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Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication

William L. Benoit

ABSTRACT: This article describes the theory of image restoration discourse as an approach for understanding corporate crisis situations. This theory can be used by practitioners to help design messages during crises and by critics or educators to critically evaluate messages produced during crises. I begin by describing and illustrating the basic concepts in this theory. Then, I offer suggestions for crisis communication based on this body of theory and research.

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Image is essential to organizations (i.e., corporations, government bodies, non-profit groups) as well as individuals. Even if we are moving away from a notion of image as a single impression shared by an audience,¹ image is still a central concept to the field of public relations. Firms may take preventive² and restorative approaches to image problems.³ This essay argues that the theory of image restoration discourse is a viable approach for use in developing and understanding messages that respond to corporate image crises.

Of course, there are differences in the repair efforts of individuals and companies. For example, firms might use different strategies than individuals, or employ them in different configurations. Firms may bring greater resources to image repair efforts than individuals. Attorneys may recommend that their companies eschew certain strategies to minimize the risks of litigation. Nevertheless, the basic options are the same for both individual and corporate image repair efforts.

THE THEORY OF IMAGE RESTORATION DISCOURSE

Basic Concepts of Image Restoration Theory

The key to understanding image repair strategies is to consider the nature of attacks or complaints that prompt such responses or instigate a corporate crisis.⁴ An attack has two components:

1. The accused is held responsible for an action.
2. That act is considered offensive.

No matter what happened, it is not reasonable to form an unfavorable impression of a firm *unless that company is believed to be responsible* for that act. Responsibility can appear in many guises: for example, a business can be blamed for acts that it performed, ordered, encouraged, facilitated, or permitted to occur (or for acts of omission or poorly performed acts that it appears responsible for). Furthermore, if nothing happened—or if what did happen is not considered offensive—then the company's image is not threatened. Importantly, a *salient audience* (or audiences) must be thought to disapprove of the act.

Second, for both conditions, *perceptions are more important than reality*. The important point is not whether the business *in fact* is responsible for the offensive act, but whether the firm is *thought* to be responsible for it by the relevant audience. Of course, if the firm is not really to blame for the offensive act, this can be an important component of its response. As long as the audience thinks the firm at fault, the image is at risk.

Similarly, the key question is not if the act was *in fact* offensive, but whether the act is *believed* by the relevant audience(s) to be heinous. Of course, if the act in question was not actually offensive, that can be an important part of its defense. But the most important question is whether the salient audience believes the act to be offensive.

Finally, corporations often address multiple audiences. For example, a business might face local citizens, governmental regulators, stockholders, employees, pressure groups, and politicians. Each audience potentially has diverse interests, concerns, and goals. The crisis communicator must identify the most important audience (or prioritize important audiences).

Typology of Image Restoration Strategies

Rather than describe the kinds of crisis situations⁵ or the stages in a crisis,⁶ the theory of image restoration discourse focuses on *message options*. In other words, what can a corporation say when faced with a crisis? This theory⁷ is more exhaustive than the earlier theories (*apologia*, accounts) on which it builds. This theory offers five broad categories of image repair strategies, some with variants, that respond to such threats. Denial and evasion of responsibility address the first component of persuasive attack, rejecting or reducing the

TABLE 1

Image Restoration Strategies		
Strategy	Key Characteristic	Illustration
<i>Denial</i>		
Simple Denial	Did Not Perform Act	Coke Does Not Charge McDonald's Less
Shift the Blame	Act Performed by Another	Exxon: Alaska and Caused Delay
<i>Evasion of Responsibility</i>		
Provocation	Responded to Act of Another	Firm Moved Because of New State Laws
Defeasibility	Lack of Information or Ability	Executive Not Told Meeting Changed
Accident	Act Was a Mishap	Sears' Unneeded Repairs Inadvertent
Good Intentions	Meant Well in Act	Sears: No Willful Over-Charges
<i>Reducing Offensiveness of Event</i>		
Bolstering	Stress Good Traits	Exxon's Swift and Competent Action
Minimization	Act Not Serious	Exxon: Few Animals Killed
Differentiation	Act Less Offensive	Sears: Preventative Maintenance
Transcendence	More Important Considerations	Helping Humans Justifies Tests
Attack Accuser	Reduce Credibility of Accuser	Pepsi: Coke Charges McDonald's Less
Compensation	Reimburse Victim	Disabled Movie-Goers Given Free Passes
Corrective Action	Plan to Solve or Prevent Problem	AT&T Promised to Improve Service
<i>Mortification</i>	Apologize for Act	AT&T Apologized

accused's responsibility for the act in question. Reducing offensiveness and corrective action, the third and fourth broad category of image restoration, concern the second component of persuasive attack: reducing offensiveness of the act attributed to the accused. The last general strategy, mortification, tries to restore an image by asking forgiveness.

