influences a crisis, but the reverse is also true. That is, a crisis and its outcome can have profound effects on management systems and practices, as well as on basic beliefs and values within the corporation, bringing about changes that otherwise might not have been possible. Through self-regulation an open, dynamic system must recognize the need for change and be prepared to recreate itself in response to new demands in the environment even when these influences require modifications in deeply rooted values within the corporate culture.

Because they often expose the organization's weaknesses, crises can serve as a catalyst for transformation. Gerald Meyers and Holusha (1987) identify the following as potential advantages of crisis to the culture of a corporation: heroes are born; change is accelerated; latent problems are faced; people can be changed; new strategies evolve; early warning systems develop and new competitive edges appear (p. 28).

To this list, we might add the advantages of crisis for corporate communication: awareness of potential crises is heightened and need for crisis preparedness is intensified; barriers to communication are recognized and can be reduced or removed; communication with key publics is increased; weaknesses/inconsistencies in corporate culture are identified and can be corrected; crisis communication plan is tested and improved; and if managed successfully, credibility with media and public is enhanced.

From this vantage point, it is possible to see a crisis from the perspective of "opportunity," as implied in the Chinese definition. The Chinese symbol for their word crisis, called 'wei-ji', is actually a combination of two words, 'danger' and 'opportunity' (Fink, 2000). Still, no one is suggesting, from a communications standpoint, that the organization should seek crisis to achieve these ends, although there are a number of authors who actively promote crisis as a management tool to revive lagging companies.

For his part, Meyers et al. (1987) sees one aspect of corporate culture as most worthy of preservation in a crisis: "Whenever the public at large is involved, the most important thing is to protect your credibility. With it, you can recover; without it, you are in for lasting damage" (p. 234). If asked, Meyers undoubtedly would congratulate Johnson & Johnson on its decision to pull Tylenol off the market, regardless of the short-term cost, in order to preserve its credibility with the public. And he certainly would have more critical words for Exxon and Union Carbide

who sacrificed credibility in favor of short-term cost savings and ultimately paid a much higher price with the loss of public trust.

Does Crisis Communication Work?

After considering the case for crisis communication planning and its impact on corporate reputation and corporate culture, it becomes essential to gauge the effects of crisis communication on the most important element in the communication process: the target audiences.

Porter/Novelli public relations conducted a survey of 1,000 people, asking them to recall certain business crises and indicate how they felt the company and the media handled these incidences. The results, published in the *Public Relations Journal*, reveal some of the difficulties communicators face when trying to manage a crisis. Seventy-five percent of those surveyed said they felt companies refuse to take responsibility for the crises they create and 57% believed that companies withhold negative information or lie when dealing with the public. Only 19% of the respondents said companies are totally truthful in a crisis situation.

Television was considered the most believable source of information in the study (34%), followed by newspapers (29%), magazines (22%) and radio (12%). In a positive development for the corporate side, 89% said the media blow crises out of proportion with their coverage. But while 23% indicated they trust journalists, only 9% felt they could trust company executives.

It is interesting to note that 95% claimed to be more offended to learn that a company lied about their actions than by the crisis itself and 65% said declining to comment always implies guilt. Overall, a majority agreed that crises have a lasting effect on their behavior as consumers and their intent to purchase products (Shell, 1993).

The numbers produced by this survey, though unscientific, appear demonstrative enough to reveal the broad contours of public opinion. In most instances, the percentages reflect strong attitudes in one direction or another, with a few exceptions in the middle. Although the public relations firm undoubtedly used these results to convince potential clients of the need for crisis communication services, there is no indication that the survey was designed to intentionally mislead or misrepresent the participants.

The fact that three quarters of the respondents found corporate spokespersons unwilling to accept blame for a crisis may be more of a reflection of the litigious nature of contemporary American society than of any organized effort to deceive the public. Legal counsel most often advises against any admission of culpability, a subject that will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

The suggestion by more than half of the participants in the survey that companies are withholding information or in fact lying to the public indicates a serious credibility problem. The idea that one quarter of the participants trust journalists, while nine out of ten admit at the same time that the media are distorting and exaggerating the news is striking. What is more disconcerting for business executives is the finding that only one in ten in the general public are prepared to trust companies in crisis situations. Clearly, the corporation is entering the crisis with an immediate credibility deficit and must act quickly to gain public confidence.

However, the issue of establishing credibility by means of full disclosure is not without controversy. Jeffrey Kaufmann (1994) and colleagues Idalene Kesner and Thomas Hazen at the Indiana University Graduate School of Business conducted in-depth research using case studies to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of full disclosure during crisis situations (Kaufmann, 1994). The authors concurred that full disclosure at the outset of a crisis enhances

the organization's ability to maintain credibility, limits the effects of long-term damage to the organization's reputation and generally leads to better relations with the media.

The assumption in these cases is that all information eventually will emerge anyway and full disclosure is the most expedient way to avoid prolonging the problem. The Tylenol recall (Johnson & Johnson) is one such case that greatly benefited from a full disclosure strategy.

But there are also weaknesses in the case for full disclosure. The potential for litigation rises, as well as any associated costs, and the company runs a risk of drawing increased scrutiny from government regulators. Most important, one cannot always assume that all information about the incident will emerge or that facts will remain unchanged after further investigation.

Pressures like these often tempt corporate executives to withhold information or take a "go-slow" approach to releasing it in order to limit negative exposure for their organization. There are examples of corporations that suffered enormous loss of public trust, as well as financial resources from the following strategy. A. H. Robin's executives opted not to disclose problems with the company's Dalkon Shield product until the weight of public attention forced a complete withdrawal from the market. The decision by Exxon's chairman not to appear in public for nearly a week following the Valdez oil spill contributed heavily to the company's public image problems thereafter (Kaufmann, 1994).

To disclose or not to disclose? Kaufmann (1994) suggests asking the following questions in reaching a disclosure decision:

- Could nondisclosure be fatal or lead to further inquiry?
- Is your organization culprit or victim?
- Are fictions surrounding the crisis worse than the facts?
- Can your organization afford to respond after the crisis?
- Can your organization afford not to respond?

(p. 35)

The answers to these questions should be weighed carefully and objectively. Failure to respond effectively to public perception of crisis increases the long-term loss to credibility and reputation. Losses that cannot be offset by short term measures to save face or dodge media inquiries. As former Vice President of Hill & Knowlton and author of *Communication When Your Company is Under Siege*, Marion Pinsdorf (1999) has some sound advice for corporate decision-makers in crisis situations: "Almost every crisis-experienced public relations practitioner has one cardinal rule, particularly when public safety is involved: tell it all and tell it fast. Not only does this minimize the fear because the public is informed but it means that the news makes headlines once" (p. 45).

The overall impression yielded by the Porter/Novelli survey is that corporations are not doing a very good job handling crisis situations and that they tend to function more as static, closed systems isolated from their environment, than as open, interactive systems that are capable of adapting to change. Efforts to provide information to the media, to appear open and candid, to establish credibility and accountability seem to be falling short. Confirmation that consumers are indeed influenced by the outcome of a crisis, as seen in this paper, is reason enough to want to continue improving the way companies deal with such incidents. At the very least, the results should serve as a call for better planning in anticipation of crisis and better preparation for facing a highly skeptical public in a constant effort to maintain system integrity and ensure the survivability of the organization in a continuously changing environment.

Chapter III

Developing a Crisis Communication Plan

Thus far, the discussion has centered on the significance of crisis communication planning to the contemporary organization as a means to protect and manage reputations and to ensure an uninterrupted flow of information to key stakeholders in crisis situations. With these goals in mind, the crisis communication plan can be seen as an effective tool for improving crisis readiness and for overcoming barriers to communication with important constituencies.

The need for crisis communication planning is underscored by factors in the current environment that increase the chances of negative exposure for organizations, such as the growth of media outlets and the development of new technologies. Equally important to the planning process is an understanding of some of the inherent problems the organization faces when communicating in a crisis. These include the effects of corporate culture on preparedness and on the message itself, the risks of full disclosure and the likelihood of a pre-existing credibility deficit resulting from widespread public skepticism towards corporate efforts at managing public image during crises.

Next the discussion turns to the steps necessary in developing a crisis communication plan. Returning to the definition extrapolated from Marconi's concept of "crisis marketing," we recall crisis communication as "the strategy and technique of carrying on a successful communications program before, during and after public or business sentiment has turned against you." In other words, the plan must take into account the entire process of communication in crisis situations, from before the event takes place to the recovery stages afterwards.

Mitroff et al. (1993) actually identify five distinct phases of a crisis: signal detection; preparation and prevention; damage containment; recovery and learning (p. 10). Each of these phases is integrated into the following section, which considers the major step in developing a plan for communication actions before (signal detection, preparation and prevention), during (damage containment) and after (recovery, learning) a public crisis occurs.

Before the Crisis

Johnson & Johnson serves as an early role model for crisis management planning. Since this crisis a great deal has been learned about how and why crises occur. Even more important the components of an ideal or best practice crisis management program are better understood. A crisis management plan is not just an emergency response plan, nor is it thinking about or planning for particular types of crises in isolation from one another. Successful crisis management is thinking about and planning for a wide range of crises and especially for their interactions (Mitroff et al. 2006).

An ideal crisis management program has four essential components, according to Mitroff et al. (2006):

- Preparation for a broad range of crisis types;
- Mechanisms for picking up and amplifying the early warning signals;
- A well trained, interdisciplinary crisis management team;
- Inclusion of a wide variety of both internal and external stakeholders. (p. 62)

One of the first keys to successful planning, according to many experts is identifying potential crises before they emerge. Dilenschneider et al. (1985) recommend developing a “catalogue of potential crises” (p. 36), and Carney (1993) suggests that managers conduct an organizational audit to evaluate areas where their company may be susceptible to adverse publicity (p. 35).

A successful crisis communication plan exposes weaknesses within the current organization and builds capabilities to deal with a wide variety of situations (Mitroff et al. 2006). This enables the crisis communication team to enact strategies with speed and efficiency during a crisis and learn from the experience how to improve the organization. Several different approaches to identifying potential problem areas can be taken.

One option suggests listing events that might lead to crisis, including past incidents of crisis or near-crisis proportions, and then prioritizing these according to the likelihood of occurrence. Another possibility is to group similar problem areas together and develop a response to at least one crisis in each “family” (Mitroff et al. 1993). This is the approach taken by American Motors Corporation, which divided potential business crises into nine categories and established a crisis action plan for each group: changes in public perception; sudden market shifts; product failures; management succession; cash drain; labor strife; outside attack; adverse international events and government regulation/deregulation of industry (Pinsdorf, 1987). Yet another approach essential in this process involves planning for worst-case scenarios. By anticipating the most serious occurrence possible, the organization is able to prepare for every contingency up to and including the most extreme event.

All of these techniques, identifying families of issues, reviewing past incidents and considering worst-case scenarios, can be employed to develop a working list of potential crises that serve as a basis for the crisis communication plan. Contemplating these possibilities raises awareness about potential problems and can help the organization prepare by drawing attention to warning signals that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Of course it is impossible to prepare for every conceivable type of crisis. Most crises do not consist of a single, isolated event but instead involve a complex chain of events that the

originating crisis sets off. Nonetheless, the best prepared organizations have learned how to form a crisis portfolio of potential crises (Mitroff et al. 2006).

Crisis communication must be undertaken and practiced systematically because crises are systematic in both their nature and impacts. On the other hand, it is impossible to prepare for every conceivable crisis. According to Mitroff et al. (2006), proactive organizations attempt to create a broad portfolio of crisis risks to the organization, thus creating a broad crisis portfolio. This portfolio is based on broad sample scenarios; however no crisis happens exactly as it has been planned for. Thus the plans are less important than the ability to improvise during an actual crisis. The better prepared an organization is for a crisis, the better able it is to adapt to whatever particular form the crisis takes (Mitroff et al. 2006).

A second key to developing a successful plan relies on the organization's ability to identify its most important constituents. Members of the crisis team at Hill & Knowlton recommend that companies first identify potential problems, then identify affected audiences before attempting to develop appropriate messages (Pinsdorf, 1987, p. 43). Dougherty describes the importance of identifying key publics early in the planning process, along with Mitroff and others who consider this one of the main ingredients of any useful crisis communication plan.

Who are the stakeholders? In the broadest terms, they include all parties affected by the crisis -- the media, government and the public at large. This definition can be narrowed to focus on groups with a vested interest in the outcome of the crisis -- stockholders, customers, suppliers, government regulators, employees and management. The circle widens depending on the nature of the crisis to include other companies in the industry affected by the event, as well as trade organizations, unions and other related institutions. "Organizations are composed of a variety of constituencies, including employees, investors, consumers and so forth. It is important for system effectiveness that organizations strive to satisfy the various and divergent needs of these

constituents if they are to continue receiving necessary support and cooperation” (Milburn et al. 1983a).

