

Rehabilitating Your Organization's Image: Public Relations Professionals' Perceptions of the Effectiveness and Ethicality of Image Repair Strategies in Crisis Situations

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When crisis hits an organization, public relations professionals are called upon as communication experts to play a key role in mitigating damage to and maintaining stakeholder confidence in the organization. The relevance of crisis and post-crisis communication research to public relations practitioners lies in its utility in identifying factors that influence stakeholders' perceptions before, during, and after organizational crises, and in identifying processes and strategies that are effective in maintaining or restoring an organization's reputation and image. These brand and image repair strategies rely on effective use of language, persuasive message strategies, and symbolic actions. This study offers evidence-based decision making from empirical research based on practicing public relations professionals' reported perceptions and use of specific strategies in different types of crisis situations. The use of crisis communication strategies among public relations professionals, focusing on judgments about which strategies are ethical, which strategies professionals are likely to use and recommend, and which strategies are most effective, is contextualized within three common reputation crisis scenarios (accidents, product safety, and illegal activity).

Crisis management, as it relates to corporate reputation, brand, and image management, is increasingly important in the wake of billions of dollars lost to organizations (e.g., corporate, nonprofit, government and education) due to reputation and brand erosion, as well as declining stakeholder (e.g., investor, customer, and donor) confidence due to such scandals. On a societal level, the continuing effects of 9/11 and the devastating and far-reaching consequences of natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina demonstrate the increasingly frequent and catastrophic failures impacting public and private infrastructures that result when crises occur. Although organizations, their leaders, and spokespeople will attempt a wide range of actions and messages as symbolic appeals to an organization's constituent publics, there is little certainty about what types of actions and messages are persuasive (Benoit, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Kim, Ferrin, Cooper & Dirks, 2004; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998).

Characteristics of Organizational or Corporate Crises

When organizations and leaders find themselves in crises that thrust them under scrutiny and criticism that challenge their legitimacy or social responsibility (Hearit, 1995), their public response is an important factor in recovery (Coombs & Holliday, 2002; Fearn-Banks, 2001; Seeger & Ulmer, 2003). Communication activities involved in responding to a crisis, including determining the optimal timing, response priorities, specific messages conveyed to the media and/or to individuals, source(s) of messages,

and priorities of crisis management, have implications for the organization and for crisis managers.

Crisis and Post-Crisis Corporate Communication

Crisis management encompasses the overall strategic planning to prevent, mitigate, respond, and recover routine operations during a crisis or negative occurrence. This is a process that removes some of the risk and uncertainty, promotes long-term viability, and allows the organization to be in greater control of its destiny (Fearn-Banks, 2001; Seeger & Ulmer, 2003). Crisis communication is a broad area of research and application that includes pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis decision making, training, planning, teamwork, goal setting, and crisis communication plans (Coombs, 2007a). Public crisis communication focuses on the verbal, visual, and/or written interaction between the organization and its publics (sometimes directly and sometime mediated through the news media) before, during, and after the crisis event, and “is designed to minimize damage to the reputation of the organization” (Fearn-Banks, 2001, p. 480; Fearn-Banks, 1996) and to maintain stakeholder confidence. While public crisis communication must include conveying the facts surrounding the event (e.g., the presence of an explosion, or the occurrence of a crash), it also focuses on questions of context, cause, responsibility, blame, relative harm and remedial action, which usually are disputed during and following a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Kim, Ferrin, Cooper & Dirks, 2004; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998).

Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) begins with the assessment of reputational threat presented by a crisis. Threat is described as “the amount of damage a crisis could inflict on the organization’s reputation if no action is taken” (Coombs, 2007a, p. 165). According to SCCT, the level of threat to reputation is determined by whether or not stakeholders believe the organization caused the crisis, the organization’s crisis history, and the organization’s prior relational reputation, or how well stakeholders believe the organization has treated them in the past (Coombs, 2007a). SCCT research has shown that the threat to an organization increases as stakeholders’ belief that the organization was responsible for the crisis intensifies (Coombs, 1998; Coombs and Holladay, 1996, 2002, 2004).

