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Amy O'Connor

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CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL IMAGE: A
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Amy O'Connor

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CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL IMAGE: A STUDY OF THE NASA CHALLENGER AND EXXON *VALDEZ*

Amy O'Connor, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 1998

This study examines the communication activities of two crises: the NASA Challenger and Exxon *Valdez* and investigates the effect of accommodative and defensive statements attributable to each crisis on organizational image. The survey design queried respondents about organization image with questions about trust-worthiness, responsibility and willingness for future involvement with the organization, based on statements provided. Results indicated that when organizations issue accommodative statements during a crisis, participants rated overall organizational image more positively than when defensive statements were given. Research findings are discussed based on the symbolic approach to crisis communication and the investor response theory. The implications for future research using actual case studies are discussed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

No organization is immune to the prospect of a crisis. From product recalls to acts of consumer terrorism, from environmental disasters to class action lawsuits, companies have coped with crises throughout the history of the modern organization. Yet, the number of companies that face crises has increased dramatically in the past twenty years (Hobbs, 1995; Wisenbilt, 1989). Given the dynamic and often turbulent business environment, the potential for crises has become an operating reality for all organizations. Surprisingly however, fewer than half of all organizations actively plan for a crisis (Business Week, 1985; Fink, 1986; Gonzales-Herrero & Pratt, 1995; Gottschalk, 1993). This is in direct contrast to the considerable amount of time and money most organizations spend on advertising, public relations and the development of strategic business plans. By not developing a crisis communication plan, organizations ignore the fact that one poorly managed crisis can destroy their market share, image and credibility. Clearly a crisis cannot be predicted with absolute certainty, yet organizations that develop effective crisis plans and do not allow them to languish on the office shelf are in a better position to survive crises and increase the probability of a positive outcomes (Fink, 1986; Kuklan, 1986; Meyers, 1986).

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The Crisis Phenomenon

An organization's ability to assess whether it faces a crisis situation is at the heart of effective crisis communication plan development. Fink (1986) defines a crisis as "an unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending--either one with the distinct possibility of highly desirable outcome(s) or one with the distinct possibility of highly undesirable outcome(s)" (p.15). Other definitions include descriptions of industrial crises: "these crises are organizationally-based disasters which cause extensive damage and social disruption, involve multiple stakeholders, and unfold through complex technological, organizational and social processes" (Shrivastava, Mitroff, Miller & Miglani, 1988, p. 285). Dionisopoulous and Crable (1988) define a crisis in respect to public relations. They contend that a crisis is one in which the facts are unknown, the public expresses concern and public relations activities are to be used to defend and account for the organization. Consequently, the role of public relations is to protect the organization's image and credibility, to develop positive opinion among publics important to the organization, and to provide a forum for the organization to communicate with its publics (Benson, 1988; Coombs, 1985; Sturges, 1994).

One example of a company with a positive crisis outcome is Johnson & Johnson. It survived two crises with the same product, Tylenol, in 1982 and 1986 (Benson, 1988). The company's ability to react promptly and appropriately to the crisis minimized damage to the organization's credibility and profits. In each instance,

Johnson & Johnson issued product recalls, demonstrated concern for public safety with advertisements that featured their CEO Burke, and offered to buy back Tylenol from consumers (Benson). Most organizations are not so fortunate. Exxon and NASA, for example, have been adversely impacted by recent crises (Small 1991, Vaughn 1996).

In 1989, the Exxon *Valdez* spilled oil into Prince William Sound in Alaska (Tyler, 1992). The public outcry was enormous and the media images of the oil spill were highly problematic. Initially, Exxon CEO Rawl was invisible. He did not go to the site to view the damage and offer a public response; rather, he sent his subordinates (Tyler, 1992). This enraged consumers, who believed Exxon was to blame for the spill due to its lack of oversight which allowed employee error to occur (Barnes & Hayes, 1995; Tyler, 1992). Similarly, NASA is plagued still by the Challenger disaster over a decade later. The space agency's officials varied in their accounts to Congress and attempted to maintain a level of innocence for the decision to launch the shuttle in which seven astronauts lost their lives (Vaughn, 1996). Its communication strategies that followed the crisis did little to minimize the damage to its credibility. (Rowland, 1986; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Seeger, 1986; Vaughn, 1996). Both organizations did not execute the "proper" communication strategies for their stake-holders and thus have received continued scrutiny and negative publicity for their actions.