Stakeholders in an organization can be both internal and external groups and include: unions, competitive organizations, regulatory agencies, employees, special-interest groups, law enforcement, stockholders, and so forth. The best prepared organizations factor into their crisis communication plans, policies and procedures for how these various stakeholder groups are apt to both help and hinder the organizations communication response (Mitroff et al. 2006).

Through it all winds the media, not stakeholders in the organization and with no direct interest in the outcome of the crisis, other than a professional obligation to get the story and a self-declared concern for public welfare. Despite the lack of stakeholder status in the narrower sense the media exert a powerful influence in their role as observer, reporter and information gatekeeper during the crisis. Because of their impact on public perception of the outcome, the media becomes one of the key audience groups targeted in the crisis communication plan.

Failure to anticipate and respond to the media’s role in a crisis can have a far-reaching effect on the image projected by the organization to other key audiences. “Bad news will not go away if you refuse to comment on it,” says Carole Howard (2006) in her media relation’s text, *On Deadline*. “In fact, lack of cooperation with the media may expand the story and make it last longer than you can handle the crisis and get it over with” (p. 129).

Once target audiences have been identified, key messages can be developed for each. In the pre-crisis planning stage, these messages take the form of objectives and provide a framework for communicating in a crisis situation. Details of the actual event will shape specific messages that must be developed when the crisis plan is set in motion.

The importance of establishing communication objectives however should not be underrated. These objectives are a clear statement of purpose and direct the work of the

communications team during the crisis. In its briefing materials for the media, Delta Air Lines begins with a concise statement of its objectives: "Delta Air Lines' philosophy in its corporate news media relations is based on two principles: availability and credibility." (Delta) Like the examples from Dow Canada presented in the earlier discussion on corporate culture, the objectives should reflect the image the company wants to project and the company's overall approach to communication with its key stakeholders.

These objectives must be consistent with corporate philosophy and agreed to, in advance, by top management. Management therefore must be involved in the planning process and sign off on the objectives laid out in the crisis communication plan. It is vital for the communications group to develop a relationship of trust with senior management on these issues; when a crisis strikes, the public relations team will have to respond quickly and independently, with the full confidence of the organization behind them (Carr, 1987). This exchange of information and linkage between internal units of the organization are also key elements of an open system that is capable of adapting to sudden change and surviving a crisis which emerges from within or outside the organization.

The issue of trust extends beyond infrequent incidents of crisis to everyday operations. Part of the ongoing process of crisis prevention is dialogue between communications practitioners and management. To reduce the likelihood of crisis, public relations professionals should be brought in before decisions are made on sensitive issues (Howard, 2006). The impact of important developments in internal and external audiences should be weighed in the decision making process and input from the professional communicators should be included. For their part, public relations counsel must be aware of "hot-button" issues and have a thorough understanding of the organization's stakeholder groups - what concerns and motivates them, how they feel about the organization and how they are likely to react to a particular message.

Achieving consensus within the organization is not always a given. One of the most common hurdles lies in the confrontation between legal and communications departments at some companies, for example. Where communicators clearly value openness, public image and developing a positive relationship with the media, corporate legal advisors often take the opposite approach. "For them, information is a commodity to be bartered," remarked one executive. "Smart executives are not intimidated by lawyers who don't have to run the business once the legal skirmishing is over" (Meyers et al. 1987).

Legal counsel typically prefers to restrict the release of information, even to the point of refusing comment, in order to limit their client's exposure to potential harm. By focusing entirely on liability and the immediate legal implications of an incident; however, lawyers may undermine the effectiveness of a communications plan designed to enhance credibility and protect the company's reputation in the long term. This conflict must therefore be resolved during the planning phase, before the crisis occurs, by discussing and agreeing on communication objectives to insure that the organization speaks with one voice at a critical time.

Now that a foundation has been laid, having identified potential crises, key stakeholders and communication objectives, the public relations professional has the opportunity during the pre-crisis stage to resolve some of the logistical problems associated with the implementation of the crisis plan. Six of the most important logistical components will be examined here in greater detail.

1. Diagnose Crisis Vulnerabilities

A vast array of potential crisis can happen to an organization, and every organization will have specific crisis vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are a function of the organization's size, location, operations, personnel and risk factors. Different types of organizations are prone

to different types of crises and the practitioner must identify the crises for which their organizations are most vulnerable (Coombs, 1999).

Vulnerabilities are typically assessed using a combination of the likelihood of occurrence and severity of damage dimensions. Practitioners start by listing all possible crises that could affect an organization. The list of potential crises can result from a brainstorming session or an assessment done by an outside consultant. Once a final list of potential crises is developed, each crisis should then be assessed for its potential to threaten the organization. A common approach is to rate each crisis from one to ten for likelihood and impact. Likelihood represents the odds the crisis might happen and impact is the amount of damage a crisis can inflict upon an organization. The practitioner then must multiply the likelihood and impact ratings to establish a final crisis vulnerability score. The higher the score, the greater the potential damage that crisis can generate (Coombs, 1999).

2. Form a Crisis Communication Team

Literature suggests that even if an organization cannot prevent all possible crisis from occurring, it nonetheless can recover substantially faster and at much less cost if it has a well-trained, interdisciplinary crisis communication team in place (Mitroff et al. 2006). Much has also been written about the most effective way to put together a crisis management team, what personalities are needed, what combinations of “devil’s advocate” and “consensus builder” work and what expertise should be represented. But one point is clear: handling a crisis is not a solo performance. “Crisis management is not a separate function, but a conglomerate of organizational units,” according to Robert Littlejohn (1983), who devotes his entire book, *Crisis Management: A Team Approach*, to the issue of building an integrated management team.

The communication group's job is to implement the crisis communication plan effectively, which will require flexibility and professional judgment to deal with difficult issues as they arise. As a result, the team must include expertise from those areas of the organization directly affected by the crisis, but also remain small enough to make tough choices quickly. Dougherty (1992), for example, recommends keeping the task force small (six to eight members), with representatives from legal, personnel, operations, public relations and management. All should have clearly defined roles, be team players and knowledgeable in their field.

Among these clearly defined roles must be that of the team leader, who has final responsibility for all communications decisions and must be capable of synthesizing all of the recommendations, advice, feedback and information arriving at the crisis control center from outside and from within the organization. Using these sources, the communications team must develop clear and consistent messages for each of the organization's stakeholder groups.

It is extremely difficult to bring together members of a team on an as needed basis, however the best crisis communication team trains together in order to function as a cohesive unit in the heat of an actual disaster. Precisely because each crisis has the potential to set off an uncontrolled chain reaction, having a well trained team that meets regularly is the best preparation for handling any eventual crisis (Mitroff et al. 2006).

3. Identify a Spokesperson

At the top of every emergency-planning list is the admonition to appoint a spokesperson in advance to represent the organization with the media. Having a competent and trusted spokesperson is crucial to handling press conferences or media inquiries during a crisis. "Select a single spokesperson," advises Marconi (1997) as the first of his ten steps to effective crisis marketing (p. 33). Patterson (1993) recommends naming a corporate spokesperson as a back up,

in order to keep information consistent and insure that the organization tells one story when it speaks (p. 48).

Consistency is an important advantage of the single spokesperson. By repeatedly sending out the same representative, the organization strengthens the perception that it has a plan to deal with the crisis and is addressing the problem in a systematic way. If the right person is chosen, the organization will also be able to build a relationship with the media and the public, convey concern for those affected and establish greater trust and credibility.

Choosing the right spokesperson demands careful consideration of the requirements of the job. The individual must be a good communicator, someone who understands media relations and appreciates the pitfalls and risks involved in handling the media in hostile situations. Ultimately the spokesperson serves as a leader during a time of crisis. He or she must remain visible, available and credible while sustaining employee or shareholder morale. They must also portray a positive image and be in a position to speak with the authority of senior management. "Reputation management requires delivery of credible messages backed with solid information and then communicated by an authoritative spokesperson" (Gaschen, 2000, p. 10).

The most logical choice for this role is the person with the highest authority in the organization and the most influential voice in a crisis: the chief executive. But the CEO may not always be best suited for the task when considering media relations skills, image, personality and other factors. Media training may be required to solidify key messages and will serve as a rehearsal for potential crises in the future. In some instances another spokesperson may be more qualified. This is an issue that must be resolved in advance of a crisis.

4. Organize Facilities and Equipment

For the crisis communication professional, the primary facilities concerns lie in two areas. First is the location where the crisis communication team meets. Here, the team needs a secure work area away from potential distractions. At the same time, they cannot isolate themselves from the crisis and must insure rapid and reliable access to information from all key sources.

The second facility priority should be the distribution point for media information. Typically, this will be a pressroom at the company's headquarters or a press conference in a local hotel can be arranged. Equipment needs should also be carefully examined and checklists prepared in advance to insure that everything is available. For the communications team, staying in contact with the "point person" managing the actual crisis and the staying in touch with the media are top priorities. Cellular phones, blackberries, PDAs, laptop computers and other such wireless internet devices are some of the items recommended for this purpose. Individual work stations for each member of the communications team, monitors for each of the television networks, a direct satellite feed delivering unedited footage from the Cable News Network and a telecommunications system are all necessities in a crisis communication command center. The goal of any good crisis communication command center is to equip the communications group to handle an enormous increase in the amount of media activity during a crisis.

5. Prepare Background Materials

Steven Fink (2000) counsels crisis communication teams to prepare pertinent information about their organization in advance, in part to fill the gaps in information that accompany the early stages of a crisis and in part to regain the initiative and take a more proactive stance when dealing with the media. "What you are striving for is what you should always be striving for: to

control and manage the message, control and manage the communications, control and manage the crisis” (p. 98).

He suggests presenting key data on the organization’s performance and safety record, recognition for outstanding work in the past as well as information on environmental compliance and other appropriate topics, including biographies on top executives. The objective is to reduce opportunities for speculation by providing enough information to fill as much media space as possible while exerting greater influence on the message.

6. Establish Distribution Channels

Another critical concern is the distribution of information to key stakeholders in a crisis. During the planning phase, consideration should be given not only to which channels will be used to disseminate information, but also to the sequence of distribution (Berge, 1990). Who should be contacted first? In what order should the information be presented? What technologies will deliver messages most effectively to each audience?

Crisis management experts have presented many different methods for handling this logistical problem in a systematic way. One widely acknowledged approach is the message action plan (MAP), developed by Lawrence Werner. The MAP is a one-page matrix outlining key messages, the tools for communicating them to each audience and the timing for distribution (Borda & Mackey-Kallis, 2004). Having such a plan in place reduces confusion and assures that none of the target groups are overlooked in the heat of the crisis.

Because incidents often occur without warning, establishing distribution channels prior to a crisis becomes a top priority. Routine planning, lists of contacts and procedures are very important. This information should be on every manager’s desk, not stashed away. A list of

names, phone numbers and the location of top corporate officials should always be at hand. The crisis communication team should know exactly who to contact and in what order.

Current technology offers an expanding variety of distribution options to the public relations professional. Broadcast faxes, e-mail and voice messaging, international newswire services, satellite video conferencing and online interactive computer services such as those found on the internet are just a few of those communications vehicles available, enabling the organization to reach its key stakeholders quickly and efficiently. Thanks to advances in technology, it is now possible to communicate with members of several stakeholder groups simultaneously, improving the chances that information received by employees, stockholders and government regulators, for example, will be consistent and accurate.

It is important to note, however that advances in technology also have helped the media gain faster and more independent access to information. Now, journalists no longer rely on press conferences or wire reports as primary sources; hand held mini cams, high resolution lenses and eyewitness videos take the media right to the scene.

Satellite uplinks can transmit images around the world in seconds, bringing live onsite reports into every living room around the world. Given the media's more aggressive use of technology, the public relations professional is obligated to employ similar techniques in order to maximize the organization's ability to communicate rapidly with key stakeholders when its reputation is on the line.

Once these five central logistical issues have been addressed, pre-crisis preparations can move into the final, crucial stage of training and testing. Training in crisis management and communication is essential for members of the communications team, especially for those assigned to work with the media. Spokespersons need to develop specialized media skills that prepare them for exposure to intense questioning under hostile circumstances. They need to

learn how to maintain composure, deflect personal attacks and take the initiative when challenged by the press or confrontational adversaries. In short, the spokesperson's ability to work credibly with the media will often determine how the organization is portrayed. "Indeed, the credibility of the spokesperson outweighs knowing all the facts or the truth in the heat of any major crisis" (Mitroff, et al. 1993, p. 103).

A large part of crisis communication training focuses on the spokesperson because of this critical and influential role. Companies often seek out public relations agencies that specialize in media relations to train their top executives. Much of what these experts teach centers on projecting the right image, rather than winning arguments over details. Compassion, concern for those affected, confidence and competence are all components of the ideal image the corporate spokesperson strives to project, as determined by this excerpt from a training text that asks executives to measure the quality of their responses to questions from the media:

- Do they appear intelligent and well thought out?
- Do they show concern for the welfare of your various publics?
- Do they show compassion?
- Do they offer a solution?
- Do they present your company in a good light?
- Do they make you seem responsible?
- Do they show you as being flexible?
- Do they give your publics confidence that you are in control?