The relevance of crisis and post-crisis communication research to public relations practitioners lies in its utility in identifying factors that influence stakeholders’ perceptions before, during, and after organizational crises, and in identifying processes and strategies that are effective in maintaining or restoring the organization’s reputation and image and which rely on effective use of language, persuasive message strategies, and symbolic actions.

Image Repair Strategies

Research of message strategies has helped develop the response strategy approach “from a prescriptive set of procedures to the recognition that crisis communication can be initiated from a variety of rhetorical perspectives” (Olaniran & Williams, 2001, p. 488; see also Benoit, 1997; Heath & Abel, 1996; Heath & Gray, 1997; Seeger & Ulmer, 2003; Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995). One rhetorical perspective on organizational responses to

crises or accusations of wrongdoing focuses on the organization's image restoration strategies, much of which is grounded in the study of apologia (Hearit, 2001; see also Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001). Corporate apologia focuses on "how corporations in the midst of public relations crises respond to criticism in the defense of their carefully crafted images in order to deal with the problem of guilt" (Hearit & Brown, 2004, p. 460).

Benoit (1995) has developed the widely cited Image Restoration Theory that offers a descriptive system of examining image restoration or repair strategies employed in crisis communication. Benoit assumes that corporate communication is a goal-directed activity, and that maintaining a positive reputation for the organization is one of the central goals of this communication. In crisis situations, Benoit claims that an organization's central, although not only goal of communication is "restoring or protecting one's reputation" (p. 71). The importance of an organization's reputation leads the accused party to respond under potentially threatening circumstances. Fundamentally, an attack on one's image, reputation, or brand is comprised of two components that rely on the relevant audience's (or audiences') perceptions. Only when a salient audience, or stakeholder, believes that both the action is offensive and that the individual or organization is responsible for the offense is the accused organization's or leader's reputation at risk, and is the actor/organization likely to employ image restoration strategies.

Benoit's Image Restoration Theory posits five primary macro strategies employed by organizations in their crisis communication: denial, evading of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Fourteen specific message strategies fall within these five broad categories. Silence, or no comment, was dropped as a possible rhetorical response in early explorations of this typology (Benoit, 1995; Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004). However, in the case of Enron and other examinations of crisis management, silence impacts negative perception and is connected with social morals (Rogers, Dillard, & Yuthas, 2005; Trinkaus & Giacalone, 2005).

Discussion of the use of silence in image repair and crisis communication literature has been limited to the recognition that this strategy should be an area of examination (Kim et al., 2004). Benoit intentionally omitted an organization's silence, ignoring accusations, or publicly stating "No comment" from his typology of image restoration strategies (Benoit, 1995; Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004), but acknowledges that silence is a strategy that can be and is used, at least for a short time. Trinkaus and Giacalone (2005) saw the silence of Enron's leaders and watchdogs as a problem or, at the least, a "communication glitch or a temporary lapse in social morality" (p. 237). Likewise, an analysis of public statements the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants issued during the Enron debacle argued that the AICPA's initial silence, followed by denial, then false and inadequate support for counterclaims, increased the negative perception of the accounting profession (Rogers, Dillard, & Yuthas, 2005). Discussion of the use of silence in image repair and crisis communication literature has been sparse to date, beyond the recognition that this strategy should be an area for future research (Kim et al., 2004). Table 1 provides summary definitions for the 14 strategies, and also for silence.

	Categories	Strategies	Working Definition
1	Corrective Action		Restore situation or prevent reoccurrence
	Denial		
2		Simple Denial	Contradiction of accusation
3		Shifting Blame	Pass the guilt to another party
	Evading of Responsibility		
4		Accident	Unintentional action or effect
5		Defeasibility	Didn't know about or not in control
6		Good Intentions	Motives were good
7		Provocation	Responding to an offensive act
8	Mortification		Admission and acceptance of responsibility
	Reducing the Offensiveness		
9		Bolstering	Relate positive features of the offender
10		Minimization	Reduce importance of the offense
11		Differentiation	Less offensive than other actions
12		Transcendence	Viewed favorably in larger/different context
13		Attack	Counterattack accuser
14		Compensation	Reimburse victims
15	Silence		No comment or ignoring accusation

This study investigates the perceptions of the appropriateness and effectiveness of Benoit's (1997, 1995) image repair strategies in restoring damaged reputations. Benoit and Drew (1997) investigated perceptions of appropriateness and effectiveness of the five macro strategies and their variants in image repair in interpersonal communication situations. They concluded that mortification and corrective actions were perceived as more effective and more appropriate than other strategies. Bolstering, minimization, provocation, and denial were rated as the least effective and least appropriate strategies. However, no systematic attempt to extend these findings to the contexts of corporate reputation and brand management has been made.