Given the probability that an organization is likely to face a crisis during its lifecycle, a significant challenge for management is the development of communication strategies to support the organization and address stakeholders' needs. Specifically,

crisis communication focuses on what an organization will say to its publics and how the company will say it, for an organization's communication activities shape public opinion about the organization and its products and activities. During a crisis, an organization's communication activities have a larger impact on public opinion than during day-to-day operations. Hobbs (1995) supports this point; he states that "the battle to protect organizational credibility is most fierce during a crisis situation" (p. 323). An organization needs to be protected from liability, damage to market share, loss of revenue, increased governmental scrutiny and consumer and employee dissatisfaction; these concerns often dictate the type of communication strategy used during a crisis. To evaluate which strategy is most appropriate in a given situation is a complex process; an organization must recognize the crisis stage and adapt its communication strategy accordingly.

Crisis Lifecycle

Paradigmatically, each crisis, regardless of origin, can be reduced to the following lifecycle: crisis build-up, crisis breakout, abatement and termination (Fink, 1986; Sturges, 1994). Each stage has distinct characteristics and strategic implications for an organization and represents a change in how the crisis impacts the organization and its stakeholders. This suggests that what may be an appropriate example, in crisis build-up stage is inappropriate for the abatement stage. Furthermore, as a crisis moves through the lifecycle, different publics come to the forefront. For example, in the crisis build-up stage perhaps the key publics are likely to be the

organization's shareholders or governing board; yet in abatement stage, the focus may be on members of Congress due to the increased scrutiny that comes with a crisis.

The first stage is the "crisis build-up" or the "prodromal" stage (Fink, 1986). Symptoms begin to appear that a crisis is on the horizon, often long before a triggering event brings widespread attention. Deft organizations are attuned to these signals and seek to communicate immediately to strengthen the organizational image among relevant publics. By recognizing the crisis indicators, a company may avoid the crisis all together or, at minimum, reduce some of the negative consequences.

The second stage is "crisis breakout" or "acute crisis" (Fink, 1986). In this stage the crisis erupts and impacts the organization and its relevant publics. The beginning of the crisis is indicated by the presence of a "triggering event" that signals the beginning of stage two. Examples of triggering events include the moment the Challenger exploded and when the first gush of oil hemorrhaged from the Exxon *Valdez*. The level of impact may be significant with regard to the physical, financial and emotional effects of the crisis on the organization, its stakeholders, and victims.

In the third stage, "abatement" or "chronic crisis," the crisis has subsided (Fink, 1986). However, the lingering effects of the crisis, be they positive or negative, may linger for years. This stage is characterized by inquiries, legal action, and continued media coverage (Fink, 1986). Here, organizations work toward fixing what precipitated the crisis or the defense of their innocence. This stage often proves to be very costly for an organization due to the legal action that frequently follows.

The final stage in the crisis lifecycle is "termination" (Fink, 1986). At this

point the crisis is no longer an issue for the organization or its stakeholders. To reach

a resolution allows an organization to move its focus away from the crisis. This does

not imply, however, that the crisis has not had a lasting impact on the way the organi-

zation conducts business; rather in this final stage the crisis is no longer the sole focus

of the organization. This stage is characterized by a return to day-to-day business

operations.

While the above lifecycle is useful to define the stages of a crisis and to under-

stand how a crisis evolves; the impact of communication activity is limited to a discus-

sion of its effects during the crisis. This perspective does not recognize the organiza-

tional communication activities that occur prior to the crisis and the impact they have

on the organizations' various stakeholders. Organizational crises do not occur in a

vacuum; rather, stakeholders hold impressions prior to and long after the crisis has

subsided. More importantly, the organization's reputation, credibility and goodwill

are based primarily on activities that occur prior to the crisis. Accordingly, pre-crisis

com-munication should be evaluated in conjunction with communication activities

during and after the crisis to accurately assess the success or failure of the chosen

strategies.

Crisis Typology

The origin of a crisis provides a means to categorize and compare and contrast

the event with other similar crises. Accordingly, scholars have developed a number of

typologies to explain and categorize crises. Fink (1986), for example, distinguished

between crisis events over which management has no control compared to crises in which management has control. He contends that communication strategies differ based on where fault lies in relation to the organization's management. Marcus and Goodman (1991) support this concept; they note that crises differ in at least two important ways: (1) on their effect on victims, and (2) in what can be plausibly said about their causes.