(Dougherty, 1992, p. 33)

Testing the crisis plan is also part of pre-crisis training and preparation. Through tabletop exercises, unannounced drills and full-scale simulations, companies are able to test the viability of their crisis plans under conditions resembling actual emergencies. These activities not only provide an opportunity to evaluate the organization's crisis preparedness, they also enhance collaboration with stakeholder groups directly involved in potential crises. Participation by the media, for example, in staging a drill can help them to understand how a crisis will be handled by the organization, why certain limits exist on information and what problems to expect. By

including them in training exercises, the organization enhances its credibility and makes the media part of the solution, rather than an external adversary.

Collaboration should not be limited to the media, however; working with other stakeholder groups in the industry is equally important and essential to the function of an open, dynamic organization. Not only does the organization benefit from the experience and expertise of these partners, the relationship formed before a crisis will add credibility to the organization's response when a crisis actually occurs. In the event of a crisis, government agencies, community groups, customers and even suppliers may be called upon by the media to provide opinions or expert testimony that will influence the public's perception of the organization. Winning their support and cooperation through inclusion in the planning and training process is another way to strengthen the organization's image as a competent, responsible member of the business community.

In summary, five major recommendations have been presented here as part of the pre-crisis planning phase for developing a crisis communication program:

- Identify the potential crisis.
- Identify the key stakeholders.
- Develop communication objectives.
- Prepare logistics.
- Provide training and test the plan.

If surprise is not to become one of the defining characteristics of a crisis, then of these stages, which includes signal detection, preparation and preventions are perhaps the most important in the planning process. Through careful and thorough preparation, many of the dangers of crisis can be overcome; the organization can position itself to anticipate problems before they surface and to take the initiative they do. Nevertheless, crisis is inevitable and the real test of any communications plan lies in its ability to adapt to real events and the real people involved.

During the Crisis

With the onset of crisis, the communications plan goes from drawing board and training room to implementation. The crisis team is assembled to evaluate the situation; their first responsibility is to review the facts and gather missing information before determining what messages the organization will send out. Then it is time to notify key publics.

The first eight to 12 hours of a public crisis are considered by virtually all experienced practitioners as the most critical. During this time, the direction of the story and the organization's image are first established in the public eye. In this short time, the organization will be exposed to intense examination by the media. Information about the extent and cause of the crisis will be sketchy, leaving the door open for speculation and misinformation. Even within the organization many employees and managers will be at a loss to explain what is taking place.

In most cases, the communication team's response during this critical phase will determine if a organization will be able to take control of the situation. "Initially you need to communicate the briefest, most appropriate and most accurate information that you have as quickly as possible," writes Dieudonnee ten Berge (1990, p. 89). Berge, like many others, sees an important advantage for organizations in crisis to take the initiative immediately, even if information about the crisis is still incomplete.

Patrick Lagadec (1993) suggests following these guidelines when formulating an initial message to key stakeholders:

- We are aware of the problem and have taken charge.
- Many unknowns remain; everything is being done to determine more.
- Emergency plans are now in action and here is how they work.
- More information will be provided as soon as it becomes available. (p. 212)

Taking the initiative means acknowledging that a problem exists before others reveal it. At the same time, this allows the organization to explain what is being done and to establish itself as an authoritative source of information. Without this credibility, the organization cannot expect to manage its image effectively during the crisis.

As demonstrated by information integration theory, the public's attitudes are directly influenced by the weight or reliability of the information they receive. If the public does not trust the organization to provide accurate and timely information, they will look elsewhere and external experts, analysts and others who have ready access to the media will replace the organization's voice. "Often initiating contacts with the media in an essentially negative situation can result in the reporter's making a special point to carry your position and even turn a negative story into a positive one" (Howard, 2006, p. 151).

There may be forces within the company, such as legal counsel, who resist attempts to get ahead of the crisis and take a more adversarial, rather than conciliatory stance towards the media. Clearly, the communications group should not overstep its authority and release unconfirmed, incomplete or speculative information that would compromise the company; however with sound arguments based on historical precedence, the crisis team should be able to overrule lawyers, operations managers and others in the organization who, in the name of prudence or caution, counsel retreat from public view until the storm has passed, rather than venturing further out into the open. "Business, as it operates increasingly on the consent of its various publics, must assume the risks of heightened exposure and accessibility. It must argue its position vigorously and confidently, not shrinking from controversy" (Pinsdorf, 1987, p. 19).

Because the media is the fastest and most pervasive means of reaching many of the organization's key publics, a proactive approach to communications is essential to a organization's success in managing a crisis. One of a organization's main responsibilities is not

only to disseminate initial information promptly, but also to keep the pace with ongoing developments and maintain a regular flow of information to the media and key stakeholders.

This affords the opportunity to present a positive and accurate perception of the organization and opens a channel of communication with stakeholders that allows the organization to express its moral and ethical philosophy, explain its business practices and demonstrate that it has procedures in place for dealing professionally with crises.

Taking the initiative typically means cooperating extensively with the media. Thus every crisis plan should contain guidelines for working with them during a crisis. But before these guidelines can be considered, it is necessary to understand how the media approach crisis stories.

Lagadec (1993) takes a critical view in his book and reminds public relations practitioners of the assumptions they must make about the way the media react to a crisis:

- Assume the media will learn about the event.
- A crisis is a good deal for the media because bad news is good news for them and they will pursue the story.
- The media are highly mobile with advanced technical resources that allow them to overcome time and space.
- They have access to their own subject matter experts who provide information and opinions.
- Vital information may or may not be reported and the media will fit the information they receive into their own framework.
- A journalist always has the right to make a mistake, while everything an executive says is always under a microscope.
- Reality created by the media becomes accepted reality for the public.

(p. 120-129)

Any organization that deals with the media in a crisis must contend with the problems associated with these assumptions. Section five of this document will provide guidelines for companies who find themselves in particularly sharp conflict with the press following a crisis.

After the Crisis

When is the crisis over? The answer lies in the objectives established in the crisis management plan. Once these have been achieved, the organization can step down from the full-scale crisis and begin the process of rehabilitation. Pepsi counted the start of its crisis from June 10, 1993, when the first syringe complaint was recorded and the end on July 4, when sales of their product began to rebound (Pepsi, p. 18). Using sales figures as a measure of public response, the company was able to evaluate its communications program over this period and determine its level of success.

Long-term impact on the organization's image and reputation are much more difficult to ascertain. From a communications perspective, the organization must focus on two major issues immediately following a crisis: learning and recovery.

Learning from the experiences of communicating in a crisis requires an honest critique of the organization's performance and of the communication plan:

- Was the plan designed to respond to the crisis?
- Was the organization trained and prepared to use the plan?
- Did the communications team function well and receive adequate support?
- How effective was the spokesperson?
- Were the organization's messages understood and communicated accurately?
- Did the messages reach the target audiences?
- How flexible was the team in responding to developing issues?
- What logistical problems could have been solved in advance?
- Was information released in a timely manner?
- How well were inaccuracies in media reports handled and corrected?

These are just some of the issues the communications team must deal with in order to learn from this crisis and prepare for the next. Still open, however is the question of how the organization's image among key stakeholders may have been affected by the crisis. Although overall media coverage may have been balanced, or even positive, this is no guarantee that key

stakeholders are in agreement with the press. Follow-up surveys, responses and letters from customers and other direct means of communication are often employed to obtain additional insight into effectiveness of a communications program, enabling the organization to reach beyond reports received from gatekeepers in the media.

The communications group also shares responsibility for the organization's recovery from crisis. Based on the results of the post-crisis critique, weaknesses in the organization's image may surface. It may be necessary to reinforce certain messages or strengthen the organization's position in certain markets in order to rebuild its reputation. The values and goals of the organization may change, leading to new priorities and more emphasis placed on communication with certain target audiences, such as employees or community groups. Or, the organization itself may undergo structural changes to improve the way it gathers information or makes decisions with direct affect on the communications team.

Although the organization has now acquired additional and valuable experience in dealing with crises, it must continue to examine its crisis preparedness and remain flexible in its approach to managing potential problems. No two crises are alike and there is danger for the organization that believes past experience can be applied unconditionally to future events. "To avoid this tendency to reenact the past, the organization needs to establish and retain internal diversity and structural flexibility. The methods to accomplish this include discrediting the natural tendency to rely on precedents, simulating crisis and utilizing consultants, contractors or other outsiders to spot weaknesses in the managerial apparatus of the organization" (Milburn, Schuler & Watman, 1983b, p. 1173).

Chapter IV

Media Relations Guide and Sample Crisis Communication Plan

A media interview, when conducted properly, can be an excellent opportunity to communicate an organization's story to various publics. Although every media interview will vary depending upon location, format, time available prior to deadline and other factors, techniques for a more effective media interview during a crisis can be learned and practiced. This manual is intended to provide the tips and tools practitioners needed to help one find their own comfort zone and be prepared and responsive when they are in an interview situation.

First, what is news? The goal of most interview situations is to make - or in some special cases avoid making-news. To meet those goals, it's important to understand how the media define news: typically controversy or change.

Examine a daily paper or watch a newscast today. Almost every story will deal with change or controversy. Why do political campaigns, for example, generate enormous media coverage? Because both elements of controversy and change are usually present. Two candidates vie for one job. A winner usually will signify change. During the campaign, both sides will trade charges - and spark controversy.

In most cases organizations want to avoid areas of controversy. But unless one can describe some change - i.e., a new product, service or direction for the company - or take some controversial position, a practitioner may grant an interview that does not yield a news story.

Why does the media abandon their usual skepticism and concern for accuracy when reporting on crises? Commercial and competitive pressures from rival media outlets, plus the desire to create a readable, even dramatic story, can result in a distorted picture of actual events.

This image of an organization, once introduced to the public, is difficult to correct or alter.

Therefore, reaching the media early and quickly with the organization's perspective takes on added importance under these circumstances.

The following media relations guidelines, drawn from a number of the texts reviewed for this project, take into account the risks and problems of working with the media outlets during a crisis. Although by no means exhaustive, it contains the most pertinent and useful suggestions of some of the leading authors in the field of crisis management including: Mitroff et al. (1993), Dougherty (1992), Meyers et al. (1987), Regester (1989), Denison (1997), Patterson(1993), Coombs (1999), Marconi (1997) and others.

1. Tell your story: start early, repeat it often, and be consistent. Know your copy points and how to define your messages concisely. Plan to communicate your key messages first.
2. Don't be diverted by speculation. Don't accept hypothetical cases or premature conclusions.
3. Improve your story as you learn more; appear open-minded and responsive to new information.
4. Don't stonewall or resort to "no comment" – the story will appear whether you cooperate or not.
5. Don't make comments "off the record"; assume everything you say will be used. Be careful about giving your opinions.
6. Keep your composure; don't take questions personally or become emotional. Challenge statements, not people.
7. Tell the truth. Never lie. Admit mistakes and move on.
8. Strive for proactive responses. Turn negatives into positives; try to neutralize a hostile situation.
9. Use language that shows you care and demonstrates you are trying to put the matter right.
10. Respond quickly to media requests. Respect the reporter's deadline. Know your journalists by familiarizing yourself with their work.
11. Speak in sound bites. Speak in short, simple sentences that are believable. Organize your message in a succinct and provable manner.
12. Be aware of verbal and non-verbal communication. Maintain eye contact and always be aware of your body language.

Guidelines like these can be useful in managing media relations in any crisis situation.

However, several points stand out from the rest. Speculation is one of the chief enemies of well-

managed crisis communication and should be avoided at all costs. The media is often pressured to develop hypothetical explanations or speculate on the circumstances surrounding a crisis in the hopes that they can be the first to bring the story to the general public; any comment by an organization spokesperson that could be interpreted as speculation or hypotheticals would only serve to encourage such reports.

The other extreme can be equally destructive. "No comment means that you have something to hide, not that information simply is not available or not yet verified," writes Pinsdorf (1987, p. 104). Avoiding difficult questions all together can raise doubts about the organization's candor and credibility. Or at the very least, it will appear that the organization has failed to consider certain issues and does not have a handle on the crisis.

Rather than eluding the media, the organization is better off acknowledging the problem and promising to return to it when more information is available. Crisis by nature are full of uncertainty, and it is entirely appropriate and acceptable for the spokesperson to admit that the organization does not have all the answers.

No media relations' guidelines can overcome a pre-existing negative relationship with the media. "You can greatly hurt or help your cause depending on your relationship in the past with the media. If you have had negative dealings or you are viewed as uncooperative and antagonistic, the press will probably not deal very sympathetically with you during a crisis" (Dougherty, 1992, p. 28).

Establishing credibility, trust and goodwill begins long before any crisis, and the relationship carries over from everyday media relations to crisis situations. Harold Carr (1987) submits there is no difference between normal operations and crisis communication in terms of media work. Basically, it is important for public relations practitioners to keep up with the

product and customers, demonstrate goodwill and a willingness to learn, handle routine press inquiries quickly and accurately in order to learn the respect and confidence of the media (p. 249).