While numerous qualitative and critical assessments have been offered as to the desirability and/or effectiveness of image restoration strategies, little research examines the degree to which these strategies are chosen by organizations and their crisis managers when confronted by crises, and which strategies are perceived to have pragmatic utility (Coombs, 2007; Hearit, 2001; Brinson & Benoit, 1996). Still less is known about which strategies are perceived by crisis management professionals to be effective and ethical, and are likely to be recommended to organizational leaders as desirable responses to crisis situations (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Kim et. al, 2004). Research in crisis communication and the use of image repair strategies is dominated by case study analysis, which limits our understanding to descriptions and speculations in retrospect about crisis situations that have occurred. Recent research reveals the

interesting finding that organizations involved in major crises from 1989 to 2002 used different crisis message strategies depending on the stakeholders that their message targeted, however, this study also is limited in its case study analysis (Stephens, Malone, & Bailey, 2005).

This study offers evidence-based decision making from empirical research based on practicing public relations professionals' perceptions and use of specific strategies in different types of crisis situations.

Student Perceptions of Image Repair Strategies

This is the second phase of research conducted by these communication scholars. The pilot study administered this survey to advanced public relations, law, and journalism students, a first step in a research program aimed at measuring perceptions of professional practitioners who regularly make the message strategy choices for organizations embroiled in crisis events. Surveying pre-professionals who are preparing for careers, nearing completion of their major area of study, and who may be expected to represent the perspectives of professionals in those fields, was a reasonable first step and yielded significant findings. Two general findings seemed to emerge from the data. First, while the positive or negative evaluations of strategies differed among the three pre-professional groups, the hierarchal positioning (from highest to lowest) is relatively stable, indicating more positively and negatively perceived rhetorical strategies (see Table 2). In general, strategies maintained their ranking in terms of respondents' preferences, and most rhetorical strategies are viewed either good or bad regardless of context or profession.

Table 2. Overall Image Restoration Strategy Means and Rankings

	Effective	Likely	Ethical	Effective	Likely	Ethical	SDRank
Corrective Action	1.21	1.51	1.17	1	1	1	0.00
Mortification	1.41	1.77	1.29	2	2	2	0.00
Compensation	2.00	2.17	1.84	3	3	3	0.00
Bolstering	3.16	2.44	2.67	4	4	4	0.00
Transcendence	3.68	3.09	3.30	5	6	6	0.58
Good intentions	3.75	2.72	3.01	6	5	5	0.58
Minimization	4.24	3.57	3.94	7	8	8	0.58
Defeasibility	4.35	3.55	3.90	8	7	7	0.58
Counterattack	4.55	3.92	3.99	9	9	9	0.00
Differentiate	4.61	4.04	4.17	10	10	10	0.00
Accident	4.71	4.19	4.48	11	11	12	0.58
Provocation	4.77	4.30	4.68	12	13	14	1.00
Blameshift	4.80	4.35	4.59	13	14	13	0.58
Silence	4.82	4.21	4.31	14	12	11	1.53
Deny	4.91	4.65	4.88	15	15	15	0.00

Second, three distinct identifiable categories, or tiers, emerged (see Table 3). The strategies perceived most positively were corrective action, compensation, mortification, and bolstering. These categories appeared to be fairly robust regardless of profession, scenario or saliency (effectiveness, likelihood to recommend, and ethicality.)

Table 3. Organizational Image Restoration Hierarchy in Pragmatism and Ethicality

Tier One	Tier Two	Tier Three
Corrective Action	Defeasibility	Accident
Compensation	Minimization	Provocation
Mortification	Good Intentions	Attack Accuser
Bolstering	Differentiation	Shifting Blame
	Transcendence	Silence
		Simple Denial

The primary purpose of the pilot study was to clarify the research questions and assess the usefulness of this method of investigation. While the generalizability of the findings from the pilot study sample of students is limited, the findings help establish a framework from which a more substantial investigation of public relations professionals' perceptions of image repair strategies can be launched, which is this phase. Further,

this study examines to what extent there is consistency or divergence in perceptions of crisis communication strategies.