Fink's and Marcus and Goodman's definitions, in effect, imply that management's actions influence the impact of a crisis; they do not acknowledge the veracity of evidence in relation to the organization's responsibility, damage caused, and the company's performance history and subsequent goodwill. These factors are tied directly to a discussion of publics. Stakeholder theory defines publics as any group that can affect or be affected by the operation of an organization (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Coombs, 1995; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Examples of stakeholders include employees, share-holders, suppliers, consumers, local community, media, competitors, government, special interest groups and unions. Stakeholder theory suggests that multiple publics exist with different attributes; subsequently, they have different views of the same crisis situation. On the basis of these factors, this thesis, distinguishes two different types of crisis: accidents and product safety incidents.

Accidents occur unexpectedly during the course of normal business operations and plausibly are claimed as one-time occurrences. They are characterized by highly interdependent systems and numerous interactions that lead to a crisis (Shirvastava, et.al., 1988). It is for these reasons that accidents are difficult to predict and nearly

impossible to stop once the sequence of interactions begins. Accidents have identifiable and cohesive groups of victims and non-victims. Victims typically are represented by legal counsel who have significant experience in this type of litigation and capable of winning sizable settlements. In addition to the presence of victims and the organization's systemic attributes, accidents are defined by the damage they cause. In an accident, the damage to property may exceed the injury to humans; furthermore, the human damage may not immediately be evident (Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Sturges, 1994; Coombs, 1995).

Similar to accidents, product safety crises have identifiable victims who are represented by legal counsel. However, with the possible exception of class action lawsuits, the victims are not a cohesive body or easily identified. Product safety incidents typically occur over time; no single event creates mass damage instantaneously. Consequently, product safety issues are characterized by repeated events and revelations and evolve over time. As such, an organization typically has numerous opportunities to find solutions, change tactics, issue recalls or warnings in an attempt to mitigate the affects of a pending crisis (Coombs, 1995; Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Sturges, 1994).

Understanding the crisis typology is helpful in the development of rhetorical strategies. The ability of an organization to communicate with its publics during a crisis influences how well the company will survive the crisis and its aftermath.

Choosing the Right Words

Communication commands center stage in a crisis situation. It creates meaning for stakeholders, facilitates resolution, and re-builds organizational credibility (Bechler, 1995). The organization's choice of words coupled with those of the mass media, government and other interested parties quickly create meanings attributed to the crisis (Barton, 1991; Bechler, 1995; Benson, 1988; Fink, 1986; Flecker, 1990; Seymour, 1991; Sturges, et al. 1991; Tortorella, 1989; Wisenblit, 1989). Therefore, choosing the communication strategy that is best suited to the crisis and the organization's various publics is critical. In a broad sense, the primary communication strategic options for organizations in crisis are accommodative and defensive messages (Coombs, 1995; Ice, 1991; Marcus & Goodman, 1991). These signals are located in the various statements an organization makes in regards to a crisis.

Accommodative statements occur when management accepts responsibility for the crisis, admits to the existence of problems attributable to the organization and takes action to rectify the situation (Marcus and Goodman, 1991). Defensive communication messages, conversely, insist problems do not exist, and provide reassurance about the organization's ability to continue operating and resuming normal business opera-tions quickly (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). The messages management sends can help to achieve the primary objectives of communication during a crisis situation: appease third party interveners, provide explanation for the crisis situation to stakeholders and others, and open an avenue of retreat (Becher, 1995; Marcus &

Goodman, 1991). The degree to which the appeasement of third party interveners and organizational stake-holders is successful can be measured by public opinion.

Public Opinion

Public opinion research is not limited to the exit poll results used during elections. Rather, public opinion research has broad implications for organizations with regard to sales, market share and future growth. In a crisis, for instance, an organization must assess public opinion and incorporate its findings into the development of crisis strategies. Glynn (1984) summarizes that public opinion is a compilation of individual beliefs, beliefs derived from the process of socialization, and the beliefs held by referent groups. He contents that the formation of beliefs is an on-going process that is highly influenced by events external to the individual. This view of public opinion supports the crisis lifecycle concept and recognizes the fluidity of public opinion by recognizing that social actors influence public opinion and it changes over time based on external factors. Cantril (1948) links public opinion to events and suggests that public opinion is highly sensitive and does not become stabilized until the implications of the event are clear. Additionally, events of unusual magnitude are likely to produce radical swings in public opinion. The role of suasory discourse indicates the opportunity for management to influence public opinion. Therefore, the primary objective of crisis management is to influence public opinion so that post-crisis opinions are not more negative than prior to the crisis (Sturges, Carrell, Newsom, & Barrera, 1991). Unfortunately, the vast majority of organizations focus primarily on

damage control during a crisis and fail to address the impact of those strategies on public opinion.