During a crisis, however, many of the familiar media contacts may not be present. The crisis can occur far from local media outlets where major media outlets may dispatch local affiliates to cover the crisis and whom the public relations practitioner has no personal connections. Maintaining control of the story becomes even more difficult in these situations and the value of solid media relations' practices like those presented in these guidelines increases.

Taking the initiative and working effectively with the media are two important elements of the implementation phase, but there is also a third. It is not enough to prepare and disseminate messages; the communications team must also track the media's reporting to insure that key messages are being communicated, watch for inaccuracies or the development of new messages, and respond immediately. Only by monitoring the media's coverage can the organization determine in what form its messages are being communicated and if changes in the way it works with the media are necessary.

The organization cannot assume, however, that the media's reaction to their messages automatically reflects the attitudes held by key stakeholders. Although the media may be reporting on the incident in a manner consistent with the crisis plan, the organization's key publics may not be responding favorably to the message. "Do not confuse the press with the public. Reach out beyond yesterday's headline and communicate with your key publics – whenever possible, directly" (Dougherty, 1992, p. 72).

Overall the main concern once the crisis has begun is damage containment. All communication with the media and stakeholders is aimed at limiting damage beyond the crisis and returning the organization to homeostasis as soon as possible. Any move by the organization or the media that will prolong the crisis or expand it must be avoided or prevented.

This may mean moving quickly to take responsibility and announce steps to correct the problem, even though it may result in negative exposure. This approach is consistent with a non-zero-sum game as defined by game theory. By providing information to the media in exchange for access, the organization focuses on achieving its overall goal of restoring public trust and confidence after a crisis. Thus the media become part of the ongoing communication process with key stakeholders – a critical element in the successful implementation of the crisis communication plan.

Reviewing the previous literature on crisis communication offers a perspective through which we can understand the importance of crisis planning and how it relates to public relations. The literature revealed the need for early intervention on behalf of the public relations executive; the need for ongoing communications; flexibility; and the need for continued dialogue between management, employees, organization stakeholders, the media and the general public.

It is the goal of any organization dealing with a crisis to maintain its reputation. To do so, organizations need to understand what to do, and what to avoid in a crisis. Having a crisis communication plan and communicating openly is imperative for any organization surrounded by crisis. As Davis (1991) notes, while crises may pass, their effects will linger (p. 11).

A crisis communication plan will prevent disorganized reactions and keep an organization focused on a thoughtful and consistent course towards the resolution of any crisis. Crisis management has evolved into a discipline that concentrates on three areas: prevention, preparation and practice. Long (2001) argues that taking steps to prevent a crisis, creating a plan, assigning roles, and practicing the plan in simulated situations will benefit any organization (p. 14).

In a crisis, the organization has the opportunity to defend its reputation or add to its reputation in front of its key audience (O'Brien, 2001). Pitts (2001) argues that in today's world of

message overload, the smart communicator understands that it is not what you say, it is what they remember (p. 25). “The only thing of consequence is ensuring that your target audience listens, believes and remembers the message you want to get out” (Pitts, 2001, p. 26).

A primary objective of crisis communication, beyond coping with the aftermath of a crisis, is to influence public opinion development. According to Sturges (1994) an organization engaged in crisis should seek to “influence public opinion to the point that opinions held in the post-crisis period are at the same level or greater in positive opinions and at the same level or lower in negative opinions among the members of any constituent audience” (p. 4).

Pepsi probably never dreamed it would have a crisis involving hypodermic syringes in its cans. However, Fearn-Banks (2001) argues that Exxon could have anticipated the worst oil slick in American history (p. 89). An organization’s ability to survive unblemished can be greatly enhanced by preparation and planning. However, Caywood (1993) warns that a plan is always incomplete and is a continual work in progress for managers who face unique situations daily (p. 40).

Today, even with extensive planning, an organization must be prepared to endure a dramatic increase in stress and public pressure as part of any crisis. For those who overestimate their ability to manage a crisis, Pinsdorf (1987) delivers this sobering reminder of the limitations of crisis planning: “When trouble hits, shifting tactics daily, personal strength and resolution will count for far more than all the plans ever written. It is hubris to think public crises can be controlled. The best battle scarred executive can hope for is damage control, countering outrageous criticism and telling the truth day after day until it gets across. Never doubt the resourcefulness or tenacity of your adversaries, nor the willingness of the public to believe the worst of the best companies” (Pinsdorf, p. 4). As Fearn-Banks (2001) notes, “Considering that the toll of stress and emotion during a crisis necessarily affects one’s thought processes, a

carefully developed crisis communication plan is the best substitute for a fully functioning brain. Even if you are cool and calm under pressure, others are not. The crisis communication plan alleviates that problem too" (p. 23)

Crisis communication plans need to be based on consultation with the organizations involved; have elements that are specific to the organization; and specify a number of activities that should take place to assist in rectification of crisis events (Dyer, 1995). The result is a comprehensive crisis communication plan.

In what follows, I outline a generic, basic crisis communication plan. Crises are inherently dynamic and unpredictable; therefore many plans are developed as general outlines rather than step-by-step guides. This makes the plan more adaptable to a variety of situations (Seeger, 2007). To develop a more comprehensive crisis communication plan, one would need to apply this plan to the unique situations of organizational life and make the necessary adjustments to meet the needs of that specific organization. This plan is not intended to answer all questions or meet all crisis communication planning needs, but rather serves as a basic outline of options one might want to consider, based on the earlier research, when developing a tailored crisis communication plan or for reference when one is in the midst of an actual crisis.

Communication Objectives

- Portray organization as a professional, reliable and responsible member of the business community.
- Present a positive and accurate image of the company.
- Demonstrate compassion and concern for the welfare of others.
- Provide accurate and timely information.
- Be open, accessible and proactive when dealing with the media.

Potential Crises

- Personnel Actions
 1. Strikes, protests, layoffs

- 2. Lawsuits, scandals involving personnel
 - 3. Reorganization
- Environmental Problems
 - 1. Natural Disasters
 - 2. Environmental group actions (external)
- Service Irregularities
 - 1. Product contamination
 - 2. Product Recalls
- Business-related Incidents
 - 1. Boycotts
 - 2. Government investigation/legal action
 - 3. Problems with Suppliers/Vendors
 - 4. Financial Issues

Key Publics

- Employees
- Customers
- Media
- Stockholders
- General Public
- Local Community
- Government
- Industry Analysts
- Special Interest groups
- Business Partners
- Suppliers/Vendors/Contractors/Distributors

Logistics

- Assemble the Crisis Team
- Designate a single Corporate Spokesperson
 - 1. The media spokesperson represents the company and speaks on behalf of the company. The spokesperson must be selected very carefully. In addition, two or three alternatives should be selected in case the primary spokesperson is unavailable at the time of a crisis.
- Criteria for Selecting a Spokesperson
 - 1. The spokesperson must have the power to make decisions and be accessible throughout the crisis.
 - 2. The spokesperson must be articulate. They should be able to speak clearly, concisely and in a pleasant manner.
 - 3. The spokesperson must appear rational, concerned and empathetic during a crisis.
 - 4. Multiple spokespersons, when used, must all be prepared to say the same thing.
- Facilities and Equipment
 - 1. Television monitor/VCR

2. Cable television connection
 3. Minimum of 10 computers/laptops with high-speed Internet connections
 4. Minimum 10 phone lines
 5. Recording Capability for external phone lines and Television
 6. Photocopier
 7. Radios
 8. Fax machine (minimum of 2 direct lines)
 9. Emergency contact phone/fax lists
 10. Set of emergency information worksheets
 11. News Release letterhead/fax letterhead
- Background Materials
 1. History of the company
 2. General fact sheets
 3. Annual financial reports/news releases
 4. Pre-prepared key corporate messages
 - Distribution Channels
 1. Internal Media
 2. External Media
 - Newswire services
 - Distribution lists for the media
 - BusinessWire electronic photo distribution services
 - Fax-on-Demand service for the media
 - B-Roll/video distribution services

Training and Testing

- Training
 1. Spokesperson and back-up to receive training for on-camera crisis interviews and crisis media relations.
 2. Workshops to be conducted by in-house corporate communications team for local managers on crisis preparedness.
- Testing
 1. Crisis communication team to participate in one tabletop exercise or full-scale simulation per year.
 2. Crisis Communication team to review crisis procedures annually.

Media Relations

- Sample Media Statements
 1. Our company is responding to the situation. We have trained and experienced people on-site working to resolve the situation.
 2. Our first priority is the safety of the public, our customers and our employees. We are gathering information, and as soon as more details are available, we will inform the media.
 3. Further details are not known at this time. More information will be provided as soon as it becomes available.

- Media Call Log
- Media Guidelines
 1. Do not speculate. Always stick to the facts.
 2. Focus on two or three key messages to communicate and repeat them during the interview.
 3. Speak in simple, common terms. Keep answers short and to the point.
 4. Remain calm.
 5. Do not use negative language. Do not let reporters put words in your mouth.
 6. Do not answer questions you do not understand.
 7. Make only “on the record” comments.
 8. Avoid saying “No comment.”

Communication Policy and Guidelines

- The philosophy of our organization’s news media relations is based on two principles: availability and credibility. All requests by the media, even in potential emergency situations, should be made through the Corporate Communications department. The Corporate Communications department handles all media relations for the organization. The Corporate Communications department is quick to respond to any media inquiry, whether it is a routine business story or breaking news. In addition to responding to news media inquiries, the Corporate Communication office directs the organization’s news media relations around the world. Our staff is comprised of experts in the industry who understand the news media’s needs.

Follow-up Actions

- Media clipping services should be notified immediately in the event of a crisis to provide transcripts or copies of media reports.
- A follow-up survey should be conducted among employees or customers following the crisis to gauge the impact in image and other aspects of the communications program.

Chapter V

Crisis Communication Analysis and Media Audit of the Bridgestone/Firestone - Ford Crisis

During a crisis situation what an organization communicates can and will be used to assign blame or responsibility. When an organization is thrust into the media spotlight, every word serves as their response to the crisis. What is said can damage an organization's reputation, but in many instances it may also serve to repair or even enhance the public's perception of a organization.

An organization in crisis has a variety of different crisis communication and image restoration strategies at their disposal. Coombs (Stephens, Malone & Bailey, 2005) states that each crisis situation should be matched to a crisis communication strategy. Mismatches may incur greater reputation damage, whereas proper crisis strategy matching should help repair the image of the organization.

The study of crisis management, including crisis communication, has allowed practitioners to gain a greater understanding of how to assess and manage communications for an organization in crisis. Analyses of these crisis communication efforts range from case studies and categorizations of communication responses, to empirical studies that examine the categorizations of communication responses and how these strategies (CCSs) are affected by the crisis situation (Coombs, 1995).

Firestone (or, Bridgestone/Firestone), a major tire manufacturer, was the focus of product recall-related national and global public and media attention on two occasions, first in 1978 and again in the late summer and fall of 2000. It is important to note that Firestone failed to learn from their earlier mistakes. Both tire recalls were conducted in strategically and tactically similar

ways, with negative results both times. It is also important to mention that the 1978 Firestone recall was the largest tire recall in U.S. history.

On August 9, 2000, Bridgestone/Firestone recalled 6.5 million tires in the wake of mounting evidence that the tires were experiencing a phenomenon known as “tread separation.” This describes a breakdown in the binding of the tire, resulting in what is commonly known as a blow out. The second largest tire recall in U.S. history, a recall of this many products would endanger the image of any organization. In this case, a federal investigation blamed these tires for at least 100 deaths (Healey, 2000a, p. 1B). Ultimately the number of casualties reached 271. It was clear that Bridgestone/Firestone’s reputation was in serious jeopardy.

This case study and media audit analyzes and evaluates the rhetorical effectiveness of Bridgestone/Firestone’s image repair discourse from a select group of popular news publications. It will also examine select CCSs and responses used by Firestone and Ford in the 2000 crisis, and discuss some of the basic rules of crisis communication violated by these companies. These mistakes include: the failure to act quickly; failure to tell the truth; failure to accept responsibility; and scapegoating. This case study merits scholarly attention not only for its relevance to public relations practitioners, but also for its possibilities of advancing further research in crisis communication and image restoration.

Background

This situation emerged in 1992 when Firestone and Ford first began investigating complaints about tread separation. In 1996, the state of Arizona reported that Firestone tires were experiencing tread separation in hot weather. Ford first learned about the Firestone tread separations when it began happening on Explorers in Saudi Arabia. In 1998, State Farm reported

to the government 21 instances of tread separation found in their accident claim data. Fourteen of these accidents were linked to Ford Explorer vehicles.