Denial

One general approach to image repair, with two variants, is denial. For example, Pepsi-Cola accused Coca-Cola of requiring its other accounts to pay higher prices, subsidizing its largest customer, McDonald's. Coke replied by simply and directly denying Pepsi's charges: charges that Coke increased prices for some customers but not all "were absolutely false;" price increases were "universally applied; there were no exceptions."⁸ Here, Coke rejects Pepsi's charges as false. A firm may deny that the act occurred, that the firm performed the act, or that the act was harmful to anyone.

A second form of denial is shifting the blame, arguing that another person or organization is actually responsible for the offensive act. After the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill, Rawl, Chair of Exxon, "blamed state officials and the Coast Guard for the delay, charging ... that the company could not obtain immediate authorization on the scene to begin cleaning up the oil or applying a chemical dispersant."⁹ If Exxon was not at fault for the delay, their image should not be tarnished.

Evasion of Responsibility

This general image repair strategy has four versions. A firm can say its act was merely a response to another's offensive act, and that the behavior can be seen as a reasonable reaction to that provocation. For example, a company might claim it moved its plant to another state because the first state passed a new law reducing its profit margin.

Another specific form of evading responsibility is defeasibility. Here, the business alleges a lack of information about or control over important elements of the situation. For instance, a busy executive who missed an important meeting could claim that "I was never told that the meeting had been moved up a day." If true, the lack of information excuses the absence.

A third option is to claim the offensive action occurred by accident. If the company can convince the audience that the act in question happened accidentally, it should be held less accountable, and the damage to that business's image should be reduced. After charges of auto repair fraud, Sears' Chairman Brennan characterized the auto repair mistakes as "inadvertent," rather than intentional.¹⁰

Fourth, the business can suggest that the offensive behavior was performed with good intentions. Brennan also stressed Sears' good intentions, declaring that "Sears wants you to know that we would never intentionally violate the trust customers have shown in our company for 105 years."¹¹ This remark functions to stress Sears' good intentions toward its customers.

Reduce Offensiveness

A company that is accused of wrongful actions can also try to reduce the perceived offensiveness of that act. This general image repair strategy has six versions.

First, a corporation may use bolstering to strengthen the audience's positive feelings toward the itself, in order to offset the negative feelings connected with the wrongful act. Businesses may describe positive characteristics they have or positive acts they have done in the past. After the *Valdez* oil spill, for example, Exxon's Chairman Rawl declared that "Exxon has moved swiftly and competently to minimize the effect this oil will have on the environment, fish, and other wildlife." He expressed his sympathy to "the residents of Valdez and the people of the State of Alaska."¹² These sentiments, if accepted, should bolster its image and offset damage to its reputation.

A second possibility is to try to minimize the negative feelings associated with the wrongful act. After the *Valdez* oil spill, Exxon officials also tried to downplay the extent of the damage. Baker explained that "On May 19, when Alaska retrieved corpses of tens of thousands of sea birds, hundreds of otters, and

dozens of bald eagles, an Exxon official told National Public Radio that Exxon had counted just 300 birds and 70 otters."¹³ This statement works to minimize the apparent problem.

Third, a firm can employ differentiation, in which the act is distinguished from other similar but more offensive actions. Sears argued that the acts labeled unneeded repairs were actually preventative maintenance.¹⁴ Clearly, its actions sound much less offensive when understood as preventative maintenance instead of as fraud.

A fourth way of reducing offensiveness is transcendence, which attempts to place the act in a more favorable context. A company that experiments on animals could claim the benefits to humans from such research outweigh the harms to animals.

Fifth, those accused of wrong-doing may decide to attack their accusers. After Coca-Cola argued that Coke is more profitable than Pepsi, Pepsi-Cola counter-attacked in advertisements aimed at retail outlets. One ad claimed that Coke charged other firms more than McDonald's: "Coke's pricing policy is requiring you to subsidize the operations of your largest competitor."¹⁵ This attack on Coke this might reduce the damage from Coke's criticism of Pepsi.

Compensation is the final form of reducing offensiveness. If it is acceptable to the victim, the firm's image should be improved. For example, a group of disabled people were denied admittance to a movie theater. An official later apologized and offered them free passes to a future movie to help compensate for this offensive act.¹⁶

Corrective Action

Another general image restoration strategy is corrective action, in which the company promises to correct the problem. This action can take the form of restoring the state of affairs existing before the offensive action, and/or promising to prevent the recurrence of the offensive act. For instance, in 1993 AT&T experienced a breakdown in long distance service to and from New York City. Chairman Allen relied heavily on corrective action: "We have already taken corrective and preventive action at the affected facility" in New York City, including "a thorough examination of all of our facilities and practices, from the ground up." He also announced plans "to spend billions more over the next few years to make them even more reliable."¹⁷ Thus, he not only promised to correct the current problem but also to prevent future problems.