Research Questions

This study analyzes situational, pragmatic, and ethical considerations for their relative influence on image or brand repair message strategies. Pragmatic factors encompass the strategies deemed effective and likely to be recommended. More specifically, this study investigates perceptions of 15 strategies communication professionals may use and/or recommend to repair their organization's image, reputation, or brand during and after a crisis. Collected data will be analyzed in order to answer the following research questions:

Research Question # 1 – Do public relations professionals significantly differ in their perceptions of the effectiveness of image restoration strategies in different types of crises?

Research Question #2 – Do public relations professionals significantly differ in their likelihood to recommend different image restoration strategies in different types of crises?

Research Question #3 – Do public relations professionals significantly differ in their perceptions of the ethicality of image restoration strategies in different types of crises?

METHOD

Procedures

A survey instrument was designed using a five-point Likert-type scale, asking respondents to rate 15 image repair strategies in three situationally distinct corporate crises. Respondents rated the effectiveness, ethicality, and their likelihood to recommend each strategy. The survey was prepared in a matrix format so that all strategies were simultaneously rated in regard to their respective crises. This produced an instrument encouraging relative comparisons (rankings) between rhetorical strategies. Rankings are viewed by some as a more robust estimator of survey values, even though they may produce some analytical difficulties (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989). The instrument was successfully pilot tested for face validity and usability (Chandler, Ferguson, & Wallace, 2001).

Members of the Hoosier Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America were asked to participate via an announcement in the chapter's email newsletter. In the newsletter announcement was a link that directed members to a survey instrument with three hypothetical crisis scenarios: unintentional accident, illegal activity, and product safety. Thirty-six surveys were returned. The completion rate for the three surveys, representing three different kinds of crisis, varied from 29 to 36, depending on which of the 15 strategies was examined.

The instrument used a five-point scoring system, with categories ranging from highly unethical (5) to highly ethical (1). Pragmatic saliencies of “effectiveness” and “likelihood to recommend” were scored the same way. Significant differences were calculated with analysis of variance within strategies and between scenarios. Scheffe’s multiple comparison procedure was used due to its relative conservative estimation of differences and ability to account for compound comparisons (Reinard, 2007). A limited number of demographic items (e.g., type of organization, years of experience) were added. The hypothetical nature of the company helps control for historical or perceptual moderating factors (Coombs, 2004; Dean, 2004; Kim, et al., 2004; Pfau et al., 2004).

RESULTS

Research questions were addressed in several ways. First, it was determined if there were any differences holistically across all scenarios and strategies. The appendix provides a breakdown of saliencies with the mean scores of strategies between crisis scenarios. Second, data was transformed into hierarchical rankings to expose order preferences among the rhetorical strategies, similar to Wallace, Ferguson, & Chandler’s (2007) hierarchical analysis (see Table 4). Standard deviation of rankings was used as visual indicator of possible hierarchical differences. Some deviation is to be expected, but rankings help to contextualize any mean differences in terms of their contribution of preference of one strategy over another.

Table 4. Hierarchical Rankings of Pragmatic Image Restoration Strategies								
	Effectiveness				Likelihood			
	Accident Rank	Illegal Activity Rank	Product Safety Rank	stdev	Accident Rank	Illegal Activity Rank	Product Safety Rank	stdev
Corrective Action	1	2	1	0.58	1	1	1	0.00
Mortification	2	1	2	0.58	2	4	4	1.15
Compensation	3	3	3	0.00	3	5	5	1.15
Bolstering	4	4	4	0.00	4	2	2	1.15
Transcendence	5	5	6	0.58	5	7	6	1.00
Good intentions	6	6	5	0.58	6	3	3	1.73
Minimization	7	7	8	0.58	7	6	8	1.00
Defeasibility	8	7	7	0.58	8	8	7	0.58
Counterattack	9	10	11	1.00	9	14	12	2.52
Differentiate	10	9	8	1.00	10	9	9	0.58
Accident	11	12	10	1.00	11	11	14	1.73
Provocation	12	11	14	1.53	12	10	10	1.15
Blameshift	13	13	12	0.58	13	13	11	1.15
Silence	14	15	13	1.00	14	12	13	1.00
Deny	15	14	15	0.58	15	15	15	0.00