In August 1999, Ford replaced Firestone tires in the Middle East over Firestone's objections. In February of 2000, Ford also replaced Firestone tires in Malaysia and Thailand. That same month a television station in Houston, Texas broadcasted a special report on tread separation. In April of 2000, Firestone reported the results of a five-month study in Arizona: There is no problem in the United States. In May, Ford continued replacing Firestone tires in Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela. That same month the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration began investigating Firestone tread separation

This was a particularly tricky situation because the connection between Ford and Firestone reached back over 100 years. Their business relationship extended far beyond the corporate boardrooms, as the grandchildren of Harvey S. Firestone and Henry Ford, William Ford and Martha Firestone, are married to one another (Mayer & Swoboda, 2001). We should also note that Firestone is a subsidiary of Bridgestone, which means that the company is sometimes referred to as Bridgestone/Firestone and at times Bridgestone corporate officials spoke to defend the company.

The interdependent nature of this relationship between the two companies allows practitioners to gain a better understanding of the dynamics that occur when two organizations, linked together in a single crisis, work independently of each other trying to maintain their own reputation. This crisis is of special interest to practitioners because it is rare that two companies, involved in a single crisis, actively attempt to influence attributions of blame and responsibility.

Research

One goal of crisis communication is to create messages designed to improve stakeholder perceptions toward an organization in crisis. These messages are called internalizing messages, and it is these messages that are consumed by the public and used to develop either positive or negative images of an organization (Sturgis, 1994). What an organization says can persuade or reshape the way stakeholders perceive acts that may cause negative impressions (Benoit, 1995). The communicated messages may also shift perceptions of responsibility away from an organization.

People use information from a variety of sources, everything from communications released by an organization to the information derived from media publications to formulate their perception of an organization (Sturgis, 1994). "What organizations say to their various publics during a crisis should influence the extent of the reputational and financial damage a crisis can inflict on the organizational image" (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, p.292).

Overall, the Bridgestone/Firestone-Ford crisis is an example of ineffective crisis communication and crisis management efforts; Nicolazzo and Nickson (2001) called the crisis one of the "greatest crisis communication breakdowns of our time" (p. 41). As this crisis evolved, greater perceptions of transgressions by Firestone emerged. The symbolic approach would suggest that Firestone should have used more accommodative strategies when perceptions of transgression were present (Coombs, 1995). However, Firestone approached the crisis from a defensive stance, using tactics and actions that range from the denial of the existence of tire problems, to the shifting of blame to a variety of other agents. The present examination uses as its framework the symbolic approach to crisis communication and Benoit's theory of image restoration strategies.

The symbolic approach organizes the various CCSs in relation to two theories: neoinstitutionalism and attribution theory (Coombs et al. 1996). Neoinstitutionalism works with the concept of organizational legitimacy, whereas attribution theory works with public perception. One primary area that CCSs help organizations is in the attempt to restore an organization's legitimacy. During a crisis, people look for the cause of the crisis. The more a public assigns responsibility for a crisis to an organization, the more likely they are to act upon negative images towards an organization (Coombs, 2004). If the public decides that an organization is responsible for a crisis, then they will form negative impressions. Conversely, if the public feels that the organization is not responsible for the crisis, the public will tend to view the organization as a victim of outside circumstance.

Crisis attribution, or the degree the organization's stakeholders blame the organization for the crisis, is a direct link between crisis situations and CCSs (Coombs, 1998). Coombs suggests that each crisis situation should influence the CCSs employed by an organization in crisis. An understanding of each crisis situation allows for the matching of appropriate response strategies. Matching of CCSs to the crisis situation is predicted to help alleviate the damage to an organization's reputation (Coombs, 1999).

Coombs (Stephens et al. 2005) created a model to explain which responses best fit a crisis situation. The model was constructed by placing CCSs along a continuum of accommodative and defensive strategies. Accommodative strategies accept responsibility whereas defensive CCSs deny responsibility or deny that a crisis even exists. Crisis types were placed on a continuum based on perceived personal control. Crisis types with higher perceptions of personal control contain stronger perceptions of crisis responsibility.

The order of crisis responses, from weakest to strongest personal control, are: attack the accuser, denial, excuse, justification, ingratiation, corrective action, and full apology. Natural

disasters are matched with responses of weak perceptions of crisis responsibility. Tampering and accidents fall somewhere in the center of the continuum. Transgressions contain strong perceptions of crisis responsibility; therefore, they are matched with strategies of corrective action and full apologies. The basic premise is that different crises require different communication strategies. As the crisis continues to evolve, the public relations manager should use more accommodative CCSs to counter the perceptions of blame and responsibility for the crisis.

In general, when an accident occurs, strong perceptions of responsibility are placed on an organization. This is because events leading to the crisis are, in most cases, preventable. However, accidents can sometimes be perceived by the public as a one-time event, and in many cases organizations are held with little or no accountability. Organizations with a history of accidents should adopt greater accommodative strategies, since frequent or recurring accidents are often seen as transgressions (Coombs, 1999).

Perceptions of misdeeds done by an organization appear to generate the strongest levels of organizational responsibility. Transgressions are intentional actions performed by an organization that place stakeholders at risk. The organization is usually perceived to have complete personal control over events leading up to the crisis. Examples include the selling of defective products, the violation of laws, and knowingly operating under dangerous conditions.

Coombs (2004) suggests that crisis stability can influence the attributions regarding whether an organization is responsible for a crisis. When a history of similar crises occur within an organization, stakeholders' perceptions lead them to perceive that the organization committed a misdeed or transgression. When stakeholders perceive that a crisis is due to some transgression, then more accommodative CCSs are necessary (Coombs, 1999, p. 71).

The strategies available to the public relations manager range from the denial of responsibility to the acceptance of partial or full responsibility. However, not all strategies are at

the extremes of taking full responsibility. Strategies created to distance an organization from a crisis do exist, as well as strategies that cast an organization in a positive light.

Benoit's theory of image restoration strategies is based on two assumptions. First, communication is a goal-oriented activity. Second, the maintenance of a favorable image is a primary communication objective of that organization (Clark & Delia, 1979). The theory holds that communicators who need to restore damaged reputations have five general rhetorical options: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification.

When an organization claims that no crisis exists or that they are not responsible for the current crisis, they are adopting a Denial strategy. Denial is divided into two sub-categories. Simple denial occurs when an accused denies committing the offensive act or denies that the act occurred at all. Shifting blame, or scape-goating, asserts that another party is responsible for the wrongful act. Denial strategies will only work to restore the image of the accused if they are accepted by the audience.

Evasion of responsibility strategies includes four sub-categories. One can claim provocation, which means that the wrongful act was a reasonable response to a prior offensive act perpetrated by the victim. Defeasibility asserts that the offensive act occurred only because of lack of information or ability. The third category is to claim the offensive action occurred by accident. As the name suggests, accident declares that the wrongful act was not committed purposefully. Society tends to only hold those responsible for the factors and actions that appear to be under their control. Finally, one can attempt to evade responsibility by claiming that the act was committed with good intentions. Here the audience is asked to reduce the accused's responsibility for the wrongful behavior because it was performed while trying to accomplish a good.

Rather than deny or reduce responsibility for an offensive act, an organization accused of wrongful actions can try to reduce the offensiveness of an event. This general image repair strategy has six sub-strategies. Bolstering emphasizes good traits and/or beneficial past acts that might offset damage from the wrongful act at hand. Bolstering is designed to strengthen the audience's positive feelings toward the accused. Although the amount of negative affect from the accusation remains the same here, increased positive feeling toward the accused may help offset the negative feelings. Minimization attempts to portray the wrongdoing as minor and unimportant. If the audience comes to believe the act is less offensive than it first appeared, the amount of damage to the accused's reputation should be reduced. Differentiation claims that an offensive act should be distinguished from other similar but more offensive acts. Transcendence attempts to place a misdeed as part of a larger context where more important values would pervade the situation. It can also be used to suggest a different frame or reference. Attacking one's accuser attempts to reduce the accuser's credibility, thus reducing the offensiveness and/or plausibility of the accusation (or make it appear as if the victim deserved what happened). Compensation offers payment or restitution to the victim of the offensive act. This payment can be in goods and services as well as monetary reimbursement. These ingratiation strategies try to gain public approval for the organization (Alien & Caillouet, 1994).

When an organization attempts to try and distant themselves from a crisis, they adopt either excuse or justification strategies. Excuses minimize the organization's responsibility by denying the intention or violation. Justification attempts to minimize damage by convincing the publics the crisis was not that serious, the victim deserved what happened, or claiming the crisis was misrepresented (Stephens et al. 2005). Such actions may take form by denying the intention to create the crisis or by minimizing the impact of the crisis. Minimization strategies attempt to create an impression that the crisis is not as bad as it seems (Benoit, 2004). The organization may

compare their crisis to a larger one that is similar in nature. Distance strategies try to attempt to weaken the link between the crisis and the organization by focusing on the unintentional or external dimensions of a crisis (Benoit, 2004). In doing so, they clearly acknowledge the crisis but then begin to make excuses or justify the crisis.

To create a positive image for an organization, a practitioner might adopt a mortification or corrective action strategy. Corrective action attempts to correct the crisis situation or the factors that lead to the crisis. Corrective action can take two forms: fixing the damage from the wrongful act and/or taking steps to assure that the problem never occurs again. Finally, mortification is an apology, an expression of sorrow or regret for the offensive act. Mortification may also include the acceptance of responsibility to some degree. According to Stephens et al. (2005) mortification is one of the most frequent message strategies used by 40% of practitioners. Ingratiation strategies are the second most common with a recorded use 23% of the time. Ingratiation strategies focus on ways to gain public approval such as bolstering the existing organizational image, transcending the crisis to a more desirable position and praising others in an attempt to gain their approval.

In addition to these strategies, Coombs also mentions two other strategies. The first is silence – a response that Coombs claims is passive because it suggests uncertainty on the part of the organization in crisis. A second strategy is much more effective and likely useful during technical crises because it uses the endorsement of an outside expert to boost the credibility of the organization. These experts can either praise the handling of the situation or confirm that the organization is assessing the situation correctly (Stephens et al. 2005).

Crisis

Initial reports appeared to the public in early February 2000, on Houston TV station KHOU-TV (Crock & St. Pierre, 2000). These early reports revolved around deaths involving Ford Explorers, a popular make and model of sport utility vehicle, and the ensuing lawsuits being brought against Ford and Firestone as a result of these deaths. The broadcast indicated the cause of these deaths was tire treads separating from Firestone tires without warning.

On August 9, 2000, Firestone announced a voluntary recall of 3.85 million of its Radial ATX and Radial ATX II tires, and 2.7 million Wilderness AT tires. According to a press release issued by Firestone, the recall was instigated because, "At Bridgestone/Firestone, nothing is more important to us than the safety of our customers" (Bridgestone/Firestone corporate news web page, 2001). The move was described as a precautionary step to ensure customer safety and confidence in the Firestone brand. The company stated that it was replacing new as well as used tires, regardless of the age of the tires. The tires being recalled were described as those being produced at a Decatur, Illinois tire-manufacturing plant, where a union strike occurred in 1994. In response to that strike, Firestone used replacement workers to manufacture tires.

In the initial August 9, 2000 press release, Bridgestone/Firestone called for consumers to take additional steps to maintain proper inflation of their tires. Doing so would increase the lifespan and safety of the tire. "When under inflated, all radial tires generate excessive heat," said Gary Cridder, vice president of Bridgestone/Firestone, Inc., "Driving on tires in this condition can lead to tread separation. Maintaining the proper inflation level will enhance the performance and lifespan of these tires" (Bridgestone/Firestone corporate news web page, 2001).

Initial reports suggested that 46 people had died and 80 had been injured by the separation of these tires (Lavelle, 2000; Naughton & Skipp, 2000). Later reports increased the number of deaths to over 200 dead and more than 700 injured (Greenwald, 2001; Gibson, 2001;

Naughton, 2001). These accusations cost Bridgestone/Firestone over \$200 million in 2001. The legal bills from this crisis exceeded the company's \$463 million legal reserve, and Firestone has since found itself liable for much of the \$3 billion cost associated with this particular crisis (Welch, 2001).

Both Ford and Firestone came under close scrutiny, as government investigations and congressional hearings were held to determine the cause of the deaths (Eisenberg & Zagorin, 2000; Muller, Green, St. Pierre, & Moore, 2000), Ford CEO Jacques Nasser, in initial congressional hearings, stated that "This is a tire issue, not a vehicle issue" (Eisenberg et al. 2000, p. 30). Firestone responded by blaming the design of the Ford Explorer as the cause for these accidents (Eisenberg et al. 2000). Congress suggested further investigations to be held on other Firestone tires beyond those that were recalled (Muller, Green, St. Pierre, & Moore, 2000).

On May 22, 2001, Ford announced that they would recall another 13 million Firestone tires. Ford CEO Jacques A. Nasser stated that "We simply do not have enough confidence in the performance of these tires keeping, and their ability to keep our customers safe" (Muller, Welch, Green, & St. Pierre, 2001). Firestone pre-empted Ford's announcement with a press release dated May 21, 2001, announcing the termination of their long-standing relationship with Ford. Firestone added that Ford merely wanted to replace good tires with good tires. According to Firestone CEO John T. Lamps, "They are trying to divert attention away from the Explorer and trying to convince people this is only a tire issue. Rollovers are a vehicle issue, and that has got to be addressed" (Naughton & Hosenball, 2001, p. 38).

