

12-5-2008

Responding to Crises: A Test of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Courtney Wright
University of South Florida

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Scholar Commons Citation

Wright, Courtney, "Responding to Crises: A Test of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory" (2008). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*.

<https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/91>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Responding to Crises:

A Test of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory

by

Courtney Wright

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
School of Mass Communications
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Kelly Werder, Ph.D.
Kenneth Killebrew, Ph.D.
Randy Miller, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
December 5, 2008

Keywords: attribution theory, corporate *apologia*, crisis communication management,
image repair discourse, neoinstitutionalism theory

© Copyright 2009, Courtney Wright

Table of Contents

List of Tables	iii
List of Figures	iv
Abstract	v
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Background	2
Purpose	2
Crisis Defined	2
Chapter Two: Literature Review	5
Crisis Communication and Crisis Management	5
Crisis Communication Management in the Beginning	6
Johnson & Johnson Tylenol Case	7
Exxon <i>Valdez</i> Oil Spill Case	8
Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)	10
Historical Development of SCCT	12
Benoit's <i>Image Repair Discourse</i>	12
Image Repair Theory and Crisis Management	17
Hearit's <i>Apologia</i>	19
SCCT's Current Articulation	21
Attribution Theory	21
Neoinstitutionalism Theory	24
The Crisis Situation	25
Crisis Response Strategies	27
Modeling the Process	29
Matching Crisis Situations to Crisis Response Strategies and Limitations	32
Terminological Changes	33
Research-Driven Changes	34
Testing the SCCT	34
Purpose and Hypotheses	37
Chapter Three: Methodology	39
Research Participants	39
Design and Materials	39
Instrumentation	40
Organizational Reputation	42
Crisis Responsibility	42
Potential Supportive Behavior	42

Procedures	43
Chapter Four: Results	44
Study of Participants	44
Measures of Variables of Interest	45
Test of Hypotheses	48
Exploration of Individual Item Differences	49
Chapter Five: Discussion	57
Future Research	60
Conclusion	61
References	62

List of Tables

Table 1	Sex and academic year of participants	45
Table 2	Cronbach's alpha for multiple-item indexes	46
Table 3	Organizational Reputation descriptive	46
Table 4	Crisis Responsibility descriptive	46
Table 5	Organizational Control descriptive	47
Table 6	Potential Supportive Behavior descriptive	47
Table 7	Overall Effectiveness descriptive	47
Table 8	Mean and standard deviation for composite measures	48
Table 9	Individual item mean and standard deviation	49
Table 10	Independent Sample <i>t</i> -tests	53

List of Figures

Figure 1	Crisis types by level of crisis responsibility	26
Figure 2	Crisis response strategies by postures	28
Figure 3	Situational Crisis Communication Theory model	30
Figure 4	List of crisis response recommendations	31

Responding to Crises:

A Test of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Courtney Wright

ABSTRACT

Crisis management includes efforts designed to prevent and to detect potential crises, and to learn from crisis experiences. The SCCT posits that certain crisis responses (matched) produce better outcomes for organizations than others (unmatched), depending on the situation. In addition, the results from this study attempt to support the situational crisis communication theory in aiding crisis managers in protecting their organizations against crises.

Chapter One

Introduction

Crisis communication management is a public relations function that is increasingly important to the achievement of organizational goals. Media coverage of organizations facing crisis situations is abundant. During the next five years, 83 percent of companies will face a crisis that will negatively impact the profitability of the company by 20 to 30 percent, according to new research by Oxford-Metrica, an independent adviser on risk, value, reputation and governance (Aon, 2006). For instance, the 1989 Exxon *Valdez* crisis cost the company billions. It is estimated that some Exxon station sales decreased by 30 percent. The company saw a drop of 43 percent from its 1988 profits as a result of the oil spill. In addition, the net income per share also decreased from \$1.06 to \$.37 (Small, 1991).

An organization may encounter a variety of crisis situations. According to Pearson and Clair (1998), a plethora of potential crises exist, including corporate misdeeds, product tampering, and environmental and natural disasters, to name a few. The Institute for Crisis Management states that crisis-prone industries include medical/surgical manufacturers, software manufacturers, pharmaceutical manufacturers, telecommunication companies, computer manufacturers, commercial banks, solid waste disposal companies, security and commodity brokers, life insurance companies, and the airline industry. Therefore, effective crisis management is important to a broad range of organizations.

Background

A review of literature indicates that minimal attention has been devoted to crisis management theory. According to Coombs (2008), theory development in crisis communication is behind general public relations theory development because this specialized area of inquiry is still in its theoretical infancy, despite its importance in practice. This is supported by Seegar, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998), who found a lack of theory-based approaches in reviews of crisis communication literature. Crisis communication has created a large body of practical research, but scant theory has emerged (Coombs, 2007).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to further current theory-driven research in public relations by examining the perception of the effect crisis management strategies have on organizational reputation, crisis responsibility, and potential supportive behavior of an organization. Specifically, this study seeks to test the situational crisis communication theory to determine its ability to predict effective crisis response strategies.

Crisis Defined

To better understand the current state of crisis management research, it is necessary to review the development of this area of public relations scholarship. To date, scholars have developed commonalities regarding crisis situations that are used to define the concept. For example, Fearn-Banks (1996) defines a crisis as “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name” (p. 1). Sociologist R.L. Hamblin (1958) argues a crisis is “...an urgent situation in which all group members face a

common threat” (p. 322). According to Pauchant and Mitroff (1992), a crisis is “a disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumptions, its subjective sense of self, its existential core” (p. 12). Fink (1986) claims a crisis is any event that may escalate in intensity; fall under close media and government scrutiny, interfere with normal business operations, and may affect the image and bottom line of a company. In 1993, Barton stated that a crisis “[was] a major, unpredictable event that has potentially negative results. The event and its aftermath may significantly damage an organization and its employees, products, services, financial condition, and reputation” (p. 2). Lerbinger (1997) defines a crisis as “an event that brings, or has the potential for bringing, an organization into disrepute and imperils its future profitability, growth, and possibly its very survival” (p. 4). Finally, Pearson and Clair (1998) view a crisis as “a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly” (p. 60).

Even though these definitions are slightly different, a closer examination reveals numerous similarities. According to King (2002), a crisis has three primary characteristics. First, a crisis is an unplanned event that has the potential to dismantle the internal and external structure of an organization. Second, a crisis can occur at any time. Finally, a crisis has the potential to affect the legitimacy of an organization. The media can influence public perception in regards to issues involving cause, blame, response, resolution, and consequences. When an organization is presented in a negative light, its legitimacy may be threatened (King, 2002; Ray, 1999).

Once an organization is presented in a negative light, the probability of the organization surviving the crisis is dramatically reduced. Fearn-Banks (1996) emphasizes, in her seminal work on crisis communication, the need for organizations to develop and implement effective crisis management and communication plans.

This study attempts to contribute to the current theory-driven research in crisis communication by examining crisis response strategies from a communication-centered perspective. Specifically, this study seeks to further understanding of crisis communication by examining the effect of a crisis when a matched or unmatched response strategy is used by an organization facing a crisis due to an accident. The crisis type as well as the strategy used in this study is derived from Coombs' situational crisis communication theory. This theory and its origins will be introduced and discussed in the following literature review.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

What is to be communicated and by whom within an organization are important factors in crisis communication. Crisis communication is “the communication between the organization and its publics prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence” (Fearn-Banks, 1996, p. 2; King, 2002). This definition of crisis communication will be the referenced definition throughout this study. However, in the next paragraph, several versions of the definition will be provided to show different perspectives. During the communication phase, the organization must appear to be in control to members external to the [organization] (Heath, 1994; King, 2002). Such behavior will direct stakeholders’ physical and psychological responses, as well as impressions about the organization (King, 2002; Ray, 1999). To do this, crisis managers may use an array of response strategies, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Crisis Communication and Crisis Management

Crisis management differs from crisis communication in the fact that it represents a “systematic attempt by organizational members with external stakeholders to avert crises or to effectively manage those that do occur” (Pearson & Clair, 1998). In this case, the organization and members of the crisis management team attempt to remove some of the risk and uncertainty that would *not* allow the organization to be in control of its own destiny (Fearn-Banks, 1996; King, 2002). In addition, the crisis management team must decide what issues must be addressed within a crisis plan. Constructing a crisis

management plan may be difficult due to the situational characteristics of a crisis and its many changing variables.

Effective crisis communication management is difficult to achieve since each crisis is different from the next. What an organization says and does once a crisis begins (the crisis response) can have a significant effect on the success of the crisis management effort (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 1999). Researchers have just begun to explore the dynamics of the crisis response process (Benoit, 1995, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

The next section explores crisis communication management from seminal work when few crisis responses were documented and made available to crisis managers to the development and testing of crisis response strategies and their effectiveness in achieving organizational goals.

Crisis Communication Management in the Beginning

Crisis communication management, in public relations research, has lagged in research and theory development (Coombs, 2006). Although, according to Coombs (2007), crisis communication management is considered a subset of public relations, tactics of public relations are used to disseminate information to the appropriate stakeholders and publics during a crisis, thus, qualifying crisis communication management as a form of public relations.

Up until the incidents of the Johnson & Johnson and the Exxon cases, pre-crisis management had been deemed symbolic because, for too many years, crisis communication research was simply practitioner truisms and tales from the field: “What I did during our crisis” (Coombs, 2006). However, these two crises provided benchmarks in crisis communication management research on what to do and what not to do during a

crisis and how to prevent it from happening again. Due to their influence on the development of crisis communication theory, these two seminal cases are briefly reviewed in the following section to clearly portray what happens when a crisis is handled properly and when a crisis is handled poorly.

Johnson & Johnson Tylenol Case. In 1982, some Tylenol capsules were found laced with cyanide in the Chicago area. This product tampering resulted in seven deaths. To this day, the identity of the person or persons who committed the Tylenol product tampering is still unknown. All supplies of the product in stores nationwide were pulled off the shelves by Johnson & Johnson, at a cost of \$50 million. After due time and investigation, the product was reissued in tamper-resistant containers, and a sealed package of capsules was offered free to consumers who had discarded the suspect supplies in their possession (Center & Jackson, 2003).

During the aftershock of the crisis, Tylenol miraculously recovered the market share it held prior to the crisis. Despite initial losses, the company was able to regain its credibility and reestablish public trust. As a result, Johnson & Johnson set the benchmark for successful crisis management. The question that needs to be answered now is how was Johnson & Johnson able to gain the market and its image and reputation back after a tumultuous crisis such as the cyanide-laced capsules? The phrase, “*no good deed goes unpunished,*” holds true to Johnson & Johnson because the standards that the company holds itself to were the pillars of its success in handling the crisis. The following factors, according to Center and Jackson (2003), are the main reasons Johnson & Johnson came out on top:

1. “The company benefited from a long history of success and service in a field of “beneficial” and “worthwhile” healthcare products.”

