The Public Relations Campaigns of BP Following the 2010 Oil Spill

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Abstract

This paper explores the public relations campaign of BP P.L.C. following the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. It investigates the different PR tactics that were involved in attempting to restore the company’s image as well as how the techniques used evolved over time. It also explores B.P.’s website and the PR techniques used therein.

*Keywords:* public relations, PR, B.P., British Petroleum, oil spill, Deepwater Horizon, Transocean

On April 10, 2010, Transocean’s oil rig *Deepwater Horizon* exploded and sank, killing 11 workers and causing an oil pipe owned by B.P. to leak oil and gas into the Gulf of Mexico (Frost, 2017). 210 million gallons of oil spilled into the ocean, causing damage to the ecosystem and to Gulf Coast businesses. This was particularly damaging to their reputation, given their long-term advertising campaign championing the company as a leader in environmental concerns (Trefis Team, 2012). In response to the spill, B.P. launched a massive public relations (P.R.) campaign to repair its image among the general public. The campaign changed over time, but the goal remained the same: to win back the favor of customers and shareholders.

In the early weeks following the oil spill, B.P. made some enormous P.R. mistakes which damaged their credibility (Beam, 2010). Initially, the company informed reporters that the rig was leaking a thousand barrels of oil per day, although it turned out to be leaking five times that amount. Additionally, the company didn’t initially take any responsibility for the accident, shifting the blame to Transocean. There was also evidence that B.P. was attempting to get Gulf fishermen to sign waivers which would keep the company from being held accountable for damage caused during the spill’s cleanup. On top of all these missteps, the company was delivering a message that they would fix the problem quickly during a time when they had not yet figured out a solution (Shogren, 2011).

Following the public relations disaster of the early weeks following the oil spill, B.P adopted consultant Steve Marino to lead their social media department (Shogren, 2011). Under his supervision, the social media team communicated with the public through Facebook and Twitter, fostering two-way communication and allowing the public to feel that their complaints were being heard. This helped enormously in swaying public opinion.

87 days after the oil spill, B.P. finally managed to cap the leak (Hertsgaard, 2013). The company paid fishermen to burn and skim leaked oil to help get rid of surface oil in the Gulf, and also used the dispersant Corexit to break up the oil and allow it to sink to the ocean floor (Ferris, 2017).

For the third phase of its P.R. campaign, B.P. made efforts to downplay the damage caused by the oil spill following its cleanup. During this era, B.P. lied to Congress about the amount of oil that was discharged into the Gulf, which was uncovered far later in a trial that resulted in B.P. pleading guilty to 14 felonies (Hertsgaard, 2013). Corexit made this possible, as it made the oil spill nearly invisible to the naked eye. B.P. also downplayed the toxicity of Corexit, which is especially dangerous upon contact with crude oil, and was responsible for severe illness in hundreds of Gulf residents and cleanup workers. By the time B.P. went to trial, the issue had disappeared from the public eye, and they faced very little negative publicity as a result of their coverup during this time period.

In 2015, B.P. launched another campaign, highlighting evidence of the Gulf’s recovery following the spill (Moskowitz, 2015). They selectively compiled scientific studies that pointed to significant recovery in the Gulf Coast ecosystem, and claimed that local businesses were recovering from the devastation as well. They chose to ignore data showing that at least 20 species were still being affected by the spill, and that many companies had gone out of business as a result of the damage (Reckdahl, 2015).

Despite its rocky beginnings, the public relations campaign following the *Deepwater Horizon* spill was very successful. In 2012, *Forbes* noted that “there have been no visible effects of the backlash on the company’s end customer sales” (Trevis Team). In fact, from 2009-2014 B.P.’s assets increased by 74% (Reckdahl, 2015). Additionally, B.P.’s stock is up 66% since the spill (BP Interactive Chart, 2017). Presently, there has been a marked improvement in the state of the Gulf of Mexico, shown by marked recovery of marine life and a resumption of fishing in the area (Ferris, 2017). This is due, in large part, to microbes which feed on the oil which has sunk to the ocean floor as a result of the dispersant used during the cleanup. Although an estimated 88% of affected businesses will never see a payout for damage caused by the spill, it is obvious that the area is making a recovery (Reckdahl).

Today, the B.P. website touts their “culture of safety”, “contribution to the nation’s economy”, and “commitment to energy security” (B.P. US). The website alludes to a co-creational view of public relations, as it paints the company as catering to issues that are important to its publics (Botan, 2009). However, in practice B.P. has proven to have a hired-gun viewpoint, as their P.R. campaigns have served to sugar-coat, or even blatantly cover up, their bad practices to gain public favor.

In conclusion, B.P. has promoted a variety of messages during different points in their campaign, directed at the consumer public and their shareholders. They started with blame-shifting and unsubstantiated claims, but quickly shifted to a more responsible approach, opening up lines of communication between the company and the public using social media. Following this, they started promoting a positive image of the company through skewed information. While undoubtedly unethical, B.P.’s campaign was surely a success in maintaining relationships with its customers and its shareholders.

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