As the crisis continued to unfold, evidence surfaced suggesting that Ford and Firestone may have been aware of the potential crisis as early as 1998 (Greenwald, 2000; Muller & St. Pierre, 2000). Some have even suggested that the potential for a crisis such as this had been evident for over nine years (Eisenberg et al. 2000; Greenwald, 2000; Naughton, Hosenball, &

Gunson, 2000). State Farm Insurance began noticing a pattern of problems beginning as early as 1997, and Ford noticed problems in 1998 with tire treads that were separating in Saudi Arabia, Asia, and South America (Naughton, Hosenball, & Gunson, 2000). In May of 2000, Ford began replacing Firestone tires in Venezuela (Naughton, Hosenball, & Gunson, 2000). Firestone was reportedly reluctant in agreeing to the recall.

Other evidence soon surfaced suggesting that Firestone had been hiding evidence of potential tire problems, even going so far as to have lawyers suppress the reports of these problems (France, 2000). Ford also indicated that Firestone was reluctant to offer information pertaining to the crisis; they even suggested a possible cover-up on the part of Firestone (Naughton, Hosenball, & Gunson, 2000). An e-mail sent on January 28, 1999, from a Ford executive read "Is it possible that Firestone is not telling us the whole story to protect them from a recall or lawsuit?" (Bryant & DeLuna, 2000, p. 30).

Campaign

The first phase of Bridgestone/Firestone's image repair effort will be described from newspaper reports of events in 2000. Then, Bridgestone/Firestone's print and television advertisements from its "Making It Right" campaign will be analyzed to understand the second phase of its image repair campaign.

In a congressional hearing, U.S. House of Representatives Commerce Subcommittee Chair Billy Tauzin (R-Louisiana) succinctly stated his outrage: "You knew something was badly wrong, and you told nobody about it" (Smith, 2000). The problems faced by Bridgestone/Firestone in this crisis were twofold:

- 1) Bridgestone/Firestone manufactured a product that cost hundreds of lives in the United States and Venezuela (Chapman, 2000),

- 2) Bridgestone/Firestone concealed knowledge of the defects from the public for three years, only admitting to the problems after numerous reports of fatalities ("Firestone Retiree," 2000, p. 4),

As indicated before, Bridgestone/Firestone tires were alleged to be responsible for as many as 271 deaths. While this is shocking, arguably, these deaths could have been prevented if Firestone had acted responsibly on the basis of information in its possession. Senator Richard Bryan observed that:

Americans are quite properly indignant when they learn that Firestone and Ford initiated recalls in Saudi Arabia more than a year before the notice of recall was issued in this country. Other countries were also given earlier recall notices, among them Malaysia, Thailand, Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador. And the question arises, are not American lives as important to protect and safeguard as lives in these other countries, which were clearly given an earlier notice and opportunity? ("Firestone Retiree," 2000, p. 4)

Suspicious about Firestone were inflamed by advertisements from competing tire manufacturers. Ads by both Michelin and Goodyear raised concerns about tire safety (without naming Firestone). Allegations of dangerous products and delays in protecting consumers would constitute a major setback for any business. This multi-layered betrayal of the public's trust in a renowned company, Firestone Tires, clearly demanded a careful and effective image repair effort.

Firestone's defense developed through two relatively distinct phases. The first part occurred in the fall of 2000 as the government investigation began and Firestone announced - and attempted to justify -- the tire recall. This battle was fought in newspapers and in congressional hearings (key elements of which were highlighted in news reports). The second phase was fought largely through newspaper and television advertisements in 2001 as Firestone attempted to restore lost ground. We will analyze each phase separately. It will also become clear that Ford Motor Company was a major figure in this series of events; most accidents occurred with Firestone tires on Ford Explorers and, as we will show, Firestone attempted to shift the blame to Ford.

Firestone's image repair campaign incorporated five strategies: mortification, corrective action, bolstering, denial, and shifting the blame. Masatoshi Ono, CEO of Bridgestone/Firestone, engaged in mortification: "I come before you to apologize to you, the American people and especially to the families who have lost loved ones in these terrible rollover accidents" ("Firestone Detailed," 2000, p. A14). He straightforwardly apologized for the harms caused by these accidents. Citing health reasons, chief executive officer Masatoshi Ono resigned on October 10, 2000 and was replaced by John Lampe. However, his successor continued the use of mortification. One of Lampe's first actions was to hold a telecast news conference where he announced; "My first act as new CEO is going to be an apology for those who have suffered personal losses or had problems with our products" (Incantalupo, 2000, p. A6). The tire recall, of course, functioned as corrective action: Firestone replaced defective tires with safe ones. However, it seemed odd that the recall had three stages, beginning in southern states: "Replacements in some parts of the country aren't expected to be completed for 18 months" ("Consumers Demand," 2000, p. A8). A news release accompanying the recall in August of 2000 featured Gary Criger (executive vice president) declaring that "At Bridgestone/Firestone, nothing is more important to us than the safety of our consumers" ("Bridgestone Recalls," 2000, p. A14). Clearly, this statement meshes well with mortification and corrective action.

However, the company also denied their tires were defective. Bridgestone's president Yoichiro Kaizaki said "No structural deficiencies had been found in the tires themselves" ("Bridgestone President," 2000, p. B1). This raised the question of why the company was recalling tires if they were not defective. Firestone protested weakly that "We didn't recall the tires because we found a defect that caused the accidents" ("Bridgestone President," p. B1). Finally, Firestone attempted to blame the under inflated tires on Ford Explorer SUVs, because this model had experienced most of the tire failures. Bridgestone President Kaizaki revealed that

“it struck him that there was a high accident rate only for Ford Explorers, and not for other car makers’ vehicles that used the same products;” the “high death toll only applied to Ford vehicles” (“Bridgestone President,” 2000, p. B1). Similarly, CEO Lampe declared that “I’m tired of hearing that the whole blame rests upon the tires. Only a very small percentage of Ford Explorer accidents and rollovers are attributable to tires, whether ours or others” (Incaualupo, 2000). Finally, Kaizaki indicated that “under inflation of tires or poor maintenance are known to be causes of the tread belt separations and punctures that caused the accidents” (“Bridgestone President,” 2000, p. B1). This statement suggests that the blame resides with Ford (for recommending lower tire pressure) and/or consumers for not maintaining proper tire inflation. In fact, the desire to shift the blame was so great that in 2001, Firestone severed business ties with Ford. This decision, according to Firestone CEO and President John Lampe, was fueled by “Ford’s refusal to admit that the Explorer’s design played a role in the tires’ tread separations, which have been linked to 174 deaths and 700 injuries” (Incaualupo, 2001, p. A7). Clearly, Firestone wanted to shift a portion of the blame onto Ford.

The second phase began on April 5, 2001, when Firestone announced an advertising campaign called “Making It Right.” This was to be a direct attempt to influence public perception of the embattled company, outside of the legal and corporate boundaries of hearings and proceedings. The campaign was planned by the prestigious Grey Worldwide advertising agency. The campaign included print advertising run in the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Tire Business*, *Modern Tire Dealer*, *Automotive News*, *Ward’s Auto* and individual dailies throughout the country. The broadcast commercial campaign was designed to reach 80% of all adult viewers by purchasing time on the network morning and evening newscasts, primetime newsmagazines such as “20/20,” and cable news and entertainment channels. Notably, the television campaign

also included the popular auto racing events aired on ESPN, ESPN2, and ABC, In short, the campaign was directed at the general public, tire dealers, and tire/auto experts and enthusiasts.

Actions

Bridgestone/Firestone relied predominately on three image repair and CCSs -- corrective action, bolstering, and shifting the blame -- in that order of prominence. The theme of this campaign, "Making It Right," assumes that something is wrong and that the company intends to put it right, a clear instance of corrective action. The print advertisement made several promises for the future. The headline of the ad announced this theme: "Making It Right: You Have Our Word on That" ("Making It Right," 2001a). This general theme was repeated in the body of the ad: "We'll do whatever it takes, however long it takes, to gain your trust." Though devoid of details, this statement was unequivocal about the company's desire to regain trust. Finally, this ad closed with the promise "We'll make it right. It's that simple" ("Making It Right," 2001a). This was a blanket assertion that the problems would be resolved.

The ad did offer readers somewhat more in the way of specifics; "In the role of watchdogs, a new team of top technical and quality control managers has been assembled to continuously analyze tire and safety data. They'll act to uncover issues *before* they become problems" ("Making It Right," 2001a). Notice that this subtly shifts from "we will fix what is wrong" to "we will try to prevent future problems." This was intended to allay fears that new problems might surface in the future.

Corrective action benefits an organization by indicating to the stakeholders that the organization is taking action to eliminate the crisis and those factors that led to the crisis (Coombs, 1998). The practice of corrective action could include both actual action and the promise of future action: compensation, rectification, proactive works, and a change in corporate

policy. Firestone's initial corrective action strategy was a call for consumers to properly maintain tire pressures on their vehicle; however the sense of urgency to correct the problem was not evident. By starting in certain regions of the country and indicating the recall could take up to 18 months, Firestone gave the impression the consumer really was not that important, and that Firestone would take care of the crisis at their own convenience. Overall, the corrective action strategy, where traditionally employed as an accommodative response, was transformed to be an extra defensive strategy. According to Firestone, this crisis could have been corrected if Ford would have re-examined stability issues in the Ford Explorer.

The commercial campaign also promised corrective action. Lampe, presenting himself as the "new sheriff in town," offered: "I'm John Lampe, new CEO of Firestone and I'd like to introduce 'Making It Right,' our action plan for the future. It's dedicated to gaining your trust, and includes important upgrades in manufacturing and quality control" ("Making It Right," 2001b). This statement underscored that the company intended to improve the manufacturing process as well as quality control. Corrective action was the primary strategy employed in the image repair efforts.

The company bolstered their efforts by declaring that "We believe in our tires" ("Making It Right," 2001a). By claiming that the company believed in its own product, it attempted to convey the impression that Bridgestone/Firestone believed they were providing quality tires for automobiles, rather than being a company strictly motivated by profit. The broadcast ads bolstered as well. In "Making It Right" (2001b), Lampe explained that "Firestone wants to make it right because your safety is our primary concern." This statement asserted that customer safety was the company's top priority.

However, the television advertisements also used figures from outside the company to bolster its reputation. In a television ad called “Michael Andretti,” the famous auto racer offered his endorsement of Firestone tires:

Their tires and their people always perform at the highest standards. The champ car circuit has the fastest racing in the world with events on all kinds of tracks. In the wet and in the dry I’ve been amazed at how Firestone tires performed. Lap after lap, event after event, at the speed we race and in the wet and dry you must have absolute confidence in your tires. And as long as I’m on Firestones, I do.

(Michael Andretti, 2001)

This praise from a racing professional extolled the virtues of the Firestone product. He continued to offer additional praise; “Firestone has a great heritage in racing and in the automobile industry. My dad [racing great Mario Andretti] and I are glad to be a part of Firestone’s ongoing efforts in promoting highway safety” (Michael Andretti, 2001). This statement served to bolster Firestone’s historical role in the tire industry. It also repeated Andretti’s belief that the product had integrity.

A second television advertisement, “Michael and Mario Andretti on Trust”, included a brief instance of bolstering from Mario: Firestone is “committed to building quality tires” (2001). This statement bolstered the company’s level of commitment to the quality of its product. In “Michael and Mario Andretti on Safety,” a third television spot, Michael explained that “safety is the most important thing,” underlining the company’s presumed first priority ... safety. These examples clearly illustrate how Firestone attempted to bolster its damaged reputation.

At no time does Bridgestone/Firestone explicitly shift blame for the accidents to the respective vehicle operators. However, the ad clearly assumes that improperly inflated tires were an important contributing factor, advising consumers to “check your air pressure monthly.” In the context of an advertisement designed to mitigate the effects of this crisis, the meaning of “inflate your tires” is clear: the fatalities were at least partially explained by consumer error.

The commercial advertisements worked from this assumption as well. Speaking in “Michael Andretti,” the driver spoke of his new relationship with Firestone:

They’ve asked me to help with some messages to drivers. Some of those are going to focus on tire selection and maintenance and I believe that’s very important. Tires have become so good that they’re often the most neglected part of the car. By reminding consumers how important tires are, we aim to make the streets and highways safer for all of us. (2001)

Once again, Firestone implied that consumers were responsible for improper maintenance of their tires. By choosing to focus on the ill effects of improper tire choices and maintenance instead of alleged manufacturing problems, Andretti implicitly asserted that the problems were with the vehicles and customers, not the tire itself.

This form of shifting of blame occurred again in the “Michael and Mario Andretti on Safety” advertisement:

Michael: One of the more important cases of safety equipment is the tires.