2. “Johnson & Johnson took pride in its public visibility and its reputation for integrity.”
3. “The company benefited by having had a strong founder who believed that “the corporation should be socially responsible, with responsibilities to society that went far beyond the usual sales and profit motives (Baker, 1993). Johnson & Johnson, basically, set high standards for itself to set a distinguishing tradition that shall be continued as long as the company is in business.”
4. “There was a credo, a “For this we stand” on paper, which succeeding generations of executives have built and interpreted in terms of changing times and challenges. The credo was brought out during the crisis for the world to see.”
5. “In its relations with employees, neighbors, investors, customers, and government agencies, there was a candor consistent with competitive and financial security. Company spokespeople – including the CEO – showed leadership and authority.”
6. “There was a recognition of the public interest and its legitimate representation by news media. Information, whether good or bad, was forth coming as rapidly as it developed.”
7. “The corporate public relations function was part of the management, participating in the decision process and in the implementation when communication was involved.”
8. “There were mechanisms for feedback from constituent publics, and a high value was placed on public input” (Center & Jackson, 2003, p. 187).

Johnson & Johnson’s success in crisis management stands in sharp contrast to the example set by the Exxon Corporation.

Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Case. It was supposed to be a routine trip from the Prince William Sound to Long Beach, California for the Exxon *Valdez*, a 987-foot oil tanker. The tanker, commanded by Captain Joseph Hazelwood, was “longer than three football fields, [and] loaded to the top with enough oil to fill the Rose Bowl almost halfway to the top” (Turning Point, 1994).

Unfortunately, the Exxon *Valdez* never made its destination to Long Beach because on March 24, 1989, the oil tanker ran aground the Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska. The Exxon *Valdez* spilled 240,000 barrels (10 million gallons) of oil into the water. The oil slick was 10 feet wide, four miles long, and eventually covered 1,300

miles of shoreline. An estimated 2 million animals died as a result, including 1 million migratory fowl, a third of the sea otter population, and numerous seals and sea lions. This estimate does not include the number of clams and fish on whom Alaskan fishermen depend for their livelihood (Fearn-Banks, 2007).

However, the real crisis mishap occurred when Exxon refused to take responsibility for the crisis. Exxon blamed anyone and/or anything from the captain of the Exxon *Valdez* to the out-of-date radar of the U.S. Coast Guard. In the wake of the crisis, Exxon blamed the Alyeska Pipeline Service Company, U.S. Coast Guard, the Alaskan government, weather, and the Department of Environmental Conservation. The giant conglomerate also went as far as to blame the captain, Joseph Hazelwood, and the third mate, Gregory Cousins, because reports came out that Hazelwood was intoxicated during the incident and handed over the responsibility of the ship to an inexperienced Cousins (Fearn-Banks, 2007).

The then-CEO of Exxon, Lawrence G. Rawl, was one of the last people to communicate about the crisis when he should have been the first. Unlike Tylenol, Exxon did not have a strategic chain of command to handle the crisis. In the wake of the spill, rather than Rawl becoming the spokesperson like a CEO should, Frank Iarossi, then-president of Exxon shipping, was the main representative at the Valdez site (Fearn-Banks, 2007). There was no presence of remorse from the top executives. It took Rawl 10 days to formally issue a response to the public, which came in the form of an open letter.

During the initial response to clean-up the spill, Exxon barely participated in any efforts in containing and cleaning the crisis. Atlantic Richfield (ARCO), British

Petroleum (BP), and five other companies initially participated in the response. Exxon soon after took over the clean-up efforts from the other companies (Fearn-Banks, 2007).

Information about the crisis was disseminated poorly. Iarossi did not keep Exxon's publics informed and when he did make a statement, the information turned out to be erroneous the majority of the time.

It is important to understand why the cases of Tylenol and Exxon *Valdez* are important to crisis communication management. During a time of scant crisis communication study, these cases showed how a crisis can be handled in a successfully orchestrated manner, with positive organizational outcomes, or how a poor inappropriate organizational response can result in significant negative outcomes for an organization. With the occurrences of the Tylenol and Exxon *Valdez* cases, crisis communication management spawned into a more strategic study of how to handle crises to achieve more positive organizational outcomes. Through the years, crisis communication has started a slow transition from "*What I did during our crisis*" to a more theoretical approach to handling a crisis. Out of theory came the situational crisis communication theory that posits a crisis response taxonomy.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Crisis management includes efforts designed to prevent and to detect potential crises, and to learn from crisis experiences (Caponigro, 2000; Cohn, 2000; Coombs, 1999b; Mitroff, 2001). Moreover, crisis management has emphasized post-crisis communication and the use of crisis response strategies – what organizational leaders say and do after a crisis hits (Coombs, 2007). Integrated with Benoit's (1995) image restoration and Hearit's (1994) corporate *apologia*, the situational crisis communications

theory (SCCT) model attempts to map out post-crisis communication. More specifically, the model illustrates how crisis response strategies can be used to protect reputational assets after the presentation of instructing information, which is the first communication priority in a crisis (Sturges, 1994). According to Bergman (1994), Coombs (1998), and Sturges (1994), the SCCT attempts to explain the type of information that instructs stakeholders what to do to protect themselves from the crisis, the basics of what happened, and what the organization is doing to fix the situation and to prevent a recurrence of the problem.

For any crisis, compassion should be the primary response strategy that organizations contemplate when the source of the crisis is uncertain. Compassion is suggested as the answer to any crisis where fault is unknown because some crises produce victims and victims place unique demands on crisis managers (Ogrizek & Guiller, 1999). Expressing compassion involves acknowledging and expressing sympathy for victims without accepting responsibility or stating remorse in order to avoid litigation issues. Legal expert, J. Cohen (1999), supports the recommendation that compassion be used when fault is unclear. Most accidents and product recalls (either human or technical error) have unclear fault at the onset of the crisis and may take weeks or months to clarify (Ray, 1999).

According to Coombs (2007), the SCCT posits that the crisis situation determines which crisis response strategies will be most effective in protecting the organization's reputation. Reputational assets are important to an organization and are threatened by a crisis. It follows that crisis managers should try to maximize the reputational protection afforded by using appropriate crisis response strategies.

Historical Development of SCCT

The SCCT has been the focus of numerous studies over the past (Coombs, 2007). To fully understand the development of the SCCT, it is important to understand the theoretical perspectives of Benoit's Image Repair Discourse and Hearit's *apologia* which have informed the growth of the SCCT.

Benoit's Image Repair Discourse. When people, groups, and organizations are accused of objectionable behavior, reputations can be damaged (Benoit & Brinson, 1999). An organization's image, or reputation, is a valuable asset that represents trust, loyalty, and responsibility granted to an organization. In other words, when an organization fails to live up to its promises and expectations, negative consequences can occur for consumers, ranging from inconvenience to death. Whenever an organization is faced with a crisis that tarnishes its image, a domino effect of events starts to occur. When one crisis happens in an organization, customers immediately begin to become skeptical of how they use or buy that organization's products or services. After that initial shock of crisis, a domino effect, of sorts, starts to occur. An [organization's] image could influence how closely the government regulates its actions. Reputation can influence the price of a company's stock. It can even influence how other companies deal with it (e.g., terms offered for loans or credit; how long a supplier is willing to wait for payment or how much of a discount will be offered on a purchase) (Benoit & Pang, 2007). Thus, whether an organization be large or small, it is important for it to continuously maintain and portray a positive image.

Crises and threats that have the potential to disrupt or tarnish an organization's image are constantly threatening organizations today. Some organizations are may face

several crises in a day, but they are never heard of because of their low threat level. However, it is the major crises that make it past the stakeholders and into the media that many organizations dread each day. That is why it is so true when Pinsdorf (1987) acknowledged that public relations crises “are no longer a matter of if, but when; no longer the exception, but the expected – even the inevitable” (p. 37). This proactive stance has led many companies to take extensive measures of crisis prevention and image preservation. This section explicates the theory of image repair discourse, which provides the foundation for the situation crisis communication theory’s (SCCT) responses to organizational crisis. However, we will begin with developing and understanding messages used to respond to corporate image crises.

To completely understand the theory, it is important to define *image*. Image is nothing but a symbolic thought that is created in one’s mind about a representation of a certain feeling or object. However, in the realm of corporate image, a corporation’s image is a subjective impression of that business held by other people. A corporation’s (or person’s or organization’s) image, or reputation, is subjective because it arises from the information held by people about that corporation. Our perceptions of an organization (or person or group) are formed from the words and deeds of that organization – and from what others say and do about that organization. So, in a much abridged version, an image is a subjective impression of an organization formed through one’s experience with that organization and interpreted are based on other past experiences (Benoit & Pang, 2007, pp. 244-245).

Benoit and Pang (2007) also implied that an image is a subjective impression that will vary from one person to another. It is unlikely that two people will have identical

experiences. Furthermore, even if they did have the exact same experiences with a given organization, their other unique experiences are likely to dominate their own interpretations of the information they share about the organization. Other people will often have similar impressions of an organization, but it is unlikely that any two people will have precisely the same impression of an organization where some people, of course, will have widely disparate impressions of a firm. So, more than likely, different people can be expected to have different images of a given corporation (Moffitt, 1994).

The image restoration literature is heavy on description and retrospective sense-making through case studies, whereas it is short on predictive value and causal inferences (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). Scientific evidence demands the process of comparison. The knowledge gained from a one-shot case study is generally illusory (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

Image restoration analysts tend to generate a list of image restoration strategies employed in the case and then speculate on how these strategies promoted success or failure of an image restoration effort (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). According to Coombs and Schmidt (2000), the typical image restoration analysis provides limited insight into how publics reacted to the strategies and the actual effect of the strategies on the organizational image. These limits preclude (a) developing precise additions to the body of knowledge and (b) allowing crisis managers to draw from the full benefits that image restoration theory has to offer crisis communication.

In 2000, Coombs and Schmidt, made it aware that; to understand how publics react to different image restoration strategies in different types of crises if crisis managers are to learn when certain response strategies should be used or avoided, we must become

more prescriptive so that crisis managers have clearer guidelines for selecting their image restoration strategies. In other words, for crisis managers to help organizations protect their image during a crisis, it is urgent for an organization to present a clear picture of the organization's current image to its stakeholders for crisis managers to provide organizations with concise information on how to continuously and actively preserve the organization's image. To do this, Coombs and Schmidt (2000) suggested that there are at least two options for developing more exact prescriptive knowledge. The first option is to execute a series of similar case studies. Using a series of similar case studies would allow the researcher to find patterns that would indicate the effect of specific strategies in a particular type of crisis. For example, a number of collapsed mines crises and the image restoration strategies that were used could be examined. If a specific strategy is associated with successful crisis management, then it is safe to assume that that strategy should be used in other collapsed mines crises. We can be more confident in the implications of a case study if a number of case studies are conducted and a pattern of similar results emerge (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000).

The second option is to empirically examine the effect of various strategies that were employed in a crisis case. Coombs and Schmidt (2000) suggested testable research that could come out of the descriptive list of strategies identified in a case study to determine their true effects on publics. Respondents can read or view videotapes of the image response strategies and complete surveys designed to assess their reactions to the strategies. The claims made about the effects of strategies are tested to see if they hold true. The researcher controls the image response strategies by exposing respondents to different strategies and then measuring their reactions for comparisons. The empirical

tests are another way of moving from speculation to knowledge (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000).