Mortification

The final general strategy for image restoration is to confess and beg forgiveness, which Burke labels mortification.¹⁸ Another part of AT&T's response was mortification, or apology: "I apologize to all of you who were affected, directly or indirectly."¹⁹ A potential drawback to this strategy is that it might invite lawsuits from victims.

Several studies illustrate the potential of this theory. Benoit applied this theory to the Exxon Valdez oil spill, to Union Carbide's response to the Bhopal gas leak, and to a series of advertisements by Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola in *Nation's Restaurant News*.²⁰ Benoit and Brinson applied it to AT&T's handling of the long distance service interruption in New York City.²¹ Benoit also applied it to Sears' response to accusations of auto repair fraud in California.²² Brinson and Benoit analyzed DOW Corning's handling of the breast implant crisis.²³ Benoit and Czerwinski analyzed USAir's discourse following the crash near Pittsburgh and a hostile story published in the *New York Times*.²⁴

SUGGESTIONS FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Recommendations for utilizing these strategies are emerging from this research. These ideas are organized under three topics: preparation before the crisis, identification of the nature of the crisis, and suggestions for coping with crises.

Preparation of Crisis Contingency Plans

Before a crisis occurs, judicious planning may reduce response time and possibly prevent missteps in an organization's initial response to a crisis. Someone in the firm be responsible for a crisis response and take swift action when needed. Tylenol acted quickly in the first poisoning episode,²⁵ while Exxon's reaction was slow, undermining its image repair efforts.²⁶

This person should also anticipate potential crises and prepare contingency plans. Although crises can take a variety of forms, some potential crises can be anticipated. An airline should anticipate the possibility of a crash; a restaurant should prepare for cases of food-poisoning. These contingency plans should be reviewed periodically and implemented thoughtfully: elements of the actual problem may differ from the anticipated problem, so plans should be modified as needed.

Analysis of the Crisis and the Accusations

When a crisis occurs, it is important to clearly understand both the nature of crisis and the relevant audience(s). First, what are the accusations or suspicions? A firm must know the nature of the crisis to respond appropriately. Second, it is important to know the perceived severity of the alleged offense. The response should be tailored to the offense.

Identification of the Relevant Audience(s)

It is vital to clearly identify the salient audience(s). A key part of persuasion is tailoring one's message(s) to the audience. For example, suppose a company is accused of dumping waste. At least five different potential audiences can be identified in this situation. First, the company may, of course, wish to

assuage the concerns of their attackers, the environmentalists. However, the opinions of its stockholders are important, if they are aware of the controversy. Governmental regulators may fine or otherwise sanction the company. If customers decide to boycott the company because of the attacks, consumers are another potential audience. Local voters could conceivably pass laws restricting the company's business practices. The interests of these groups differ widely (e.g., stockholders are concerned with profits; environmentalists with the quality of the environment; regulators with laws; local voters with their community), and thus message appeals that might be effective with one group could be worthless with another.

A company facing crisis may hope to favorably influence more than one audience. If so, it is best to prioritize the audiences, making sure that the most important audience is appeased first, and then devoting time and effort to the other audiences as possible. This may be done with different messages delivered to different groups (while separate messages may stress different points, according to the intended audience, it is risky to develop contradictory messages), or by directing different passages or aspects of a message to different audiences.

Repairing a Tarnished Image

Must the Accused Always Respond to the Charges? Ryan asserts that "the critic cannot have a complete understanding of accusation or apology without treating them both."²⁷ However, this does not necessarily mean the firm must respond to those accusations.

First, it is possible to redefine the attack. Second, instead of altering the nature of the accusations, the business may attempt to refocus attention on other issues. Third, it is possible that each accusation is not be important to the audience. Of course, if a charge is important to the audience, or if it is repeated enough by the attackers, a business may well be forced to deal with that accusation.

Suggestions for Effective Image Repair Discourse

First, because image restoration rhetoric is a form of persuasive discourse, suggestions for effectiveness can be derived from our understanding of persuasion generally. The analysis of the cola wars²⁸ reveals advice applicable to persuasion generally: avoid making false claims; provide adequate support for claims, develop themes throughout a campaign; avoid arguments that may backfire. Examination of Exxon's discourse on the Valdez oil spill²⁹ suggests that once Exxon made self-serving statements that seemed at odds with other information (their allegedly swift and competent cleanup), that may have damaged Exxon's credibility and undermined other arguments. Coke's response to Pepsi's accusations appropriately used a clearly identified and prominent company spokesperson, while Sears at first used an ineffectual outside lawyer.³⁰ However, other suggestions for image repair discourse are specific to crisis communication discourse.