Mario: So it’s really important to take great care of your tires.

Michael: To re-inflate and rotate to keep them performing safely. (2001)

Again, the Andrettis do not explicitly claim, “It’s not the tires, it’s the customers.” However, when they insisted -- in advertisement that appeared designed to repair Firestone’s reputation -- that consumers should pay better attention to air pressure and basic tire maintenance, they implied consumers who do not properly maintain their tires will be the ones responsible for any mishap or accident.

Firestone continued their offensive strategy with other attempts to shift the blame to Ford, by indicating that the problem was not in fact tread separation, but design problems with the Ford Explorer were causing these rollover accidents. John T. Lampe told a Senate committee that “We made some bad tires. We take responsibility for that. But the interaction between the tire and the vehicle should be the focus” (Muller, Welch, & Green, 2000, p. 40). In later testimony,

John T. Lampe indicated that “SUV’s should pull over, not roll over” when tire tread separations occur (Naughton, 2001, p. 45).

Firestone’s blame shifting was not only targeted at Ford. After blaming the Ford Explorer design flaws, Firestone attempted to shift blame onto the Decatur, Illinois manufacturing plant. Firestone maintained that the problem tires only originated from that one plant. Union officials fired back by saying Firestone should stop trying to place blame on their own employees, and instead focus on the various quality control problems within the manufacturing facility (Eisenberg et al. 2000). Union officials also pointed fingers at Ford, maintaining that Ford recommended an incorrect, almost dangerous, tire inflation pressure for its Ford Explorer (Downey, 2000).

Throughout the crisis, Ford and Firestone exchanged various explanations for the crisis as well as implementing several different crisis communication and image repair strategies. An analysis of the Firestone response revealed that management maintained a more defensive strategy rather than an accommodative strategy. According to the symbolic approach using such defensive strategies would be a mismatch in CCSs (Coombs, 1998). These mismatches are not expected to help alleviate the crisis, nor help in image restoration efforts.

Eisenberg et al. (2000) put the Firestone crisis response in perspective.

“Thanks to a generously dreadful crisis management, marked primarily by silence and denials, Firestone brand has very little credibility left. The public is becoming increasingly skittish about any Firestone tires - the vast majority of which are safe.”
(p. 38)

Firestone public relations executives failed to have their top management take control of the crisis in the media, and because of this it appeared they were trying to hide from the crisis. Kunii and Faust (2000) feel that Firestone’s overall strategy appears to be a “dogged one of hunkering down and waiting for the cloud to blow over” and that any attack against Ford

demonstrated how Firestone was operating in a defensive mode (p. 43). Kunii et al. also suggest that Firestone's president Masatoshi Ono was laying low during the crisis. When he did appear for a Congressional testimony, Ono took "Full and personal responsibility", but then went on to deny that there were any tire defects (Bryant et al. 2000, p. 32). He also continued to blame the consumer for poor tire maintenance.

Execution

The crisis was widely covered in the media, and this presentation of many other views of the crises by the media resulted in substantial damage to the Firestone brand. This lends further support to reports that this crisis was a mishandled transgression. The print media quickly pointed out the fact that the current crisis was the second largest tire recall in history. The largest one occurred in 1978, when Firestone also recalled 14.5 million tires (Lavelle, 2000, p. 48). Media reports also frequently mentioned the Decatur, Illinois manufacturing plant strike in 1994 (Downey, 2000; Eisenberg et al. 2000). These reports raised issues with Firestone's concern over employee as well as consumer safety (Bryant et al. 2000). A history of crises such as these by any organization will almost always lead the perceptions of company stakeholders to view the current crisis as a transgression on the part of the organization (Coombs, 1999).

As the story unfolded, the weekly news media reported new developments in the crisis. Within the text of the articles, readers were presented with new interpretations and attributions about the cause of the crisis, as well as the responses by each organization. Titles of the articles set the stage, and the tone of the text and quotes within the articles allowed readers to see how knowledgeable sources interpreted the crisis as well as providing valuable insight into the cause of the crisis.

In a review of popular weekly news magazines; *Business Week*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report* between the periods of August 2000 and July 2001, the crisis can be viewed from how the news magazine presents its frame of the crisis. Early titles clearly designated this situation a Firestone crisis. Titles for articles published in weekly news magazines on August 21, 2000 and during the initial week of the crisis included: "Firestone's tire crisis" (Greenwald, 2000), "Ripped tires and blown reputations" (Lavelle, 2000), and "Throwing the brakes on tires that peel out" (Naughton & Skipp, 2000). During the following weeks, publications maintained much of their focus on Firestone and the causes of tread separation, with titles such as "Peeling Apart" (Naughton & Hosenball, 2001), and "Firestone's rough road" (Eisenberg et al. 2000).

As the crisis progressed, the news magazines began to add Ford into the titles of their articles. *Business Week* asked "How will Firestone and Ford steer through this blowout" (Muller & St. Pierre, 2000), "Firestone and Ford: The ride gets bumpier" (Muller, Green, St. Pierre, & Moore, 2000), and "Ford vs. Firestone: A corporate whodunit" (Muller & St. Pierre, 2001). *Newsweek* reported "Workers to Ford: Don't tread on us" (Downey, 2000), and "Ford vs. Firestone" (Naughton, Hosenball, Figueroa, Downey, Skipp, & Barry, 2000). *U.S. News & World Report* raised questions, such as "Ford v. Firestone. Which is to blame? The tires or the vehicles?" (Lavelle, 2001).

Many of these weekly news publications were creating catchy play-on-words for their titles. Some headlines linked the crisis to both companies. Some titles clearly were unfavorable, such as "They just don't have a clue how to handle this" (Kunii et al. 2000); "Fighting to stay on the road" (Kerwin, Muller, & St. Pierre, 2000); "Firestone and Ford: The road gets bumpier" (Muller, Green, St. Pierre, & Moore, 2000); and "Spinning out of control" (Naughton, Hosenball & Gunson, 2000)

Overall, the text within the articles was no friendlier than the headlines preceding these articles. Many articles began by relating the personal experiences of the victims to the reader (Bryant et al., 2000; Greenwald, 2000; Naughton, Hosenball, & Gunson, 2000; Naughton & Skipp, 2000). Firestone and Ford were accused of using “smoke and mirrors” rather than clear explanations to address the crisis (Muller & St. Pierre, 2000). The finger pointing between Ford and Firestone was also highlighted (Eisenberg et al. 2000; Muller, Green, St. Pierre, & Moore, 2000).

Subject matter experts and other sources close to the situation were featured often throughout much of the coverage in these weekly publications. One former Firestone engineer was quoted as saying “You have got a vehicle with marginal stability and a tire that is marginal. Put them together, and you’ve got a disaster” (Eisenberg et al. 2000). James R. Gregory, CEO of Corporate Branding LLC says “The only winners in this are going to be their competitors” (Muller, Welch, Green & St. Pierre, 2001). According to Noel M. Tichy, a management professor at the University of Michigan, the fact that there were two companies engaged in crisis complicated the ability of either organization to give a clear and succinct explanation for the crisis (Muller & St. Pierre, 2000, p. 54). A branding expert was also quoted as saying “If you argue with your stakeholders and say ‘it wasn’t our fault’ or ‘there wasn’t enough air pressure,’ you might be dead right, but from a branding point of view, it is a disaster” (Holstein, 2000, p. 64).

Lawyers also provided their interpretation of the situation. Assessing the crisis from legal sources, it seemed that Ford and Firestone fighting against each other was favorable to the lawyers. The split enabled lawyers to pit one company against the other in court (Greenwald, 2001). Newsweek reported that each side was establishing their own defense, “a dynamic that gives joy to the personal-injury lawyers” (Naughton, Hosenball, Figueroa, Downey, Skipp, &

Barry, 2000, p. 30). According to one lawyer, "They're shooting at each other instead of shooting at me" (Naughton & Hosenball, 2001, p. 39).

People began to relabel the tires in derogatory ways. Jay Leno, a popular late night television host, called Firestone tires "Tombstones" (Naughton & Hosenball, 2001, p. 39) and Venezuela media were calling them "assassin tires" (Naughton, Hosenball & Gunson, 2000, p. 58). One consumer was quoted as calling the tires "Death tires" (Naughton & Skipp, 2000, p. 60).

Based on the media's framing of this crisis, it appeared that both Firestone and Ford were acting on their own, despite early recommendations of working together from the onset of the crisis. Each company took a different approach to dealing with the crisis. Ford began by being open and responsive to consumer concerns; however before the crisis was resolved Firestone managed to push Ford into more of a defensive and reactionary role. Occasionally articles and quotes were published in the media concerning the inconclusiveness of the cause of the crisis. On the popular television show, "Whose Line is it Anyway?" host Drew Carey joked that there will be a new show coming soon sponsored by Ford and Firestone called "Whose Fault is it Anyway?"

Much has been written in the media about Firestone's failed tire recalls. Although the analysis of the execution of this crisis is predominately speculative, it is nevertheless possible to identify some likely causes of this public relations nightmare. Firestone's attempts at recalls failed in both 1978 and again in 2000, for many of the same reasons, and in many of the same ways. To understand this failure, one should examine the crisis communication practices, or the lack of proper planning that is normally part of any pre-planned, strategic crisis communication plan.

One of the basic rules of crisis communication is the necessity to act as quickly as possible in implementing your crisis communication plan and initiating communications with your

stakeholders. In 1978, Firestone waited about a year before announcing recall plans (Gaschen, 1980). More than twenty years later, Firestone was again accused of stalling and refusing to recall defective tires, despite pressure from different safety advocates and organizations.

Another fundamental rule violated during this campaign was the failure on the part of Firestone to accept responsibility. In this case, if the tire recall had been effectively implemented, then the situation would have probably disappeared from media and public consciousness. However, this would have required Firestone to immediately own up to the problem and accept responsibility. Complete candor and honesty are necessary parts of any crisis communication strategy. In both the 1978 and 2000 recall, Firestone's public communication strategies and actions were questioned on ethical grounds during Congressional inquiries.

One of the most serious consequences of this failed execution was diminished corporate credibility. For a manufacturer or retailer of any product, lack of credibility will translate into reduced sales, market share, revenue, profit and stock value. The aggressive denial and argumentative nature of Firestone's tactics prolonged the media exposure of the crisis, and this prolonged exposure resulted in greater public awareness of a crisis, subsequently spawning the need for even more media coverage.

All organizations have a corporate culture, or set of norms, values and informal rules designed to characterize the internal organization. There must be something distinctive about Firestone's corporate culture, to have produced such remarkably similar CCSs more than twenty years apart.

It is impossible to say whether corporate culture played much of a factor in the way this crisis communication campaign was executed without interviewing those who worked at Firestone and were in charge of managing the crisis. Other possible causes for this failed crisis communication effort could include poor planning or the exclusion of public relations. There is

reason to believe that public relations was involved in merely a participatory rather than a strategic or advisory role in the tire recall planning and implementation. Having gone through one similar recall before, Firestone should have been better prepared to implement an effective recall plan.

Evaluation

The August 2000 recall was termed “voluntary” but it was clearly in response to mounting pressure and occurred after the government began its investigation. Firestone’s corrective action was too little, too late, and too slow. First, the recall was too little, as demonstrated by the later, more extensive recalls. Second, it was too late, because tires were recalled in other countries before issuing a recall in the United States. Finally, it was too slow, being spread out over 18 months. Even if there was a reason to begin in the South, this would be little comfort to those in other regions of the country who saw temperatures in the nineties or higher — or those who vacationed or engaged in business travel in the South. Finally, this strategy contradicted Firestone’s use of denial. If the tires truly were safe - and if the company had hard evidence to prove that - there would have never been a need for a recall.

Attempting to shift the blame to Ford and the tire inflation recommendations for Firestone tires on Explorers, could not be expected to work well. At best, Firestone could only hope to share the blame with Ford - Firestone tires were, indisputable failing. However, the question of whether Ford deserved even partial blame is not clear. Ford spokesperson Mike Vaughan indicated that other tires on Explorers did not have problems “The issue is with this particular tire. The recalled tires are the ones that show the higher failure rate. It is not an issue with the air pressure or with other tires” (“Ford Recommended,” 2000, p. B1). Furthermore, Ford had initiated tire recalls when Firestone had failed to do so. Ford also raised questions

concerning the safety of these tires: "Bridgestone had said it wasn't aware of a problem until July [2000]. And then it only knew, Bridgestone had said, because an impatient Ford analyzed the tire company's reports of incidents involving injury or damage" (Healey, September 2000, p. B3).

Ford CEO Jaques Nasser explained that:

I listened in disbelief as senior Firestone executives not only acknowledged that Firestone had analyzed its claims data but also identified significant patterns of tread separations as early as 1998. Yet Firestone said nothing to anyone, including the Ford Motor Company. (Ford, "Firestone," 2000, p. A1)

Thus, it appears that Firestone concealed evidence of tire defects even as Ford sought to investigate the tire's apparent safety problems. The evidence available to the public does not appear to support Firestone's attempt to shift even part of the blame to Ford. In fact, eight times as many people blamed Firestone as Ford for "failure to warn consumers about the dangers of rollover accidents associated with these [Firestone] tires" (Roper, 2000). Shifting the blame to Ford was not successful.