Analysis of image repair discourse suggests that there are many points of views in understanding and influencing images. For the most part, our image of a company is based on what we have seen, heard, and read about that [organization] (Benoit & Pang, 2007). The way a stakeholder perceives a particular organization depends on how that organization communicates to the stakeholder, which, in turns produces an image or impression of that organization. Other points of views that strongly influence how we look at an organization's image are through the words and actions of other people. This means an image can be influenced (and threatened or damaged) by the accusations, complaints, and behavior of others (Benoit & Pang, 2007). And when an organization's image is susceptible to being damaged, it is critical for that organization to take the necessary precautions to prevent a potential image distortion or take immediate action in repairing image.

According to Benoit and Pang (2007), observing that an image is an impression also means that an image may be at odds with reality. This can be harmful to an organization because even though a particular situation may not seem like a threat to an organization, an organization that was or is currently perceived in a negative light may experience a biased perception. Reality and image, combined, can cause major problems for an organization because perception can be more important than reality and this is where image repair discourse meets communication. In a 2007 article, Benoit and Pang stated that [a] company inappropriately accused of wrongdoing must use communication to correct this mistaken image. They added that sometimes people see what they want to

see and fail to see what they do not want to see. The truth *can* repair an image, but if the relevant audience refuses to accept the truth, reality cannot help the unfairly damaged image. So image and image repair both arise from reality but must be shaped through communication. Furthermore, reality clearly influences images, but rarely do people have a complete knowledge of the facts, and what they do know is filtered or interpreted by their personal attitudes and experiences (Benoit & Pang, 2007).

Image repair discourse does not pertain solely to organizations, but discourse may also be implemented with individuals as well. Even though organizations have better resources than individuals to repair their image, the basic options are the same for both individual and corporate image repair efforts (Benoit & Pang, 2007). To really protect a brand, a corporate official, at times, must act as an individual to reach out to stakeholders rather than speak for the organization all of the time. Thus, writing on both corporate and individual image repair can be useful.

Image Repair Theory and Crisis Management. Benoit (2007) and his colleagues have developed the theory of image repair discourse and applied it in a variety of contexts: corporate (Benoit 1995a, 1995b; 1998; Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Benoit & Hirson, 2001; Benoit & Pang, 2007; Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002; Brinson & Benoit, 1996); political (Benoit 1995a, 1999; Benoit, Gullifor & Panici, 1991; Benoit & McHale, 1999; Benoit & Nill, 1998a; Benoit & Pang, 2007; Benoit & Wells, 1998; Kennedy & Benoit, 1997; Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004); international (Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Benoit & Pang, 2007; Drumheller & Benoit, 2004; Zhang & Benoit, 2004; Zhang & Benoit, in press); and other contexts (Benoit, 1997a; Benoit & Anderson, 1996; Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Benoit & Nill, 1998b; Benoit & Pang, 2007;

Blaney & Benoit, 1997-2001). The next section explains the relationship of image repair discourse and crisis communication.

As stated by Benoit and Pang (2007), images [can] be threatened when another person obtains information that creates an unfavorable impression about another person or organization and when images are damaged undeservedly. An organization runs a great risk of its image becoming tarnished when an organization is falsely accused of a crisis in a malicious manner, whether it be in disregard of the truth or by mistake. Threats to image that are not based in reality can be just as damaging as threats arising from the accused's harmful actions (Benoit & Pang, 2007). And this is when communication is important to crisis management and image repair discourse. It is with communication that we are successful in repairing false accusations.

Another philosophy that should be followed when dealing with image repair theory is that image, and threat to image, arise from the perceptions of the audience (Benoit & Pang, 2007). This philosophy allows that one person can have a totally different perception of a situation than that of the person standing next to them. That is why it is crucial to take different perspectives into account when dealing with image restoration. Benoit and Pang (2007) were lead to another important observation: It is vital to realize that businesses frequently must deal with several audiences. Identification of the key audience or audiences is important because different audiences often have diverse interests, concerns, and goals (Benoit & Pang, 2007). When a crisis communicator has preserved an organization's image amongst their diverse stakeholders, Hearit's *apologia* should be incorporated with the image repair discourse to provide the

proper message that should be disseminated amongst the stakeholders to preserve the established positive image of the organization.

Hearit's Apologia. It is important to understand that when apologia is used by an organization, it does not necessarily mean that an organization is apologizing for its actions in a crisis by accepting full responsibility. The organization's effort may deny, explain, or apologize for the action through communication discourse (Fearn-Banks, 2007).

Corporate apologia has been deployed for decades by organizations when dealing with organizational crises. This next section will define *apologia* as well as explicate its conceptual fundamentals.

The first theoretical framework for apologia was introduced in an essay by Ware and Linkugel (1973). During their research and studies of apologia, Ware and Linkugel (1973), observed four factors and four postures used in apologetic speaking. These factors and postures, which will be discussed next, were discovered in social scientific research on the resolution of belief dilemmas, mastered by Abelson (1959).

The first identified factor, denial, occurs when one denies "alleged facts, sentiments, objects, or relationships" (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 275). The second factor is bolstering, which is the obverse of denial because denial involves negation and bolstering involves identification. "Bolstering refers to any rhetorical strategy which reinforces the existence of a fact, sentiment, object, or relationship" (p. 277). The "speaker attempts to identify [themselves] with something viewed favorably by the audience" (p. 277). Denial and bolstering are known as reformatory strategies because they "do not attempt to change the audience's meaning or affect for whatever is in

question” (pp. 275-276); they “simply revise or amend the cognitions of the audience” (p. 276).

The third factor is differentiation, which serves “the purpose of separating some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship from some larger context within which the audience presently views that attribute” (Ware & Linkugel, p. 278). The fourth factor, transcendence, is the obverse of differentiation because whereas differentiation moves toward the less abstract, transcendence moves toward the more abstract. Transcendence “cognitively joins some fact, sentiment, object or relationship with some larger context within which the audience does not presently view that attribute” (p. 280).

Differentiation and transcendence are transformative strategies that involve a change in meaning.

When the factors for apologia were identified and described, Ware and Linkugel (1973) identified the four postures that apologetic speakers can refer to: absolution, vindication, explanation, and justification. Each of these postures involves the combination of one transformative factor with one reformative factor. The first posture is absolution, which results from the union of the differentiation and denial factors and it “is one in which the speaker seeks acquittal” (p. 282). Vindication, the second posture, involves denial and transcendence and “aims not only at the preservation of the accused’s reputation, but also at the recognition of his grater worth as a human being relative to the worth of his accusers” (p. 283). The third posture is explanation, which combines bolstering and differentiation. “In the explanative address, the speaker assumes that if the audience understands his motives, actions, beliefs, or whatever, they will be unable to condemn him” (p. 283). The fourth posture is justification, which occurs when bolstering

and transcendence are joined. Justification “asks not only for understanding, but also for approval” (p. 283).

Although the exigencies for apologia are ethical in nature, Hoff (1980) notes that management should ask if the corporation did something wrong. Is there a need to justify or defend an action?

SCCT's Current Articulation

The situational crisis communication theory was developed after J.A. Benson (1998) challenged the crisis communication field to support his theory that there are a set number of crisis types and crisis response strategies. The SCCT matches each crisis to its most appropriate response strategy. Coombs (2007) stated that meaningful matching is possible only if there is some correspondence/link between crisis types and crisis response strategies. To create this link, SCCT drew from attribution theory and neoinstitutional theory, which are reviewed below.

Attribution Theory. This theory is a useful framework for explaining the relation between a situation and the selection of communication strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Research demonstrates that people search for causes of events in a variety of domains (Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988). McAuley, Duncan and Russell (1992) identified four causal dimensions people might use when making attribution: stability, external control, personal control, and locus. *Stability* assesses if the event's cause happens frequently (stable) or infrequently (unstable). *External control* indicates whether or not the event's cause is controllable. *Personal control* assesses whether or not the event's cause is controllable by the actor. *Locus* reflects if the event's cause is something

about the actor or something about the situation (McAuley et al., 1992; Russell, 1982; Wilson, 1993).

Research indicates a substantial overlap between personal control and locus (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Wilson (1993) suggests that the two causal dimensions be taken as one dimension that reflects intentionality of an act. When both are high in an actor, perceptions of intentional actions are created, while unintentional actions are created when both are low in an actor. Although measures have been developed for four dimensions (McAuley et al., 1992), functionally there are three causal dimensions: stability, external control, and locus/personal control (locus, for short).

The judgments people make about these three causal dimensions influence their feelings and behaviors toward the actor (Weiner, 1985; Weiner et al., 1988; Wilson et al., 1993). People's attributions to an event can be changed in two ways depending on explanations given by the actors. First, the messages can shape how people perceive the three attribution dimensions. Second, the messages can affect the feelings created by the attributions (Weiner et al., 1988). People make attributions about an organization for a crisis when they determine the cause of the crisis. Greater attributions of responsibility lead to stronger feelings of anger and a more negative view of an actor's image (Weiner, Amirhan, Folkes, & Verette, 1987).

The three causal dimensions of attribution should affect evaluations of organizational responsibility for a crisis in predictable ways (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). According to Coombs and Holladay (1996), organizational crisis responsibility should be perceived as strongest if the cause is stable (i.e., the organization has a history of crisis),

external control (controlled by others outside the organization) is low, and the locus is strongly internal (unintentionality is high).

Coombs and Holladay (1996) also stipulate that when a crisis event is repeated (stable), publics are more likely to attribute responsibility to the organization. Moreover, attributions of low external control indicate that the crisis was not under the control of groups outside of the organization; thus, the crisis should not be attributed to external agents. Attributions that entail a strong internal locus/intentionality suggest that the organization could have done something to prevent the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). This type of attribution suggests that the organization knew what to do to prevent the crisis and any steps needed to contain it.

Coombs and Holladay (1996) stated that organizational crisis responsibility should be weakest when attributions suggest the cause is unstable (i.e., the crisis is an exception in the organization's performance history), with strong external control and weak internal locus (low intentionality). Attributions, as found by Coombs and Holladay (1996), reflecting strong external control and low intentionality (weak internal locus) suggest that factors outside the organization and its control are responsible for the crisis event. An unstable crisis creates weak attributions of organization responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 1996), such as when circumstances are beyond the organization's control and the crisis cannot be prevented.

One objective of crisis management is to prevent or lessen reputational damage to an organization (Barton, 1993; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Sturges, 1994). According to Coombs and Holladay (1996), attributions of organizational crisis responsibility should precipitate reputational damage. If communication can alter public's causal attributions

or affect feelings generated by these attributions, crisis response strategies can be used to reduce reputational damage.

Neoinstitutionalism Theory. An organization is granted legitimacy if stakeholders believe an organization is good and/or has a right to continue operations (Allen & Cailouet, 1994; Bedeian, 1989). Legitimacy is critical to the successful operation of an organization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) because it is a conformation of social rules and expectations established by stakeholders. On the contrary, when crises occur, stakeholders question the organization's ability to conform to the stakeholder's rules and expectations. In turn, this questions an organization's legitimacy. An organization will use communication strategically as a response to legitimacy threats because corporate discourse does shape how stakeholders view an organization (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Marcus & Goodman, 1991).

The crisis response strategy can be used to a) show the challenge is invalid or b) attempt to get stakeholders to judge the crisis more mildly and evaluate the organization more positively (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). From the neoinstitutional perspective, organizations should favor the use of crisis response strategies that reflect efforts to re-establish legitimacy (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). "Neoinstitutional research consistently indicates corporate actors use mechanisms and procedures to convey conformity with their institutional environment to enhance legitimacy and survival chances" (Allen & Caillouet, 1994, p. 48).