Second, a company that is at fault should probably admit this immediately (image restoration concerns may, admittedly, conflict with a desire to avoid lawsuits, and the firm must decide whether it is more important to restore its image

or avoid litigation). Apart from the fact that this is morally the correct thing to do, attempting to deny true accusations can backfire. An organization that falsely denies responsibility for offensive actions risks substantially damaged credibility if the truth emerges. Although initially attempting to shift the blame, AT&T eventually accepted responsibility for the interruption in long-distance service, and this probably helped restore its image.³¹ Pepsi should have apologized for making false accusations against Coke. Perhaps Union Carbide should have accepted some responsibility for the gas leak and apologized.³²

Of course, those accused of wrong-doing may, in fact, be innocent. Tylenol successfully denied that it had been responsible for deaths to its customers.³³ Coca-Cola effectively denied Pepsi's charges that Coke's other customers were subsidizing McDonald's.³⁴

Fourth, at times it is possible to successfully shift the blame. Tylenol successfully shifted the blame for the poisonings to an unknown person, someone insane.³⁵ However, shifting the blame cannot be viewed as a certain solution to image problems. Exxon attempted to shift the blame for the *Valdez* oil spill to Captain Hazelwood. The captain had been hired and given command of the *Valdez* by Exxon, so even if he is to blame at best Exxon should have to shoulder responsibility with him.

Related to this is the strategy of defeasibility. For example, Exxon could have done a better job stressing poor ocean conditions for problems with the clean-up. If factors beyond one's control can be shown to have caused the offensive act, this may alleviate responsibility and help restore a tarnished image, a fifth recommendation for corporate image repair.

Sixth, it can be extremely important to report plans to correct and/or prevent recurrence of the problem. While people frequently want to know whom to blame, it is more reassuring to know that steps have been taken to eliminate or avoid future problems. A firm commitment to correct the problem—repair damage and/or prevent future problems—can be a very important component of image restoration discourse. This would be especially important for those who admit responsibility. AT&T described in some detail plans for insuring reliability.³⁶ Even those who are innocent of wrong-doing can benefit from plans for preventing recurrence of the problem. For example, while Tylenol denied responsibility for the deaths from poisoned capsules, they introduced tamper-resistant packaging after the first incident and phased out capsules altogether after the second incident.³⁷

Of course, corrective action cannot assure success. For example, although Exxon boasted of its "swift" and "competent" actions, newspaper reports revealed that these descriptions were inaccurate. There is a risk that this strategy will fail—if not backfire—if one's actions do not fulfill one's promises.

Seventh, minimization cannot always be expected to improve one's image. Exxon's feeble efforts to minimize the amount of damage may have been counterproductive.³⁸ Trying to make a serious problem seem trivial can create a backlash.

Eighth, multiple strategies can work together. Union Carbide's plans to alleviate suffering were consistent with the attempts at bolstering, portraying the

company as concerned with victims of the tragedy. Similarly, defeasibility may identify causes of the problem that corrective action can resolve.

Finally, we must recognize that the powers of persuasion are limited. There was relatively little that could be done to restore Exxon's image after the *Valdez* oil spill—other than wait until most consumers had forgotten the incident.

CONCLUSION

This article described the theory of image repair discourse and discussed research in the corporate realm. Suggestions for those who encounter communication crises are developed, showing how this theory can guide practitioners and critics.

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Book Reviews

Stuart Ewen

PR! A Social History of Spin

New York: Basic Books, 480 pp., \$30 hardcover, 1996

and

Jacquie L'Etang and Magda Pieczka

Critical Perspectives in Public Relations

London: International Thomson Business Press, 180 pp., np, paperback, 1996

It's an interesting coincidence that these two books should have arrived at my desk on the same day, because one could not possibly have hoped for a clearer insight into the polarized views that exist between the academic and the practical worlds of public relations.

Ewen's book is a critical/historical analysis of public relations' role in twentieth-century America, an intellectual history, examining the development of ideas that came to be embodied in the practice. His thesis is based on work by political and social philosophers who wrote about public opinion, public media, and democracy in the new age of mass society, and on practitioners of public relations who spoke up publicly in books, articles, and speeches about their work and their profession. He examines real cases where public relations played a profound role in the course of human events in the twentieth century.

L'Etang and Pieczka's book is only partly critical of the profession, but more a critique of some academic theories about public relations, which are examined in a series of eight essays on public relations education, public relations in diplomacy, in politics, in public opinion, in corporate relations, corporate responsibility and ethics, public relations and rhetoric, and finally paradigms and systems theory, in that order.