The effectiveness of Firestone's bolstering and denial strategies were undermined by several factors. First, if people believed the tire had defects, this would undermine Firestone's use of a denial strategy. A *CNN/USA Today* poll conducted June 8-10, 2001 found that only 23% of the public had a favorable view of Firestone tires. In this case Firestone's use of denial and bolstering were not effective strategies.

Second, the fact that recalls occurred in other countries, and the fact that Firestone apparently had evidence of tire defects in 1998, which it concealed, completely undermines its attempt to bolster its concern for safety and the sincerity of its mortification. This phase of the image restoration battle, fought largely in newspapers and Congressional hearings, was a loss for Firestone. Ford, on the other hand, had tense moments but appears to have effectively managed its image threat.

We should note that there were both similarities and differences between the two phases. Only the first phase attempted to employ mortification. Perhaps Firestone hoped the public outrage over rollover deaths had dissipated. Both phases attempted to shift the blame, but the target changed: Firestone attempted to shift the blame to Ford and its Explorer in the first phase, and then to consumers' improper maintenance of tire pressure in the second phase. Corrective action began as relatively vague promises and a highly visible voluntary recall, but shifted into quality control and prevention of future problems. It is not clear that any of these changes were improvements.

Notice that the very name of this phase, "Making It Right" assumes that Firestone had done something wrong, something that needed to be put right. Thus, it was appropriate for the company to implement corrective action. In order to remain a viable purveyor of tires, the company had to assure potential buyers that its product would be reliable in the future. Arguably, corrective action should have been implemented earlier; and the delay in responding could only have served to aggravate the irritation with the public. Even if the tires were not the actual cause of the blowouts and rollovers, the tires were perceived as the problem. Still, the company was wise to offer corrective action as a primary strategy.

Notably, the mortification that was offered so ineffectually in the first phase was missing in this phase. This may have been an attempt to avoid legal liability (Tyler, 1997). However, defects in tire design are clearly Firestone's responsibility. Another consideration is the credibility of the corrective action proposed. The "new team of technical and quality control managers" referred to in the print ad was not defined specifically enough to persuade the audience of this team's independence from the company. As Benoit and Czerwinski (1997) noted, for such proposed reforms to instill confidence they would have to be perceived as genuinely independent.

Thus, apart from the “voluntary” recall, which presumably took defective tires off the road, there is little reason for consumers to believe anything changed at Firestone. Perhaps because they attempted to maintain their denial, they did not discuss improved design or tires or corrected manufacturing or testing products. Why should consumers believe that Firestone’s current and future tires would be any safer than past tires?

Bolstering was a reasonable choice for Bridgestone/Firestone. After all, this company has a long history of manufacturing a respected product. As such, claims about the company’s heritage were quite plausible. Moreover, the use of Mario and Michael Andretti as spokesmen for the company was a wise choice. Even the most disinterested person knows that the Andretti name is synonymous with auto racing. So, when the Andrettis extolled the virtues of Bridgestone/Firestone and spoke of their long relationship with the company, the tire manufacturer’s overall image was improved. The only drawback is the appearance of financial involvement, using Andretti as opposed to a neutral third party made their spokesmen less credible. Firestone was a sponsor of the Andretti racing team; this provided the Andrettis with a powerful incentive to praise the company.

Shifting the blame to consumers was another poor choice, even when accomplished implicitly. Through verbal discourse discussing “tire maintenance” initiatives and graphic communication promoting tire inflation standards, the company was implying that operator error rather than the tires caused the accidents. This might have been a feasible approach if the tires were not widely perceived as defective. However, as discussed above, dramatic testimony at Congressional hearings and in the press repeatedly asserted that *the tires were at fault*. Nor are customers - or the relatives of victims - likely to respond favorably to attempts by Firestone to blame them (consumers). Accordingly, the attempts to shift blame throughout the campaign were implausible.

Overall, Bridgestone/Firestone's "Making It Right" campaign should be judged as a failure. Corrective action was an appropriate strategy, but should have come sooner. The company's efforts to bolster its image were reasonable choices. However, the company's attempts to shift blame were not only implausible, but in contrast to the implied mortification that accompanied many promises of corrective action. Opinion polling supports our position that the campaign was less than successful, A *CNN/USA Today* poll conducted June 8-10, 2001 found that only 31% had a favorable opinion of Bridgestone/Firestone, Inc., while 56% had an unfavorable view of the company. Frankly, the company had not shed its image problem.

Conclusion

The Bridgestone/Firestone – Ford crisis is the first case study for two companies in crisis simultaneously and offers many lessons for the study of crisis communication. Many of the strategies incorporated by Firestone were counter to the advice suggested by prior crisis communication literature. Firestone failed to understand that the situation dictates the possible choices of CCSs that would be most effective in image restoration efforts. Firestone appears to have ignored the concerns of the customers, and instead focused on attempts to shift attributions to another party. Rather than communicating with the public and addressing consumer concerns, Firestone chose to adapt the widely discouraged tactic of shifting the blame for the crisis to any scapegoat that could be identified. These tactics ranged from blaming the consumer for failure to comply with Ford's tire pressure guidelines, to blaming Ford and their design of the Ford Explorer. Firestone even blamed their own employees at one of the manufacturing plants.

Denial and the concealment of incriminating data are common responses to wrongful action. Had corrective action been implemented immediately, it seems likely that many deaths

and injuries would have been avoided. The likely interpretation by consumers is that corporate greed was responsible for failure to act responsibly.

Analysis of the first phase suggests that mortification and bolstering strategies are not suitable for use in conjunction with strategies of denial and corrective action. Some strategies (e.g., mortification and corrective action; corrective action and accident) work well together. In contrast, "I apologize but I did nothing wrong" and "There is nothing wrong with our product and we are recalling it" are not suitable combinations.

The attempt to shift blame to Ford was poorly conceived. First, the best that could be expected was to share the blame. That is, this could perhaps reduce the responsibility of Firestone but it had no hope of exonerating them even if successful. Given the indisputable fact that Firestone tires failed when used on Explorers (and other tire brands did not experience the same failure rate), it is clear that even if Ford is partially to blame, Firestone must still shoulder a major portion of the responsibility.

Worse, evidence available in these reports indicated that Ford repeatedly asked for tire safety data from Firestone. Revelations indicated that Firestone had analyzed the data, revealing problems, but did not share those analyses with Ford. Ford performed its own data analysis and then Ford replaced Firestone's tires in a recall of its own. The obvious implication is that Ford's share of the blame was quite small if not non-existent. Attempting to shift the blame to Ford was a poor choice for Firestone's image repair effort.

Corrective action must be perceived as correcting the problem. If tires are defective, they should be replaced quickly and manufacturing and/or design flaws must be corrected.

Firestone's recall was too little, too late, and too slow, and it never made a serious effort to persuade consumers that its tires had been changed to be more safe. Perhaps the company's dogged commitment to denial kept them from implementing (or informing consumers about)

effective corrective action - and this could stem from a fear of lawsuits. Whatever the reason, the consequences for Firestone's image were disastrous.

It is a good idea to reinforce bolstering with experts (e.g., racing professionals). However, in this case, the question of whether the Andretti's were biased (by financial support from Firestone) limited the effectiveness of their endorsements (and of their implicit attempts to shift the blame).

Firestone clearly botched this attempt to recover from a very serious threat to its image. Previous research on a organization in crisis investigated the role of discourse in helping image restoration efforts. The addition of a second organization embattled within the same crisis complicated matters rather than made the process easier. Instead of paddling together to restore consumer confidence, the organizations were fighting each other for the lifeboat, while the customers sank with the ship. By having Firestone attack Ford, it seems that Ford was not able to be proactive in their efforts. Ford needed to respond to Firestone, as well as take measures to satisfy the consumers.

The symbolic approach (Coombs, 1995; Coombs, 1998; Coombs, 1999) would suggest that the more a crisis is perceived to be a transgression on the part of the organization, the more an accommodative strategy would be the best match for an organization's image restoration efforts. Firestone chose to attack the crisis from a defensive approach, ranging from denying that a problem exists to shifting the blame to everyone in sight.

The media, in its own efforts to determine the cause of the crisis, kept reporting on the crisis. As the accusations became more prevalent and damaging, the harsher the headlines and text. The more accusations that were thrown by the companies at each other, the more it seemed the reporters investigated the situation.

One can argue that Firestone's approach did achieve one level of success. At the beginning of the crisis, the crisis did appear, at least within the media, as a tire problem. Firestone did not repair its own image. However, they did manage to bring their partner of over 100 years down with them. Within the first few articles featured in the media, it became quiet clear this was a battle between two companies to assign blame rather than a simple tire recall. Ironically, two companies who were both clearly at fault in this crisis fought this battle. The effects of the defensive approach used by Firestone are consistent with the predicted outcome from the literature. Using a mismatch of CCSs to the crisis situation generally increased unfavorable reports in the media, and increased attribution of blame for the crisis.

Chapter VI

Summary and Conclusion

Protecting corporate reputation in modern times requires skill in crisis communication. Due to complexities of organizations, crises themselves are more likely. At the same time, the media have become more aggressive in their coverage, the affects of crises have become more difficult to contain and the public has become more skeptical of corporate crisis communication in general.

Systems theory provides a framework in which contemporary organizations can increase their potential for success and survival in these difficult times. By operating as open systems and exchanging information with their environment and between internal units within their hierarchy they enhance their ability to adapt to change and respond effectively to crisis.

Information integration theory and game theory also offer useful guidelines for ongoing communication with the organization's key stakeholders. To influence attitudes, information must be managed effectively; it must be pertinent, timely and reliable. The organization must work with the media and be prepared to supply them with information even if it means initial losses in public image, in order to have a voice in the communication process. In the end, the most essential element in effective crisis communication is the establishment of credibility; it is also the most important factor in protecting the organization's reputation over the long term.

The Internet has opened a new era of vulnerability for organizations. Public Relations professionals learn of potential online crisis through a variety of sources, and those who are proactively monitoring the Internet may learn of negative publicity before it can become a real crisis. They must recognize where their clients or companies are vulnerable to attacks and

develop online relationships that will withstand them. Internet resources can help with the investigation and the resolution of the problem. Negative Internet publicity may address many of the same issues found in conventional media, such as product and service complaints, employee grievances and health or environmental issues. Yet the widespread, expedient nature of the Internet may magnify those issues whereas conventional media might not. The future relationship between public relations professionals and the Internet is important, as the Internet reaches mainstream status with the general public. Publicity campaigns then may become better targeted toward even the casual Internet user; much like direct mail marketing campaigns are targeted against key consumer groups.

New technologies will become the framework on which the future of crisis communication is built. As related elements of the larger system of global communications, the public relations profession and the Internet must become closely linked as each element continues to evolve, and the changes in one may affect the other. For now, public relations professionals and organization heads alike must consider that mastering this medium and understanding its implications for the future of public relations and crisis management will be key to business success in the new century.

In general, the public remains skeptical of efforts by corporations to manage their crises and they tend to believe the media before the company. Faced with this credibility deficit, companies must consider strategies for release of information, such as full disclosure and proactive media relations, in advance of a crisis in order to manage these situations effectively.

It is encouraging to note that most crises can be anticipated and that crisis planning can improve an organization's readiness and ability to manage them. Less encouraging are the results of studies that show many companies unprepared to deal with crisis, despite evidence

that coverage is increasing due to a rise in new modes of high-speed communication and globalization of brands and products.

One reason for the lack of preparation may lie within an organization's own culture, which exerts a strong influence over how the organization perceives its vulnerability, as well as how it communicated with stakeholders. As an example of the dynamic relationship between an organization and its environment, crisis also has the ability to transform corporate culture and change the way the organization communicates with key audience groups.

A process for developing a crisis communication plan encompasses all five phases of crisis management: signal detection, preparation/prevention, damage containment, recovery and learning. As part of an open system that interacts dynamically with its environment, the organization's plan should identify potential problems, target key stakeholders and contain objectives consistent with the corporation's philosophy. Open, candid communication with the press on a regular basis, even when no crisis is in sight, is the key to positive, proactive media relations under crisis conditions. Collaboration with external groups, such as the media or industry partners in the development and testing of the plan are also part of this interactive process.

To maintain system integrity, internal exchange of information is also needed. This includes coordination of responsibilities between units within the organization, building an interdisciplinary crisis communication team and achieving consensus on communications objectives during the planning phase so that the organization speaks with one voice at the time of crisis.

An open systems approach is also vital to the learning and recovery stages of crisis management. Interaction with key stakeholders via surveys, direct mail and other means enhances the feedback received through the media to help the organization determine how

perceptions have changed as the result of the crisis and what steps are necessary to restore and protect the organization's image.

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