Coombs and Holladay (1996) argue that organizations must shift the focus from the violation of social norms (the crisis) to efforts designed to repair the violation

because, if a crisis cannot be shown to be invalid, crisis managers should use strategies that show how the organization has returned to the norms held by its stakeholders.

Attribution and neoinstitutional theories provide the framework for the SCCT, which is organized into three parts: the crisis situation, crisis response strategies, and the matching recommendations (Coombs, 2007).

The Crisis Situation

A crisis situation will generate particular attributions of crisis responsibilities or the degree to which the organization is perceived to be responsible for the crisis event (Coombs, 2007). According to Coombs (2007), the level of crisis responsibility is a primary indicator of how much a threat the crisis is to the organization's reputation and what crisis response strategies are necessary to address that threat. The crisis situation basically involves crisis types and threat intensifiers. Threat intensifiers will be discussed and described shortly, however, crisis types simply provide categories for crises. Each crisis type is different in that it situationally provokes different stakeholder views and evaluation of responsibility. Each crisis type will generate a specific level of crisis responsibility. The SCCT is built on a taxonomy of thirteen crisis types, which have been divided into three clusters (Coombs, 2007). Each of the crisis types in a cluster shares a similar level of crisis responsibility with the others (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Crisis types by level of crisis responsibility

Attributions of crisis responsibility, high: Preventable cluster

Human breakdown accidents: Human error causes an industrial accident.

Human breakdown recalls: Human error causes a product to be recalled.

Organizational misdeed with no injuries: Stakeholders are deceived without injury.

Organizational misdeed management misconduct: Laws or regulations are violated by management.

Organizational misdeed with injuries: Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur.

Attributions of crisis responsibilities, moderate: Accidental cluster

Challenges: Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner.

Megadamage: A technical accident where the focus is on the environmental damage from the accident.

Technical breakdown accidents: A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident.

Technical breakdown recalls: A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled.

Attributions of crisis responsibilities, low: Victim cluster

Natural disaster: Acts of nature that damage an organization, such as an earthquake.

Rumors: False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated.

Workplace violence: Current or former employee attacks current employees onsite.

Product tampering/malevolence: External agent causes damage to an organization.

FIGURE 1 From “The Development of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory,” by T. Coombs, 2007. In T. L. Hansen-Horn and B. D. Neff (Ed.), *Public Relations: From Theory to Practice* (pp. 262-277). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Threat intensifiers strengthen the reputation damage a crisis can cause on an organization and include crisis history, relationship history, and severity (Coombs, 2007).

Coombs (2007) defines the threat intensifiers as follows: *Crisis history* includes similar crises an organization has had in the past. News stories often include reports if an organization has experienced similar crises. *Relationship history* indicates if the organization has had a record of good works or bad behavior. Relationship history is concerned with how the organization has treated its stakeholders in the past.

Organizational behavior is a key factor in determining reputations. Stakeholders feel it is important for an organization’s words and deeds to match (Herbig, Milewicz, & Golden,

1994). Together, crisis and relationship history are known as *performance history* because they are indicators of how the organization has acted in the past. *Severity* is the amount of damage inflicted by the crisis, including injuries, loss of lives, financial loss, and environmental destruction.

If an organization has a negative crisis history, negative relationship history, and/or the crisis damage is severe, the reputational damage of the crisis type is intensified (Coombs, 2007). As seen in Table 1, the crisis types are divided into three clusters based on similar, initial attributions of crisis responsibility: preventable, accidental, and victim. It is suggested, that if a crisis intensifies, it should move a crisis type to the next level. According to Coombs' (2007), the threat intensifiers indicate what crisis response strategy is appropriate.

According to Blazer and Sulsky (1992), a favorable relationship history should produce a halo effect, acting as a shield that protects the organization from the reputational damage of a crisis. So, a favorable pre-crisis relationship with stakeholders should benefit an organization (Birch, 1994; Fearn-Banks, 1996; Siomkos & Shrivastava, 1993). When a positive relationship is established with stakeholders, a crisis that sheds negative light on an organization or when the cause of a crisis is still unknown, the attributions of the crisis responsibility and the organization's reputation will be affected for a more positive outcome for the organization.

Crisis Response Strategies

In its current form, the SCCT includes 10 crisis response strategies, grouped into three postures. A posture represents a set of strategies that share similar communicative goals and vary in terms of their focus on protecting the crisis victims (victim orientation)

and taking responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 2007). It is important to understand that the key word that links crisis types and crisis response strategies is *responsibility*. The attribution and neoinstitutional theoretical concepts are reflected in the three postures that represent the three basic communicative options.

Crisis response strategies by postures

Deny posture (low concern for victim and responsibility acceptance)

Attack the accuser: Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.

Denial: Crisis manger claims that there is no crisis.

Scapegoat: Crisis manger blames some person or group outside the organization for the crisis.

Diminish posture

Excuse: Crisis manger minimizes organization responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.

Justification: Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.

Deal posture (high concern for victim and responsibility acceptance)

Ingratiation: Crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization.

Concern: Crisis manger expresses concern for the victims.

Compensation: Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.

Regret: Crisis manager indicates the organization feels bad about the crisis.

Apology: Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.

FIGURE 2 From “The Development of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory,” by T. Coombs, 2007. In T. L. Hansen-Horn and B. D. Neff (Ed.), *Public Relations: From Theory to Practice* (pp. 262-277). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

According to Coombs (2007), the *deny* posture represents a set of strategies that claim no crisis occurred or that the accused organization has no responsibility for the crisis. If there is no crisis, there can be no organizational responsibility for a crisis (attribution theory) and no violation of legitimacy (neoinstitutional theory). The *diminish* posture reflects a set of strategies that attempt to alter stakeholder attributions by

reframing how stakeholders should interpret the crisis (attribution theory). Crisis managers might try to place distance between the organization and the crisis, thereby seeking to reduce responsibility for the crisis. The *deal* posture represents a set of strategies that seek to improve the organization's reputation in some way. By protecting victims and accepting responsibility, crisis managers encourage stakeholders to judge the organization more positively or less negatively. An organization in an intentional crisis is expected to address victim concerns, so the crisis response strategy must demonstrate the organization is meeting expectations/adhering to social norms, which is a tenant of neoinstitutional theory.

The deal posture includes the concern strategy that is an expression of compassion. Although automatically used when there are victims, the concern strategy is optional when no one seems to be harmed. Moreover, the grouping shows that an expression of concern is viewed very similarly to apology and regret, which are the two crisis response strategies that can open an organization to legal liability.

Modeling the Process

To obtain a better understanding of the relationship between variables, the SCCT is shown in model form.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory model

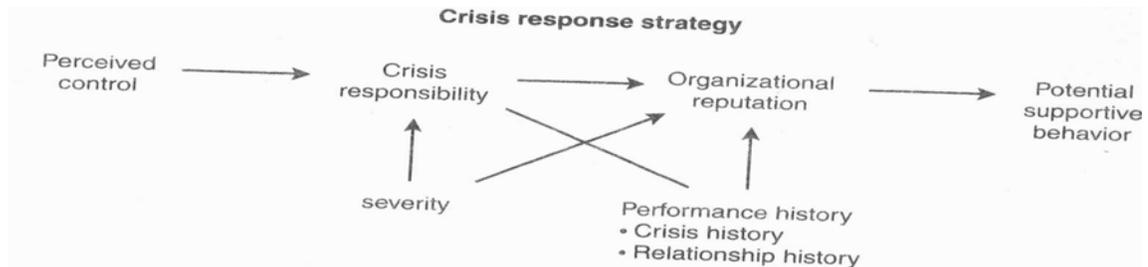


FIGURE 3 From “The Development of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory,” by T. Coombs, 2007. In T. L. Hansen-Horn and B. D. Neff (Ed.), *Public Relations: From Theory to Practice* (pp. 262-277). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

The relationships are based on the propositions below (Coombs, 2007, pp. 268-269).

1. *Organizational reputation proposition:* There is a strong, negative correlation between organizational reputation and crisis responsibility. Attributions of crisis responsibility have a strong effect on perceptions of organizational reputation. The stronger the attribution of crisis responsibility, the more the crisis can damage the organizational reputation and, in turn, affect future interactions with the organization (potential supportive behavior).
2. *Potential supportive behavior proposition:* A strong, positive correlation exists between organizational reputation and potential supportive behavior, intentions to engage in acts that would help an organization. A negative reputation should result in less supportive behavior from stakeholders, while a positive reputation should engender more.
3. *Severity proposition:* Severity has a significant intensifying effect on crisis responsibility and damage to organization reputation. As the crisis increases in severity (inflicts greater damage), attributions of crisis responsibility will intensify. Severity of an incident tends to increase perceptions of responsibility among individuals. The same dynamic is believed to hold true for organizations in crisis. Severity is also an indication of deviation from the norm. Greater severity suggests a greater violation of the expected norms and could result in direct damage to the organization’s reputation.
4. *Crisis history proposition:* An unfavorable crisis history has a significant intensifying effect on crisis responsibility and damage to organizational reputation. Organizations that have experienced similar crises in the past will be attributed greater crisis responsibility and suffer more direct reputational damage

than an organization with no history of crises. The history of crises indicates that the crisis is part of a pattern of behavior by the organization, another negative act by the organization and not an anomaly.

5. *Relationship history proposition A:* An unfavorable relationship history has a significant intensifying effect on crisis responsibility and damage to the organizational reputation. An organization that has treated stakeholders badly in the past will be attributed greater crisis responsibility and suffer more direct reputational damage than an organization with a neutral or positive relationship history.
6. *Relationship history proposition B:* a favorable relationship history has a significant reducing effect on crisis responsibility and damage to the organizational reputation. Organizations that have maintained favorable relationships with stakeholders will see weak attributions of crisis responsibility and less reputational damage for a crisis than those with neutral or unfavorable ones.
7. *Crisis response strategy selection proposition:* Organizations will suffer less reputational damage from a crisis and experience greater potential supportive behavior if they match the crisis response strategy to the reputational threat of the crisis. See Figure 4 for a list of general recommendations. These propositions emulate how SCCT forms a relationship between crisis situations and crisis response strategies.

List of crisis response recommendations

Rumor: Use any of the denial strategies.

Natural disaster: Use instructing information.

Workplace violence: Use instructing information.

Product tampering: Use instructing information.

Product recall, technical error, megadamage; and Accidents, technical error: Use excuse and/or justification.

History, relationship history, and/or severe damage: Use any of the deal strategies.

Product recall, human error and accidents, human error: Use any of the deal strategies.

Organizational misdeeds: Use any of the deal strategies.

When victims occur: Use the concern crisis response strategy in combination with other recommended strategy (ies).