Table 5. Hierarchical Rankings of Ethical Image Restoration Strategies				
Ethicality				
	Accident Rank	Illegal Activity Rank	Product Safety Rank	stdev
Corrective Action	1	1	1	0.00
Mortification	2	2	2	0.00
Compensation	3	3	3	0.00
Bolstering	4	4	4	0.00
Transcendence	5	5	5	0.00
Good intentions	6	6	6	0.00
Minimization	7	10	7	1.73
Defeasibility	8	8	9	0.58
Counterattack	9	7	8	1.00
Differentiate	10	9	10	0.58
Accident	11	11	11	0.00
Provocation	12	12	12	0.00
Blameshift	13	13	13	0.00
Silence	14	14	14	0.00
Deny	15	15	15	0.00

Third, responses were examined for significant differences among strategies within each scenario. Of the forty-five possible combinations of scenarios against strategies, ten differences were found in six strategies (see Table 6).

Concerning effectiveness (RQ 1), significant differences were found in three of the fifteen strategies: defeasibility ($F=4.269$, d.f. 2, 88, $p\leq.05$), good intentions ($F=5.015$, d.f. 2, 88, $p\leq.01$), and mortification ($F=4.465$, d.f. 2, 89, $p\leq.05$). Four strategies with significant differences emerged for likelihood to recommend (RQ 2): accident ($F=4.660$, d.f. 2, 86, $p\leq.05$), good intentions ($F=6.549$, d.f. 2, 86, $p\leq.01$), compensation ($F=3.187$, d.f. 2, 86, $p\leq.05$), and mortification ($F=3.949$, d.f. 2, 86, $p\leq.05$). For ethicality (RQ 3), six strategies were significant: provocation ($F=4.923$, d.f. 2, 85, $p\leq.01$), defeasibility ($F=6.524$, d.f. 2, 84, $p\leq.01$), accident ($F=3.345$, d.f. 2, 85, $p\leq.05$), good intentions ($F=5.228$, d.f. 2, 84, $p\leq.01$), transcendence ($F=3.516$, d.f. 2, 83, $p\leq.05$), and silence

($F=3.193$, d.f. 2, 85, $p \leq .05$). However, the accident, transcendence, and silence strategies did not localize pair-wise between any particular scenario.

	Effect			Likely			Ethical		
	Acc.	Illegal	Product	Acc.	Illegal	Product	Acc.	Illegal	Product
Defeasibility	4.36	4.52 ^a	3.83 ^b				3.45 ^a	4.41 ^{bb}	3.97
Good intentions	3.52	4.21 ^a	3.31 ^b	2.45 ^a	3.48 ^{bb}	3.32	2.83 ^a	3.76 ^b	3.32
Mortification	1.68 ^a	1.24 ^b	1.31	2.29 ^a	1.79	1.24 ^b			
Accident				3.61 ^a	4.34 ^b	4.62			
Compensate				2.58 ^a	2.25	1.69 ^b			
Provocation							4.3 ^a	4.72 ^b	4.76 ^b

Different letters indicate significant differences

a = $p \leq .05$

b = $p \leq .01$

bb = $p \leq .001$

DISCUSSION

This study examined a range of rhetorical message strategies employed in organizational crises, which vary in their ability to transform organizational perceptions. This examination of public relations practitioners' perceptions of image, brand, or reputation repair strategies reveals remarkable consistency with those of advanced public relations students in the pilot study. Holistic measures across scenarios were consistent with the two general findings from the student study.

First, the hierarchy, or higher- and lower-ranking of strategies, was consistent regardless of contextual variables, which is consistent with the previous examination of students' perceptions, but somewhat surprising because previous findings have indicated that culpability, form and type of response to an event as well as other factors, impact corporate reputation (Dean, 2004). These studies did not find such distinctions; salencies were stable regardless of crisis scenario, an important finding for scholars and practitioners. Image repair strategies generally were homogenously grouped at high (superior) and low (inferior) clusters. That is, strategies were viewed as either good or bad, regardless of whether the crisis involved an unintended accident, illegal activity, or product safety violation.