The link between crisis communication and public opinion is overlooked largely in current literature; with the exception of Sturges (1991). While qualitatively valuable, Sturges (1991) fails to provide quantitative data to support the link between crisis communication and public opinion. Current crisis communication research primarily focuses on communication strategies, models of the crisis life cycle, and development of crisis communication plans thus largely ignoring the link between crisis communication and public opinion. Marcus and Goodman (1991) have researched the connection between organizational rhetoric during a crisis and investor response. This research currently provides the best quantitative insight to public opinion fluctuations based on crisis communication, albeit limited with regard to the narrow focus of investors, rather than the public opinion of stakeholders broadly considered.

Purpose and Research Question

This thesis seeks to bridge the gap between current research on crisis communication and its effect on public opinion. The purpose of this thesis is to examine crisis communication in relation to public opinion and subsequently to assess the impact specific communication tactics have on an organization's reputation. Specifically, it analyzes the long-term impact on public opinion that accommodating and defensive announcements have during accidents and product safety incidents.

While a crisis leaves an impression on diverse groups, such as the media,

government, and investors, the organization's long-term reputation is adjudicated by the court of public opinion. Accordingly, this study will seek to answer the following research question: How does crisis communication affect public opinion? To answer this research question, this thesis examines crisis communication activities of eight organizations: four that experienced crises classified as accidents and four product-safety crises. Specifically, the four accidents analyzed are: (1) the Exxon *Valdez* after the oil spill in Prince William Sound, (2) NASA's Challenger following the explosion that killed seven astronauts, (3) Three Mile Island in the wake of the nuclear power emergency, and (4) Union Carbide after the chemical leak that killed thousands in Bhopal, India. The four product safety incidents reviewed are: (1) the General Motors side impact pick-up trucks which resulted in fiery crashes, (2) the Jack in the Box e-coli contamination in Seattle which left several children dead and others seriously ill, (3) the Procter and Gamble Rely Tampons and the products link to toxic shock syndrome (TSS), and (4) the Suzuki Samurai following charges the vehicle was prone to roll-over.

Hypotheses

An exploration of crisis communication strategies utilized by organizations based on crisis type (accidents or product-safety) and rhetorical strategy utilized (accommodative or defensive) and the subsequent effect on public opinion will form the basis of this thesis. First, analysis of the statements made in reference to the crisis to determine the type(s) of rhetoric used; second, statements will be compared in a

survey to generate an understanding of public opinion. Thus, this thesis will test the following two hypotheses:

H1: If accommodative statements are offered in response to a crisis, public opinion of the organization's image will be positively affected.

H2: If defensive statements are offered in response to a crisis, public opinion of the organization's image will be negatively affected.

The testing of these hypotheses, then, will more fully develop the complex relationship between crisis response strategy and public opinion.

Organization

This first chapter has positioned the analysis within the broad context of crisis communication and public opinion and introduced the primary research question and corresponding hypotheses. The second chapter reviews the communication activities of the eight organizations and identifies the specific link between communication strategies and public opinion. Once this link has been made, it follows that the third chapter explains the methodology used to execute the study. Chapter IV analyzes the relationship between crisis communication and public opinion while Chapter V concludes the thesis with a discussion of the crisis communication choices organizations face and the manner in which public opinion informs the choices available to crisis managers.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizations faced with crises must choose rhetorical strategies that address the institutional goals of the company while they simultaneously address the concerns of key publics. Institutional rhetoric, in times of stability, focuses on delivering prepackaged conclusions, disseminating a corporate image and asserting definitional hegemony over public policy issues in a multifaceted effort to communicate with the key publics (Dionisopoulous and Crable, 1992; Sproule, 1988). In a crisis, institutional rhetoric often becomes a necessary vehicle for organizational survival, for in the case of major accidents and product safety incidents, a crisis results in a fundamental shake-up of the way the public views those industries. Subsequently, the rhetorical strategies companies employ have increased importance since the probability of governmental intervention and litigation is significant.

In addition to the well developed body of research on crisis communication strategies, a similar plethora of research exists on crisis management. The research is both practical in application as well as theoretical, with the latter relying heavily on qualitative case studies. This chapter, then, explores crisis and crisis communication research, public opinion theory, and a review of the research on the cases analyzed in this thesis.