FIGURE 4 From “The Development of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory,” by T. Coombs, 2007. In T. L. Hansen-Horn and B. D. Neff (Ed.), *Public Relations: From Theory to Practice* (pp. 262-277). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Matching Crisis Situations to Crisis Response Strategies and Limitations

The SCCT maintains that as attributions of crisis responsibilities and/or the threat of reputational damage increases, crisis managers must use crisis response strategies that reflect a greater concern for victims and take more responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Figure 4 provides a list of crisis response recommendations to serve as guidelines provided by the SCCT. For example, a low organizational crisis such as a technical-error would require nothing more than an excuse to justify the error. However, if the same error keeps occurring, crisis managers would have to implement strategies from the deal posture because stakeholders may look at the crisis as something that is preventable rather than an accidental technical error. Coombs (2007) argues that the concern crisis response strategy should be applied to any crisis with victims to express compassion.

Like any other developing theory, the SCCT has its limitations. It posits that by matching the proper crisis type to the proper crisis response strategy, an optimum solution will be achieved in resolving a crisis. However, Coombs (2007) states that legal and/or financial liabilities can restrict what an organization can and cannot say and sometimes organizations may become inoperable if such heavy liabilities are taken by an organization. Apologies, and in some states expression of regret, will result in significant legal liabilities and financial costs (France, 2002). In order to lessen an organization's liability for a crisis, many crisis managers use a less effective diminish strategy. SCCT allows crisis managers to understand the effect of choosing a nonmatching strategy by indicating why the effectiveness of the response is reduced (Coombs, 2007).

Terminological Changes. Since its appearance on a flowchart in 1995, SCCT has gone through many changes, terminologically and technically. The historical development can be divided into terminological changes, research-driven, and theory testing (Coombs, 2007).

The 'S' in the acronym SCCT, stands for *situational*. However, when the theory was first introduced, the "S" stood for *symbolic*. The term symbolic was chosen because the crisis response strategies were viewed as *symbolic resources* that could be employed during a crisis because words are symbols, hence, crisis response strategies were symbolic resources (Coombs, 2007). Later, many researchers thought the term *symbolic* to be problematic because the word *symbolic* represents a type of action and nothing substantive. Eventually, symbolic was replaced with situational because the theory is premised on the crisis situation (Coombs, 2007).

The threat intensifiers began as modifiers. However, research showed that negative performance histories drove the effect of the modifiers, termed the *Velcro effect* (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Coombs (2007) found that negative performance history served to intensify the attributions of crisis responsibility and the damage to the organizational reputation, so the name was changed. Another notable change was that the names *technical error* and *human error* of the crisis type category evolved from technical breakdown and human breakdown. It was observed that breakdown was too cumbersome and error captured the essence of the crisis types more parsimoniously (Coombs, 2007).

Research-Driven Changes. Perhaps the most substantive growth of the SCCT was the change in representation of crisis types on a continuum rather than a grid. The information entered in the grid was easily entered. However, when all information was in its proper place, the grid of information did very little to explain the effects of the crisis types. Originally, crisis types were viewed as a 2-by-2 grid representing personal control (whether the organization could control the source of the crisis) and external control (whether an external agent was in control of the source of the crisis) (Coombs, 1995; Coombs, Hazleton, Holladay, & Chandler, 1995). However, research has found that external control contributes little to the explanation of variance for SCCT (Coombs, 2007).

In the early development of SCCT, it was thought that crisis responsibility was predicted by personal control. However, later research showed that personal control and crisis responsibility were essentially the same variable (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2002). Personal control and crisis responsibility were later combined together to form one category.

Testing the SCCT

To test SCCT, measures were developed to test the central concepts of organizational reputation, crisis responsibility, and potential supportive behavior. The organizational reputation concept was derived from McCroskey's (1966) measure of character (trust and past and current conceptualizations of reputation). His original model had 10-items, but was later scaled down to five items and still held its reliability range of .80 to .92.

Crisis responsibility was measured by using two types of scales: McAuley, Duncan, and Russell's (1992) Causal Dimension Scale II (CDSII) and Griffin, Babin, and Darden's (1992) blame scale. The Causal Dimension Scale II, or CDSII, assesses attributions of controllability of an event while the blame scale assesses who is responsible for the event. While the scales went through wording and evaluative modifications to fit the mold of the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), the final seven-item scale demonstrated reliabilities similar to that of the organizational reputation measure with a range of .80 to .91.

The potential supportive behavior measure is the only scale that was developed from scratch by Coombs. The idea of this measure is to find out how a stakeholder might act toward an organization after a crisis and if people intend to behave in ways that are favorable to the organization after the crisis (Coombs, 2007). The potential supportive behavior scale demonstrated reliabilities between .81 to .87.

Out of all of the scales, organizational reputation has been the most extensively tested. According to Coombs (2007), five studies have found a significant negative correlation between crisis responsibility and organization reputation. The average correlation across these studies $r = -.415$. The correlations were found across the entire range of crisis types, including organization misdeeds, human-error accidents, technical errors accidents, technical-error recalls, workplace violence, and product tampering (Coombs, 1998, 1999a; Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2002; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000).

Three studies used organizational misdeeds, human-error crisis, technical-error crisis, workplace violence, product tampering, and technical-error recall to test the crisis history proposition. Crisis history was found to have a significant effect on organization

reputation for all but the technical-error recall and a significant effect on crisis responsibility for all but product tampering and technical-error recall (Coombs, 1998, 2002b; Coombs & Holladay, 2001). This finding was termed the Velcro effect, as the unfavorable condition attracted and snagged additional reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

A human-error accident crisis was used to test the relationship history propositions of the theory. The results stipulate that the unfavorable relationships history was found to have a significant effect on organizational reputation and crisis responsibility which showed its support for A. On the contrary, however, B was not supported because a favorable relationships history was no different than having no relationship history (Coombs, 2007). As with a crisis history, a Velcro effect was observed; only the negative condition had an effect (Coombs & Holladay, 2001).

The severity proposition was tested in one study using technical-error accident and organizational misdeed crisis types. The results indicated that severity of the crisis damage did not affect either organizational reputation or crisis responsibility as anticipated (Coombs, 1998).

The potential supportive behavior proposition has been examined in two studies using organizational misdeed and human-error accident crisis types. Organizational reputation, $r=.37$, and potential supportive behavior correlated, $r=.48$.

The crisis response strategy selection proposition was tested in two studies using organizational misdeed and technical-error accident crisis types. According to the studies conducted, the matched strategies (those recommended by SCCT) performed better than the mismatched strategies. The SCCT matches each crisis to its most appropriate

response strategy. Coombs (2007) stated that meaningful matching is possible only if there is some correspondence/link between crisis types and crisis response strategies while the mismatched conditions included using responses that accepted greater responsibility than recommended by SCCT, to prevent finding an effect by simply using lower, less-effective crisis response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000).

Purpose and Hypotheses

This study attempts to contribute to current theory-driven research in crisis communication by examining crisis response strategies from a communication-centered perspective. Specifically, this study seeks to further understanding of situational crisis communication theory by examining the effect of crisis response strategies on public perceptions of an organization in an accident crisis situation. To accomplish this objective, three hypotheses were developed.

- H1: In an accident crisis situation, a matched organizational response message will produce a more positive perception of organizational reputation than an unmatched organizational response strategy.
- H2: In an accident crisis situation, a matched organizational response message will produce a more positive perceptions of crisis responsibility for an organization than an unmatched organizational response strategy.
- H3: In an accident crisis situation, a matched organizational response message will produce a more positive potential supportive behavior than an unmatched organizational response strategy.

It is a primary goal of this study to learn more about the effectiveness of crisis response strategies in producing the desired outcome for organizations in crisis. This study seeks to test the propositions of the situational crisis communication theory and identify the message strategies most effective in producing positive public perceptions of

organizational reputation, crisis responsibility, and potential supportive behavior of publics toward an organization in crisis, specifically an accident. To test the proposed hypotheses, the methodology section will provide, in detail, how each hypothesis will be tested.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Research Participants

The participants for this study were 90 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory mass communication class at a large southeastern university. Crises produce unique forms of publics for organizations, victims, and nonvictims. Victims are those who are directly affected in some way (e.g., evacuated from an area, injured physically, or lost property). The focus of this present study is on nonvictims. Nonvictims are not affected by the crisis but follow the crisis in the news media because they are part of the organization where the possible crisis could occur. The students fit the parameters of the nonvictim population because they share the characteristics of being directly associated with an organization where a possible crisis could occur and they hold strong perceptions of the organization prior to a possible crisis.

Of the participants, 63.3% were female ($n=57$) and 36.7% were male ($n=33$). The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 40 years old ($M=19.93$, $SD=2.96$).

Design and Materials

The Campbell & Stanley one-shot case study (intervention and post-test) required the development of one scenario. A limitation of this design can occur when treatments are not randomized, however, treatments were randomized in this study to address this limitation. One response to one particular crisis was developed for the study. The matched response had the organization taking full responsibility of the crisis and

conveying an apologetic response to its stakeholders. An accident was selected for the crisis type for two reasons. First, accidents are a common type of crisis (Irvine & Miller, 1996). The results of applied research are more beneficial when they address issues that have a direct impact on someone and/or something. The lessons are more valuable when they can be applied more frequently. Second, accidents provide a greater variance in perceptions (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Accidents vary in terms of the perceptions formed about the crisis and the organization in crisis. For instance, technical breakdowns and workplace violence produce minimal perceptions of crisis responsibilities, whereas human error produces fairly stronger perceptions of crisis responsibilities (Coombs, 1999a). Even though there are ways to help in the prevention of accidents, stakeholders can perceive accidents very differently. That is why it is important to utilize a crisis type that demonstrates variance on many of the perceptual variables used in a study.

Instrumentation

For this study, a hypothetical crisis was developed based on a possible crisis situation that could have potential serious repercussions for stakeholders if ever this crisis occurred. In this case, the budget cuts that are affecting all public universities in Florida, especially the University of South Florida and the USF School of Mass Communications, is expected to reduce many of its communications class offerings. As a result, students would be required to participate in random drawings for the classes they need. Regardless of tenure, all students are entered into the drawing equally. Depending on how some student's names are randomly selected, this process has the potential to dramatically delay student's course work which means more money and more time spent at the university because there is not enough faculty to teach all of the classes needed to

accommodate all of the students. The following message was used as the matched response:

“For the first time in 35 years, Florida is experiencing a severe economic downturn, resulting in a drop in tax collection and a decrease of the amount of state money available to State University System Institutions, i.e., USF. The budget cut strips the University of approximately \$51 million or 15% of our overall budget. Because of these large budget cuts, the university has to reduce many of its current course offerings because the university is not able to employ enough faculty to accommodate current students. Unfortunately, many courses at USF will be part of a new course enrollment process.

This new course enrollment process enters student’s names into a lottery for needed courses. Names will be selected randomly until each course is full. Due to the overwhelming number of students and limited course availability, all students are entered into the drawing equally, regardless of academic level or area of study.

It is important to understand that USF’s overall concern is to our students. The school has always made it a priority to accommodate its students and your overall collegiate success. We know how this budget cut is going to dramatically disturb a large number of your graduation plans and USF is fully committed to doing whatever is necessary so that this will not happen. USF may have to limit the number of new students and/or eliminate some programs, but your graduation and academic plans will not be affected by this economic crisis. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact myself or my staff.”