The four strategies consistently ranked high (or "good") were corrective action, compensation, mortification, and bolstering. These rankings remained consistent across all types of crisis situations and other variables. This is a remarkable finding that has potential for influencing public relations professionals' strategic choices of persuasive message strategies. It also is consistent with recommendations that initial crisis responses should focus on expressing concern and/or sympathy with victims (Coombs, 2007b; Lukaszewski, 1999). Certainly, an organization's commitment to clean up an

accidental chemical spill and make changes to prevent its occurrence in the future (an example of the corrective action strategy), an admission of responsibility and expression of regret (mortification), and offering to reimburse the victim(s) for any property damage or personal injury arising from the spill and its effects (compensation) demonstrate sympathy for the victims' suffering and commitment to a long-term relationship. Research indicates that appropriate expressions of concern also help to lessen damage to an organization's reputation and to reduce financial loss (Cohen, 1999; Coombs, 2007b; Dean, 2004; Kellerman, 2006). Public relations professionals (and students), then, recognize the importance of the victim-organization relationship when they select corrective action, mortification, and compensation as the most ethical and effective crisis communication strategies.

Denial strategies (simple denial and blame shifting) and silence were consistently grouped as the least salient. Just as Benoit and Drew (1997) found in their study of interpersonal image repair strategies, this study of professionals revealed that denial was perceived to be the least effective organizational crisis response, as well as the least ethical and likely to be recommended, followed by silence, blameshifting, and provocation. Specifically, silence as a communication strategy typically held one of the lowest rankings for effectiveness and likelihood to recommend. The only strategy which ranked lower was simple denial. For scholars, these findings suggest several specific areas for future research. For practitioners, these findings suggest that a sound and basic reputation repair message plan consistent with these four "good" strategies (corrective action, compensation, mortification, bolstering) may be adequate for most organizational crises, rather than a cumbersome, complex, and difficult to enact matrix of strategies matched to multiple situational and contextual variables. These findings may prove significant and efficient for message mapping for organizational communicators.

Second, consistent with our earlier study of student perceptions, three identifiable tiers emerged within the hierarchy of strategies for professionals. Professionals and students seem to make decisions based on hierarchy, or preferences. For the most part, the tier system seems to be stable. Positively perceived or "good" strategies clustering in tier 1 were corrective action, compensation, mortification, and bolstering. In the first tier a positive valence holds with the pilot study of students, with the exception that bolstering holds for likelihood and ethicality, but not for effectiveness (although it is still in the top four). All top six strategies were positively valenced. It seems clear from the most preferred strategies that public relations professionals are focused on maintaining and strengthening the organization's reputation and relationships with stakeholders long-term. While there was considerable shuffling within tiers, very few strategies jumped far beyond the tier's border. One exception was counterattack, which moved up to tier 2 from the previous study of students' ranking in tier 3. Also, transcendence moved down to tier 3 in the unintentional accident scenario.

Public relations professionals' responses indicated some interesting comparisons and contrasts within scenarios. When broken down by scenarios, in the unintentional accident scenario likelihood to recommend changes: transcendence has a positive

valence and shifts higher in ranking. Also, in the unintentional accident scenario, compensation still has positive valence, but dropped lower to sixth. Effectiveness tiers stay intact, except the strategy of attacking the accuser shifts to tier 2 from tier 3. When the crisis involves an unintentional accident, the highest rated strategies in effectiveness were corrective action, mortification, compensation, and bolstering, respectively. However, the composition and ranking of strategies they were most likely to recommend changed: corrective action, bolstering, reframing as positive, transcendence, and mortification. The most ethical strategies when an unintentional accident occurred were corrective action, mortification, compensation, and bolstering, respectively.

When the crisis involved illegal activity, mortification, corrective action, and compensation were the highest-rated strategies in terms of their effectiveness. However, the strategies public relations professionals were most likely to recommend changed rankings. Mortification and corrective action again were the most preferred strategies, followed by compensation and bolstering, which was not one of the four most effective strategies. For illegal activity crises, corrective action, mortification, and compensation were considered most ethical, followed by reframing the violation in a more positive way. Finally, for product safety, correction, mortification, and compensation again were rated as most effective.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study, combined with the earlier results, suggest multiple future areas of research, alleviating some of the limitations in the current study. Clearly, one of the limitations of this study is its small sample size. The researchers are gathering data from a sample of all PRSA members to explore whether these findings hold with a larger, more representative sample. Further research would allow examination of the slight changes in strategy preferences within scenario. Another interesting area for further study is examination of Coombs' application of attribution theory to the selection of image repair strategies, and the assertion that crisis managers should use increasingly accommodative strategies as the reputational threat from the crisis increases (Coombs, 2007b; Coombs & Holladay, 2004). Future research may or may not support a need to identify crises based on attribution of organizational responsibility (minimal, low, strong) as Coombs delineates, or a more holistic "humanistic ethic of crisis response" that focuses on victims or the stakeholder primarily.

One thing is certain: crisis communication will continue to be a fertile and relevant field of study with clear implications for public relations professionals, and one which provides public relations professionals with opportunities to rehabilitate an organization's brand or reputation if executed effectively and ethically.

APPENDIX A

Effective												
	Accident			Illegal			Safety			Total		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Deny	34	5.00	0.00	29	4.86	0.44	29	4.86	0.35	92	4.91	0.70
Blame Shift	34	4.88	0.54	29	4.83	0.38	29	4.59	0.73	92	4.77	0.84
Provocation	34	4.85	0.44	29	4.79	0.41	29	4.76	0.51	92	4.80	1.11
Defeasibility*	33	4.36	0.82	29	4.52	0.87	29	3.83	1.14	91	4.24	1.17
Accident	34	4.79	0.48	28	4.82	0.61	29	4.52	0.74	91	4.71	1.12
Good Intentions**	33	3.52	1.15	29	4.21	0.86	29	3.31	1.34	91	3.68	1.27
Bolstering	34	2.79	0.91	29	3.55	1.24	29	3.14	1.57	92	3.16	1.16
Minimization	34	4.15	0.89	29	4.52	0.74	29	4.38	0.73	92	4.35	1.14
Differentiation	34	4.65	0.54	29	4.62	0.68	29	4.38	0.73	92	4.55	1.13
Transcendence	34	3.50	1.21	29	4.03	1.02	29	3.72	1.03	92	3.75	1.17
Counter Attack	34	4.59	0.82	29	4.66	0.77	29	4.59	0.57	92	4.61	1.12
Compensation	33	2.09	1.07	29	2.14	1.27	29	1.76	0.69	91	2.00	1.18
Corrective Action	33	1.12	0.33	29	1.34	0.55	29	1.17	0.38	91	1.21	1.17
Mortification*	34	1.68	0.81	29	1.24	0.44	29	1.31	0.54	92	1.41	0.95
Silence	34	4.88	0.33	29	4.90	0.31	29	4.69	0.54	92	4.82	0.96

Likely to Recommend												
	Accident			Illegal			Safety			Total		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Deny	31	4.58	0.67	29	4.41	0.73	29	4.59	0.68	89	4.53	0.70
Blame Shift	31	3.94	1.12	29	4.17	0.80	29	4.34	0.97	89	4.15	0.97
Provocation	31	4.10	0.79	29	4.21	0.77	28	4.32	0.77	88	4.21	0.78
Defeasibility	30	3.17	1.05	29	3.59	1.12	29	3.62	1.32	88	3.46	1.16
Accident*	31	3.61	1.15	29	4.34	0.86	29	4.14	0.83	89	4.03	0.95
Good Intentions**	31	2.45	1.09	29	3.48	1.06	29	3.00	1.16	89	2.98	1.10
Bolstering	31	2.06	0.81	29	2.31	1.07	29	2.38	0.98	89	2.25	0.96
Minimization	31	3.16	0.93	29	3.41	0.98	29	3.69	1.11	89	3.42	1.01
Differentiation	30	3.83	0.95	29	3.72	1.03	29	4.07	0.75	88	3.88	0.91
Transcendence	31	2.10	0.83	29	2.90	1.18	29	2.83	1.00	89	2.61	1.00
Counter Attack	31	3.94	0.93	29	3.90	1.11	29	4.14	0.88	89	3.99	0.97
Compensation*	31	2.58	1.03	28	2.25	0.93	30	1.97	0.89	89	2.27	0.95
Corrective Action	31	1.68	0.87	29	1.69	0.81	29	1.45	0.57	89	1.61	0.75
Mortification*	31	2.29	0.97	29	1.79	0.86	29	1.72	0.70	89	1.94	0.85
Silence	31	3.97	1.35	29	4.21	0.90	29	4.28	0.88	89	4.15	1.05