The next message shows the unmatched response that was used in the instrumentation:

For the first time in 35 years, Florida is experiencing a severe economic downturn, resulting in a drop in tax collection and a decrease of the amount of state money available to State University System Institutions, i.e., USF. The budget cut strips the University of approximately \$51 million or 15% of our overall budget. Because of these large budget cuts, the university has to reduce many of its current course offerings because the university is not able to employ enough faculty to accommodate current students. Unfortunately, many courses at USF will be part of a new course enrollment process.

This new course enrollment process enters student’s names into a lottery for needed courses. Names will be selected randomly until each course is full. Due to the overwhelming number of students and limited course availability, all students are entered into the drawing equally, regardless of academic level or area of study. More information about this course enrollment system will be announced in late November.

This experimental design involved the manipulation of crisis history for the scenario. Three scales were employed to test the dependent variables in the study: (a) organizational reputation, (b) crisis responsibility, (c), potential supportive behavior.

Organizational Reputation. Organizational reputation was measured using five items from Coombs and Holladay's (1996) 10-item Organizational Reputation Scale, which is an adaptation of McCroskey's (1966) scale for measuring ethos. Specifically, an adaptation of the Character subscale of McCroskey's Ethos Scale was used to assess organization reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In this instance, character is used as a trustworthiness and good will of the source, that is, an assessment of the degree to which USF is concerned about its students. McCroskey's items were modified by simply replacing the term *speaker* with *USF*. The five items used in the present study were: (a) "USF is concerned with the well-being of its publics," (b) "USF is honest and open to its publics," (c) "I trust USF to be honest and open about the situation," (d) "Under most circumstances, I would be likely to believe what USF says," (e) "USF is not concerned with the well-being of its students."

Crisis Responsibility. Crisis responsibility was measured using Griffin, Babin, and Darden's (1992) three-item scale for blame. In this measure, *organization* was replaced with the term *USF*. The three items were: (a) "Circumstances, not USF, are responsible for the crisis," (b) "The blame for the crisis lies with USF," (c) "The blame for the crisis lies in the circumstances, not USF."

Potential Supportive Behavior. This final measurement was adapted from a Coombs (1999a) 8-item scale comprised of a list of actions an organization might ask

stakeholders to perform. However, the scale was modified into a 5-item version that used two items from the original scale where the term *organization* was replaced with *USF*. The items are: (a) “I intend to say nice things about USF to other people” and (b) “I intend to call or email my state government officials to voice my concern on this crisis that is affecting USF.” The last three items were specifically developed for this experiment. The items are: (c) “I plan to continue my college education at USF,” (d) “intend to support USF’s administrative decision,” and (e) “I plan to transfer to another academic institution to complete my degree.”

Procedures

Each respondent received a packet containing a cover page with instructions, one stimulus crisis case, and a copy of the survey instrument. The order of the materials in the packet was 1) a cover page, 2) a stimulus, and 3) a copy of the survey instrument. Each respondent read the stimulus and completed the survey instrument accordingly. Respondents were verbally instructed to read carefully each case and then respond to the questions following the case. The administration required about 10 to 15 minutes.

Chapter Four

Results

This study attempts to contribute to current theory-driven research in crisis communication by examining crisis response strategies from a communication-centered perspective. Specifically, this study seeks to further understanding of situational crisis communication theory by examining the effect of crisis response strategies on public perceptions of an organization in an accident crisis situation. To accomplish this objective, three hypotheses were developed.

- H1: In an accident crisis situation, a matched organizational response message will produce a more positive perception of organizational reputation than an unmatched organizational response strategy.
- H2: In an accident crisis situation, a matched organizational response message will produce a more positive perceptions of crisis responsibility for an organization than an unmatched organizational response strategy.
- H3: In an accident crisis situation, a matched organizational response message will produce more positive potential supportive behavior than an unmatched organizational response strategy.

Study of Participants

To test the hypotheses posited by this study, a 1x2 factorial experiment was conducted. The experiment utilized a balanced design that included 90 college students enrolled at a large southeastern university. The participants included 33 males and 57 females. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 40, with an average age of 19.93 years. Table 1 presents the frequencies and percentages of the sex and academic year of the participants.

Table 1. Sex and academic year of participants

<i>Variable</i>		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Sex	male	33	36.7
	female	57	63.3
Year	freshman	37	41.1
	sophomore	18	20.0
	junior	32	35.6
	senior	3	3.3

Measures of Variables of Interest

Prior to the hypotheses testing, the internal consistency of the multi-item scales used to test the variables of interest was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha to find the reliability coefficients. The five items included to test organizational reputation produced a reliability coefficient of .79. The three items included to test crisis responsibility produced a reliability coefficient of .86. The four items included to test organizational control produced a reliability coefficient of .78. Five items were included to test supportive behavior, and the alpha indicated scale reliability by dropping the item “I intend to call or email my state government officials to voice my concern on this crisis that is affecting USF.” After this item was omitted, the four remaining items produced a reliability coefficient of .87.

Overall, the Cronbach’s alpha scores, shown in Table 2, indicate reliability for the multi-item scales used to measure the variables of interest. According to Berman (2002), alpha values between .80 and 1.00 indicate high reliability. It is also agreed that the lower limit of .70 is still a useful measure of constructs (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Stacks, 2002).

Table 2. Cronbach's alpha for multiple-item indexes

<i>Variable</i>	<i>α</i>	<i>Number of items</i>
Organizational Reputation	.79	5
Crisis Responsibility	.86	3
Organizational Control	.78	4
Supportive Behavior	.87	4

Next, an evaluation of means for each variable of interest was performed prior to creating composite measures for hypothesis testing. An evaluation of the items used to measure organizational reputation produced mean scores ranging from 3.34 to 3.80. The mean and standard deviation for each item used to measure organizational reputation is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Organizational Reputation descriptives

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
1orgrep1	90	3.31	.830
2orgrep2	90	3.80	.914
3orgrep3	90	3.34	1.007
4orgrep4	90	3.51	.890
5orgrep5	90	3.46	.950

An evaluation of the items used to measure crisis responsibility produced mean scores ranging from 2.30 to 2.54. The mean and standard deviation for each item used to measure crisis responsibility is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Crisis Responsibility descriptive

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
6cr1	90	2.54	.996
7cr2	90	2.30	.854
8cr3	90	2.30	.893

An evaluation of the items used to measure organizational control produced mean scores ranging from 2.49 to 2.72. The mean and standard deviation for each item used to measure organizational control is shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Organizational Control descriptive

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
9oc1	90	2.49	1.063
10oc2	90	2.50	1.008
11oc3	90	2.72	1.017
12oc4	90	2.53	.877

An evaluation of the items used to measure potential supportive behavior produced mean scores ranging from 2.61 to 3.80. The mean and standard deviation for each item used to measure potential supportive behavior is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Potential Supportive Behavior descriptive

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
13sb1	90	3.80	1.210
14sb2	90	3.67	1.122
15sb3	90	3.06	1.193
16sb4	90	3.39	1.371
18sb5	90	2.61	.991

An evaluation of the items used to measure overall effectiveness produced mean scores ranging from 2.46 to 2.50. The mean and standard deviation for each item used to measure overall effectiveness is shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Overall Effectiveness descriptive

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
19eff1	90	2.48	.951
20eff2	90	2.46	1.007
21eff3	90	2.50	1.030

Finally, items used to measure each variable of interest were collapsed into composite measures for each variable. The mean scores for the composite measures ranged from 2.38 to 3.48. The mean and standard deviation for the composite measures are shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Mean and standard deviation for composite measures

<i>Composite Measure</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
Organizational Reputation	90	3.48	.678
Crisis Responsibility	90	2.38	.808
Organizational Control	90	2.56	.767
Potential Supportive Behavior	90	3.48	1.041
Overall Effectiveness	90	2.51	.812

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 posited that in an accident crisis situation, a matched organizational response message will produce a more positive perception of organizational reputation than an unmatched organizational response strategy. To test this hypothesis, an independent-samples *t*-test was conducted. The results indicated that an unmatched response (N=45, M=3.57, SD=.692) produced a higher mean score than the predicted matched response (N=45, M=3.40, SD=.65). However, the difference in means was not significant, $t(88) = -.506$, $p = .793$. These results indicate the matched response does not yield a more positive perception of organizational reputation; therefore H1 is not supported.

Hypothesis 2 posited that in an accident crisis situation, a matched organizational response will produce more positive perceptions of crisis responsibility for an organization than an unmatched organizational response strategy. To test this hypothesis, an independent-samples *t*-test was conducted as well. The results indicated that a matched response (N=45, M=2.45, SD=.832) produced a higher mean score than an unmatched response (N=45, M=2.31, SD=.786) as initially predicted. However, the difference in means was not significant, $t(88) = -.527$, $p = .691$. These results indicate that the matched response yielded a more positive perception of crisis responsibility; therefore H2 is not supported.

Hypothesis 3 posited that a matched organizational response message will produce more positive potential supportive behavior than an unmatched organization response strategy. An independent-samples *t*-test was also used to test this hypothesis. The results stipulated that an unmatched response (N=45, M=3.55, SD=.997) produced a higher mean score than the predicted matched response (N=45, M=3.41, SD=1.09). However, the difference in means was not significant, $t(88) = -1.129$, $p = .417$. These results indicate that the matched response yielded a more positive perception of crisis responsibility; therefore H3 is not supported.

Exploration of Individual Item Differences

Following the hypothesis testing, exploration analysis was conducted to determine if significant differences existed between the matched and unmatched crisis responses for each individual item. Table 9 shows the mean and standard deviation for each item used to measure the variables of interest in this study.

Table 9. Individual item mean and standard deviation

Crisis Type		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1 Org ReP:	matched	45	3.27	.837
“USF is concerned with the well-being of its publics”	unmatched	45	3.36	.830
2 Org Rep:	matched	45	3.71	.920
“USF is basically dishonest”	unmatched	45	3.89	.910
3 Org Rep:	matched	45	3.20	1.014
“I do NOT trust USF to tell the truth about the incident”	unmatched	45	3.49	.991

4 Org Rep:	matched	45	3.40	.863
“Under most circumstances, I would be likely to believe what USF says”	unmatched	45	3.62	.912
5 Org Rep:	matched	45	3.40	.889
“USF is not concerned with the well-being of its students”	unmatched	45	3.51	1.014
6 CR:	matched	45	2.49	1.014
“Under most circumstances, I would be likely to believe what USF says”	unmatched	45	2.60	.986
7 CR:	matched	45	2.47	.919
“The blame for the crisis lies with USF”	unmatched	45	2.13	.757
8 CR:	matched	45	2.40	.915
“The blame for the crisis lies in the circumstances, not USF”	unmatched	45	2.20	.869
9 OC:	matched	45	2.31	.973
“The cause of the crisis was something that USF could control”	unmatched	45	2.67	1.128

10 OC:	matched	45	2.42	1.011
“The cause of the crisis is something over which USF had no power”	unmatched	45	2.58	1.011
11 OC:	matched	45	2.67	1.066
“The cause of the crisis is something that was manageable by USF”	unmatched	45	2.78	.974
12 OC:	matched	45	2.60	.939
“The cause of the crisis is something over which USF had power”	unmatched	45	2.47	.815
13 SB:	matched	45	3.80	1.254
“I plan to continue my college education at USF”	unmatched	45	3.80	1.179
14 SB:	matched	45	3.53	1.160
“I intend to say nice things about USF to other people”	unmatched	45	3.80	1.079
15 SB:	matched	45	2.93	1.195
“I intend to support USF’s administrative decision”	unmatched	45	3.18	1.193
16 SB:	matched	45	3.36	1.464
“I plan to transfer to another academic institution to complete my degree”	unmatched	45	3.42	1.288

17 SB:	matched	45	3.31	1.427
“I intend to call or email my state government officials to voice my concern on this crisis that is affecting USF”	unmatched	45	2.56	1.324
18 EFF:	matched	45	2.69	.973
“I am satisfied by the way USF has managed this crisis”	unmatched	45	2.53	1.014
19 EFF:	matched	45	2.44	.893
“I believe that USF’s response to this crisis is effective”	unmatched	45	2.51	1.014
20 EFF:	matched	45	2.49	1.079
“I do not believe USF has handled this crisis as well as it could have”	unmatched	45	2.42	.941
21 EFF:	matched	45	2.38	1.072
“I am comfortable that USF responded to the crisis in a manner that accommodated to the student’s best interest.”	unmatched	45	2.62	.984

Separate independent samples *t*-tests were conducted on each item to determine if any of the mean scores for the matched and unmatched crisis responses were significantly different. Only the item, “I intend to call or email my state government officials to voice

my concern on this crisis that is affecting USF,” indicated a significant different between matched (N=45, M=3.31, SD=1.43) and unmatched (N=45, M=2.56, SD=1.32)

responses. The Results are shown in Table 10.

Table 10. Independent Sample *t*-tests

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
1 Org Rep*: “USF is concerned with the well-being of its publics”	Equal variances assumed	.069	.793	-.506	88	.614
	Equal variances not assumed			-.506	87.994	.614
2 Org Rep*: “USF is basically dishonest”	Equal variances assumed	.119	.731	-.922	88	.359
	Equal variances not assumed			-.922	87.990	.359
3 Org Rep*: “I do NOT trust USF to tell the truth about the incident”	Equal variances assumed	.029	.866	-1.367	88	.175
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.367	87.957	.175
4 Org Rep*: “Under most circumstances, I would be likely to believe what USF says”	Equal variances assumed	.131	.719	-1.187	88	.238
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.187	87.740	.238
5 Org Rep*: “USF is not concerned with the well-being of its students”	Equal variances assumed	1.834	.179	-.553	88	.582
	Equal variances not assumed			-.553	86.527	.582

6 CR*: “Under most circumstances, I would be likely to believe what USF says”	Equal variances assumed	.159	.691	-.527	88	.600
	Equal variances not assumed			-.527	87.932	.600
7 CR*: “The blame for the crisis lies with USF”	Equal variances assumed	4.989	.028	1.878	88	.064
	Equal variances not assumed			1.878	84.862	.064
8 CR*: “The blame for the crisis lies in the circumstances, not USF”	Equal variances assumed	1.213	.274	1.064	88	.290
	Equal variances not assumed			1.064	87.768	.290
9 OC*: “The cause of the crisis was something that USF could control”	Equal variances assumed	1.803	.183	-1.601	88	.113
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.601	86.138	.113
10 OC*: “The cause of the crisis is something over which USF had no power”	Equal variances assumed	.018	.893	-.730	88	.467
	Equal variances not assumed			-.730	88.000	.467
11 OC*: The cause of the crisis is something that was manageable by USF”	Equal variances assumed	1.517	.221	-.516	88	.607
	Equal variances not assumed			-.516	87.299	.607
12 OC*: “The cause of the crisis is something over which USF had power”	Equal variances assumed	.738	.393	.719	88	.474
	Equal variances not assumed			.719	86.280	.474
13 SB*: “I plan to continue my college education at USF”	Equal variances assumed	.066	.798	.000	88	1.000
	Equal variances not assumed			.000	87.670	1.000

14 SB*: “I intend to say nice things about USF to other people”	Equal variances assumed	.665	.417	-1.129	88	.262
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.129	87.540	.262
15 SB*: “I intend to support USF’s administrative decision”	Equal variances assumed	.180	.672	-.971	88	.334
	Equal variances not assumed			-.971	88.000	.334
16 SB*: “I plan to transfer to another academic institution to complete my degree”	Equal variances assumed	1.627	.205	-.229	88	.819
	Equal variances not assumed			-.229	86.592	.819
17 SB*: “I intend to call or email my state government officials to voice my concern on this crisis that is affecting USF”	Equal variances assumed	.642	.425	2.604	88	.011
	Equal variances not assumed			2.604	87.506	.011
18 EFF*: “I am satisfied by the way USF has managed this crisis”	Equal variances assumed	.029	.866	.743	88	.460
	Equal variances not assumed			.743	87.853	.460
19 EFF*: “I believe that USF’s response to this crisis is effective”	Equal variances assumed	1.143	.288	-.331	88	.741
	Equal variances not assumed			-.331	86.622	.741
20 EFF*: “I do not believe USF has handled this crisis as well as it could have”	Equal variances assumed	.448	.505	.312	88	.756
	Equal variances not assumed			.312	86.403	.756

21 EFF*: “I am comfortable that USF responded to the crisis in a manner that accommodated to the student’s best interest.”	Equal variances assumed	.250	.618	-1.127	88	.263
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.127	87.356	.263

**Org Rep = Organizational Reputation; CR = Crisis Responsibility; OC = Organizational Control; SB = Potential Supportive Behavior; EFF = Overall Effectiveness*

Each of the hypotheses and the meaning of the corresponding results will be discussed in the following chapter. From the examination, conclusions are formed and recommendations are offered for future research.

Chapter Five

Discussion

This study examined the situational crisis communication theory to test if the theory would preserve an organization's reputation in the wake of a crisis. The SCCT offers a set of principles that guide the selection of the crisis response strategies in order to maximize reputational protection (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). SCCT provides crisis managers with guidelines for understanding which response strategies are most appropriate for a given crisis type (Coombs, 1995). In an attempt to contribute to the development and refinement of the SCCT, three hypotheses were tested in this study.

H1, which states that in an accident crisis situation, a matched organizational response message will produce a more positive perception of organizational reputation than an unmatched organizational response strategy, was not supported by the results of this study. This finding does not confirm the premise of the situational crisis communications theory and, therefore, does not add to the validity of the theory.

H2, which states that in an accident crisis situation, a matched organizational response message will produce a more positive perception of crisis responsibility for an organization than an unmatched organizational response strategy, was not supported by the results of this study. Although not supported, this was the only hypothesis that suggested slight support for the matched response. It was not a significant amount; however, there was opportunity that, with more research, it significant results could possibly emerge. Per the results, this finding does not confirm the premise of the

situational crisis communications theory and, therefore does not add to the validity of the theory.

H3, which states that in an accident crisis situation, a matched organizational response message will produce a more positive potential supportive behavior than an unmatched organizational response strategy. This finding does not confirm the premise of the situational crisis communications theory and, therefore, does not add to the validity of the theory.

It was hypothesized that in an accident crisis situation, a matched organizational response message will produce a more positive perception of organizational reputation, crisis responsibility, and potential supportive behavior than an unmatched organizational response strategy. All hypotheses were not supported by the results of the study.

It should also be discussed, the item that the alpha indicated that should be dropped from organizational reputation to give a better scale reliability. By dropping the item “I intend to call or email my state government officials to voice my concern on this crisis that is affecting USF,” a better coefficient was achieved. With all other responses suggesting low involvement from the participants, what provoked the students to want to go above and beyond to contact the government?

When all previous studies on the SCCT indicate that a particular result should occur, but the results come back inconclusive, it must be taken into consideration that there were unfactored variables that were not considered while conducting the study.

The first variable that should be discussed is the lack of apathy from the participants. The study did not take the participants presumptive opinion about USF into consideration which could have made the study clearer to why the participants answered

the questions in the manner that they did. Knowing the participants presumptive opinion about USF is a key factor in this study because each stakeholder's view on an organization varies and some of the participants in the study could have had a predisposed opinion that did not favor USF which may have caused heavily opinionated responses that ultimately proved every hypothesis inconclusive.

The next variable up for discussion is low involvement from participants. This should not be ruled out for the cause of insignificant data because it could simply be that the participants did not care to be highly involved in the study because, even though the crisis was purely hypothetical, it did not affect their academic plans and if the study had nothing to do with them, then it is very clear to see why the participants would not be as involved in something that did not have a direct affect on their academic careers.

Besides the prediction of low involvement from the participants, a valid limitation on the results that is beyond the researcher's control could stem from the fact that the participants were part of a large class that is constantly saturated with surveys and experiments from graduate students because the class produces a large number for a diverse outcome of results.

Another factor that was discovered while analyzing the results was that too much information was disseminated before the actual experiment was administered. The participants of the study were alerted that the crisis in the experiment was purely hypothetical even before the participants received the survey to complete. With this major factor, it should be made aware that the results of this study should be assessed skeptically and that this could be one of the main reasons why the results came out the way they did.

Although the results from the study did not produce significance that was supposed to further validate the SCCT, a more significant discovery was found that is more important than if this study actually furthered SCCT's validation. While trying to group a hypothetical crisis with USF in the center, it was very difficult to categorize the crisis type because the crisis types list did not accommodate the type of crisis that may occur at an educational institution or organization of the sort. This is crucial to the SCCT because if it were an actual implemented theory, it would be very difficult for a crisis manager to craft an effective response for a crisis type that does not have a category.

As described on page 25, it would appear that a hypothetical crisis of this caliber would fit in organizational misdeed with no injuries, organizational misdeed management misconduct, or challenges. However, if examined closer, in a crisis like this; stakeholders are never deceived, laws or regulations are not violated by management (administration), and the educational institution is not operating in an inappropriate manner no matter the responsibility acceptance level. If this crisis did not fit any of the predisposed crisis types, then it must be concluded that another crisis type and/or a more detailed description must be added to accommodate this type of crisis.

Future Research

Research should begin to assess how crisis types are perceived. Through the scant research on the SCCT are researchers paying enough attention to make sure that there is a category for every type of possible crisis? Because my study was a hypothetical crisis that could severely affect the educational institution's stakeholders and it did not fit any of the 13 different types of crises. If there is not room for a crisis type of this caliber, then one must be conjured because all assumptions in crisis management

must be accurate if these assumptions are being used to recommend plans of action for crisis managers.

Conclusion

Despite limitations, the present study offers some insight on the effect of a crisis on perceptions organizations involved in crisis. It is important that the SCCT be tested to build reliable social science and to contribute to the constant changing and developing of crisis communication management. Results from this study do not support the SCCT in validating that a matched response is more effective than an unmatched response.

However, it should be taken into serious account that if this study were to be duplicated and all limitations were covered and/or corrected, the results would support the SCCT which will provide more information to crisis managers in crafting more strategic messages that will more effectively protect an organization's reputation.