Ethical												
	Accident			Illegal			Safety			Total		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Deny	30	4.77	0.43	29	4.90	0.31	29	4.97	0.19	88	4.88	0.31
Blame Shift	30	4.53	0.78	29	4.72	0.45	29	4.79	0.49	88	4.68	0.57
Provocation**	30	4.30	0.84	29	4.72	0.53	29	4.76	0.44	88	4.59	0.60
Defeasibility**	29	3.45	1.09	29	4.41	0.82	29	3.97	1.12	87	3.94	1.01
Accident*	30	4.20	0.89	29	4.62	0.62	29	4.62	0.62	88	4.48	0.71
Good Intentions**	30	2.83	1.12	29	3.76	0.99	28	3.32	1.19	87	3.30	1.10
Bolstering	30	2.30	0.99	29	2.79	1.21	29	2.93	1.25	88	2.67	1.15
Minimization	30	3.73	0.83	29	3.90	0.72	29	4.07	0.70	88	3.90	0.75
Differentiation	30	3.70	0.99	29	4.07	0.84	29	4.21	0.77	88	3.99	0.87
Transcendence*	28	2.57	0.88	29	3.28	1.19	29	3.17	1.14	86	3.01	1.07
Counter Attack	30	3.97	0.96	29	4.28	0.75	29	4.28	0.84	88	4.17	0.85
Compensation	29	1.90	0.77	29	1.93	0.88	29	1.69	0.71	87	1.84	0.79
Corrective Action	30	1.13	0.35	29	1.21	0.41	29	1.17	0.38	88	1.17	0.38
Mortification	30	1.40	0.72	29	1.24	0.44	29	1.24	0.44	88	1.29	0.53
Silence*	30	4.03	0.76	29	4.45	0.74	29	4.45	0.69	88	4.31	0.73

*=p≤.05

**=p≤.01

***=p≤.001

APPENDIX B

Crisis Scenarios

Accident Scenario

Early this week there was an unintentional accident in a large 500,000-gallon storage tank that resulted in a major spill of toxic solvent chemicals. There was no warning before the accident, and Acme is cooperating with HAZMAT authorities in an attempt to clean up the mess. However, groundwater contamination has made all of Midvale's water supplies unusable and put the entire region's population at risk for adverse reactions. This situation has become a crisis for Acme.

Illegal Activity Scenario

Early this week there was a major leak in a large 500,000-gallon storage tank that resulted in a major spill of toxic solvent chemicals. The leak occurred as a direct result of Acme managers violating OSHA and EPA requirements for installing containment barriers. This is proving to be a scandal for the company as it has been revealed that Acme intentionally violated the legal requirements. There is no legitimate excuse for why Acme failed to conform to the legal requirements. Acme is now cooperating with HAZMAT authorities in an attempt to clean up the mess, however, groundwater contamination has made all of Midvale's water supplies unusable and put the entire region's population at risk for adverse reactions. This situation has become a crisis for Acme.

Product Safety

Early this week there was a leak in a large 500,000-gallon storage tank that resulted in a major spill of solvent chemicals. As Acme cooperated with authorities in an attempt to clean up the mess, it was discovered that the chemicals had toxic characteristics. Now it is believed that the solvents were not harmless as previously thought but that they are, in fact, toxic chemicals. What Acme and customers previously thought was a "safe" product is now known to be a dangerous toxic chemical. All of Acme's end users and business customers are concerned about the health effects of exposure, and groundwater contamination has made all of Midvale's water supplies unusable and put the entire region's population at risk for adverse reactions. This situation has become a crisis for Acme.

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