References

- AON. (2006). AON. Retrieved Oct. 7, 2007, from [6] (http://www.aon.com/risk_management/crisis_management/crisis_mgmt_planning.jsp)
- Abelson, R. P. (1959). Modes of resolution of belief dilemmas. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 3, 343-352.
- Allen, M. W., & Caillouet, R. H. (1994). Legitimation endeavors: Impression management strategies used by an organization in crisis. *Communication Monographs*, 61, 44-62.
- Balzer, W. K., & Sulsky, L. M. (1992). Halo and performance appraisal research: A critical examination. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 77, pp. 975-985.
- Barton, L. (1993). *Crisis in organizations: Managing and communicating in the heat of chaos* Cincinnati, OH: College Divisions South-Western Publishing
- Bedeian, A. G. (1989). *Management* (2nd ed.). Chicago: Dryden.
- Benoit, W. L. (1995a). *Accounts, excuses, apologies: A theory of image restoration discourse*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Benoit, W. L. (1995b). Sears' repair of its auto service image: Image restoration discourse in the corporate sector. *Communication Studies*, 46, pp. 89-105.
- Benoit, W. L. (1997a). Hugh Grant's image restoration discourse: An actor apologizes. *Communication Quarterly*, 45, pp. 251-267.
- Benoit, W. L. (1998). Merchants of death: Persuasive defenses by the tobacco industry. In J. F. Klumpp (Ed.), *Argument in a time of change: Definition, frameworks, and critiques* (pp. 220-225). Annandale, VA: NCA.
- Benoit, W. L. (2007). President Bush's major post-Katrina speeches: Enhancing image repair discourse theory applied to the public sector. *Public Relations Review*, 33, pp 40-48.
- Benoit, W. L., & Anderson, K. K. (1996). Blending politics and entertainment: Dan Quayle versus Murphy Brown. *Southern Communication Journal*, 62, pp. 73-85.

- Benoit, W. L., & Brinson, S. L. (1999). Queen Elizabeth's image repair discourse: Insensitive royal or compassionate queen? *Public Relations Review*, 25, pp. 145-156.
- Benoit, W. L., & Czerwinski, A. (1997). A critical analysis of USAir's image repair discourse. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 60, pp. 38-57.
- Benoit, W. L., & Pang, A. (2007). Crisis communication and image repair discourse. *Public relations: from theory to practice*, pp. 244-259.
- Benoit, W. L., Gullifor, P., & Panici, D. (1991). President Reagan's defensive discourse on the Iran-contra affair. *Communication Studies*, 42, pp. 272-294.
- Benoit, W. L., & Hanczor, R. (1994). The Tonya Harding controversy: An analysis of image repair strategies. (*Communication Quarterly*, 42, pp. 416-433.
- Benoit, W. L., & Hirson, D. (2001). *Doonesbury* versus the Tobacco Institute: The Smoke Starters' Coupon. *Communication Quarterly*, 49, pp. 279-294.
- Benoit, W. L., & McHale, J. P. (1999). Kenneth Starr's image repair discourse viewed in 20/20. *Communication Quarterly*, 47, pp. 265-280.
- Benoit, W. L., & Nill, D. M. (1998a). A critical analysis of Judge Clarence Thomas's statement before the Senate Judiciary Committee. *Communication Studies*, 49, pp. 179-195.
- Benoit, W. L., & Wells, W. T. (1998). An analysis of three image restoration discourses on Whitewater. *Journal of Public Advocacy*, 3, pp. 21-37.
- Benson, J. A. (1988). Crisis revisited: An analysis of the strategies used by Tylenol in the second tampering episode. *Central States Speech Journal*, 39, pp. 49-66.
- Bergman, E. (1994). Crisis? What crisis? *Communication World*, 11, pp. 9-13.
- Birch, J. (1994). New factors in crisis planning and response. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 39(1), pp. 31-34.
- Blaney, J. R., Benoit, W. L. (1997). The persuasive defense of Jesus in the Gospel according to John. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 20, pp. 25-30.
- Blaney, J. R., Benoit, W. L., & Brazeal, L. M. (2002) Blowout! Firestone's image restoration campaign. *Public Relations Research*, 28, pp. 379-392.
- Brinson, S., & Benoit, W. L. (1996). Dow Corning's image repair strategies in the breast implant crisis. *Communication Quarterly*, 44, pp. 29-41.

- Campbell, D. T., & Stanley, J. C. (1963). *Experiment and quasi-experiment designs for research*. Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Company.
- Caponigro, J. R. (2000). *The crisis counselor: A step-by-step guide to managing a business crisis*. Chicago: Contemporary Books.
- Center, A. H., & Fellow, P. J. (2003). *Public relations practices: Managerial case studies and problems*. Prentice Hall.
- Cohen, J. R. (1999). Advising clients to apologize. *S. California Law Review*, 72, pp. 1009-131.
- Cohen, R. (2000). *The PR crisis bible*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Coombs, W. T. (1995). Choosing the right words: The development of guidelines for the selection of the "appropriate" crisis response strategies. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 8, pp. 447-476.
- Coombs, W. T. (1998). An analytic framework for crisis situations: Better responses from a better understanding of the situation. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 10, pp. 177-191.
- Coombs, W. T. (1999a). Information and compassion in crisis responses: A test of their effects. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 11, pp. 125-142.
- Coombs, W. T. (1999b). *Ongoing crisis communication. Planning, managing, and responding*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Coombs, W. T. (2002b, November). *Further testing of the situational crisis communication theory: An extended examination of crisis history as a modifier*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Coombs, W. T. (2006). Attribution Theory as a guide for post-crisis communication research. *Public Relations Review*, 33, pp. 135-139
- Coombs, W. T. (2007). The development of the situation crisis communication theory. Pearson.
- Coombs, W. T., Hazleton, V., Holladay, S. J., & Chandler, R. C. (1995). The crisis grid: Theory and application in crisis management. In L. Barton (Ed.), *New avenues in risk and crisis management* (Vol. 4, pp. 30-39). Las Vegas, NV: UNLV Small Business Development Center.

- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (1996). Communication and attributions in a crisis: An experimental study of crisis communication. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 8, pp. 279-295.
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2001). An extended examination of the crisis situation: A fusion of the relational management and symbolic approaches. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 13, pp. 321-340.
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2002). Helping crisis managers protect reputational assets: Initial tests of the situational crisis communication theory. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 16, pp. 165-186.
- Coombs, W. T., & Schmidt, L. (2000). An empirical analysis of image restoration: Texaco's racism crisis. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12(2), pp. 163-178.
- Dimaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1991). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organization fields. In W. W. Powell & P J Dimaggio (Eds.), *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis* (pp. 63-82). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Drumheller, K., & Benoit, W. L. (2004). *USS Greenville* collides with Japan's *Ehime Maru*: Cultural issues in image repair discourse. *Public Relations Review*, 30, pp. 177-185.
- Fearn-Banks, K. (1996). *Crisis communications: A casebook approach*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fearn-Banks, K. (2007). *Crisis communications: A casebook approach*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fink, S. (1986) *Crisis management Planning for the inevitable*. New York. AMACOM
General Dynamics lands F-16 contract (1986, October) *Dallas Morning News*, P A1.
- France, M. (2002, August 26). The mea culpa defense. *Business Week*, 3796, pp. 76-78.
- Griffin, M., Babin, B. J., & Darden, W. R. (1992). Consumer assessments of responsibility for product-related injuries: The impact of regulations, warnings, and promotional policies. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 19, pp. 870-877.
- Hamblin, R. L. (1958). Leadership and crises. *Sociometry*, 21, pp. 322-335.
- Hearit, K. M. (1994, Summer). Apologies and public relations crises at Chrysler, Toshiba, and Volvo. *Public Relations Review*, 20, pp. 113-125.

- Heath, R. L. (1994). *Management of corporate communication: From interpersonal contacts to external affairs*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Herbig, P., Milewicz, J., & Golden, J. (1994). A model of reputation building and destruction. *Journal of Business Research*, 31, pp. 23-31.
- Hoff, R. (1980, January). Corporate advertising: Too many objectives equal mush. *Dun's Review*, 127-129.
- Irvine, R. B., & Millar, D. P. (1996). Debunking the stereotypes of crisis management: The nature of business crises in the 1990's. In L. Barton (Ed.), *New avenues in risk and crisis management, Volume V* (pp. 51-63). Las Vegas: University of Nevada, Las Vegas Small Business Development Center.
- Kennedy, K. A., & Benoit, W. L. (1997). The Newt Gingrich book deal controversy: A case study in self-defense rhetoric. *Southern Communication Journal*, 63, pp. 197-216.
- Len-Rios, M., & Benoit, W. L. (2004). Gary Condit's image repair strategies: Squandering a golden opportunity. *Public Relations Research*, 50, pp. 95-106.
- Lerbinger, O. (1997). *The crisis manager: Facing risk and responsibility*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Marcus, A. A., & Goodman, R. S. (1991). Victims and shareholders: The dilemmas of presenting corporate policy during a crisis. *Academy of Management Journal*, 34, 281-305.
- McAuley, E., Duncan, T. E., & Russell, D. W. (1992). Measuring causal attributions: The revised causal dimension scale (CDII). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 18, 566-573.
- McCroskey, J. C. (1966). *An introduction to rhetorical communication*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Moffitt, M. A. (1994). Collapsing and integrating concepts of "public" and "image" into a new theory. *Public Relations Research*, 20, pp. 159-170.
- Mitroff, I. I. (2001). *Managing crises before they happen. What every executive and manager needs to know about crisis management*. New York: AMACOM.
- Ogrizek, M., & Guillery, J. M. (1999). *Communicating in crisis*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

- Pauchant, T. C., & Mitroff, I. I. (1992). *Transforming the crisis-prone organization: Preventing individual, organizational, and environmental tragedies*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pearson, C. M., & Clair J. A. (1998). Reframing crisis management. *The Academy of Management review*, 23, pp. 59-76.
- Pearson, C. M., & Mitroff, I. I. (1993). From crisis prone to crisis prepared: A framework for crisis management. *The Executive*, 7, pp. 48-59.
- Pinsdorf, M. K. (1987). *Communicating when your company is under siege: Surviving public crisis*. Lexington, MA: Heath.
- Ray, S. J. (1999). *Strategic communication in crisis management. Lessons from the airline industry*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books.
- Russell, D. (1982). The causal dimension scale: A measure of how individuals perceive causes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 42, pp. 1137-1145.
- Seegar, M. W., Sellnow, T. L., & Ulmer, R. R. (1998). Communication, organization, and crisis. In M. E. Roloff (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 21* (pp. 231-276). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Siomkos, G. & Shrivastava, P. (1993). Responding to product liability crises. *Long Range Planning*, 26(5), 72-79.
- Sturges, D. L. (1994). Communication through crisis: A strategy for organizational survival. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 7, pp. 297-316.
- Ware, B. L., & Linkugel, W. A. (1973). They spoke in defense of themselves: On the generic criticism of apologia. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 59, pp. 273-283.
- Weiner, B. (1985). An attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion. *Psychology Review*, 92, pp. 548-573.
- Weiner, B., Amirkan, J., Folkes, V. S., & Verette, J. A. (1987). An attribution analysis of excuse giving: Studies of a naïve theory of emotion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, pp. 316-324.
- Weiner, B., Perry, R. P., & Magnusson, J. (1988). An attribution analysis of reactions to stigmas. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 55, pp. 738-748.
- Wilson, S. R. (1993). An attribution analysis of compliance gaining interactions. *Communication Monographs*, 60, pp. 352-372.

Zhang, J., & Benoit, W. L. (2004). Message strategies of Saudi Arabia's image restoration campaign after 9/11. *Public Relations Review*, 30, pp. 161-167.