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Crisis Communication Management

Managers faced with a crisis can turn to a infinite number of crisis manuals designed to teach the manager "what to do during a crisis." The information is found in trade publications, scholarly journals, seminars and a variety of books (Barton, 1988; Dimond, 1997; Fink, 1986; Guth, 1995; Kotcher, 1992; Mitroff, 1988; Patterson, 1993). The primary goal of all these materials is to provide the manager with fundamental steps that theoretically can lessen the organizational damage suffered during a crisis.

Crisis Communication Plans

One such area of current crisis research is consistent in the development of crisis communication plans. Here, researchers provide a decision-making path organizations should follow and describe the elements that should be included in any crisis communication plan. Central to this research is the premise that the development of a crisis plan is fundamental to an organization's survival (Barton, 1988; Dimond, 1997; Fink, 1986; Guth, 1995; Kotcher, 1992; Mitroff, 1988; Patterson, 1993). Furthermore, these and other scholars agree that management should practice using and update the plan on a regular basis (Benson, 1988; Coombs, 1995; Guth, 1995; Mitroff, 1988; Patterson, 1993). This ensures, the reasoning goes, that when a crisis strikes, an organization will be able to respond with some level of efficiency. As part of the plan, researchers recommend the company name a spokesperson and train them

to tell the organization's story and communicate with its stakeholders (Benson, 1988; Coombs, 1995; Guth, 1995; Mitroff, 1988; Patterson, 1993). Ideally, this person is the organization's CEO or other high ranking official. Also included in the crisis management plan are media relations techniques and generic communication strategies, (e.g., "tell the truth") that serve as remedial reminders for managers.

Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) have produced the most detailed crisis communication manual to date. The basis for their work is research that indicated that among *Fortune 1000* companies only five to fifteen percent have viable crisis communication plans. Based on this data, they developed components of the "ideal" crisis management program. The framework for Pauchant and Mitroff's strategy is found in the division of factors that should incorporate a crisis management effort. They developed a typology of factors that includes: the strategic, the technical and structural, the evaluation and diagnostic, as well as, communication, psychological and cultural actions. Each action has numerous sub-points that an organization should address during the development of a crisis management plan. Pauchant and Mitroff argue that these action steps represent the fundamental difference between crisis-prepared and crisis-prone organizations. The incorporation of the Pauchant and Mitroff crisis management effort, so the implication goes, represents prepared organizations who view crises as opportunities for competitive advantage.

Conversely, crisis-prone organizations see crisis management plans as a cost of doing business. This distinction notes a shift in philosophy that is missing in the majority of crisis literature. The recognition that crises present opportunities, in

essence, fundamentally changes crisis management efforts from reactionary to pro-active and broadens the scope of publics. For example, when an organization views crises as a cost of doing business the likely response is to do whatever necessary to end the crisis. However, if an organization sees crises as an opportunity it is probable they will look beyond the immediate event and its obvious publics to other groups and areas that can be maximized to the organizations benefit.

While this form of research is helpful to assist managers in the development of crisis plans, it is short-sighted since it limits communication activities to those directly linked to a crisis, does not provide for differences in crisis origin, and does not address the rhetorical strategies available to organizations. Furthermore, the simplistic nature of the plans does not allow for thorough analysis of the complex systems that lead to the crises.

Models of Crisis Communication

A first step in introducing a more theoretical component to crisis research is the development of models that explicate the nature of crises. Sturges (1994), for example, has developed the Model of Crisis Communication Content. This model consists of three components: the crisis situation dimension, crisis communication choice, and crisis communication implementation. The model looks at different crises, the corresponding communication strategies and reviews how each choice should be implemented. He contends that this model provides a framework for future research that regards communication in a crisis. The model corresponds with his research

(Sturges, 1991) on the relationship between the formation of public opinion and crisis communication activities. In each instance, Sturges (1991, 1994) suggests that the type of communication activities employed should vary by crisis stage and target audience. While this model defines a crisis with regard to importance, immediacy and uncertainty, it does not provide a clear typology; thus organizations may assume erroneously that the same process can be utilized regardless of typology. The inclusion of communication effects in the model, and the acknowledgment that pre-existing public opinion has an impact on the communication strategy chosen by an organization, are important contributions to the study of the link between crisis communication and public opinion.

This outward focus is supported further by Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) whose four-phase model, that closely mirrors Fink's (1986) crisis lifecycle, incorporates environmental factors, planning, and prevention techniques, assessment strategies, and communication tactics into the crisis mix. Similar to Sturges (1994), Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt incorporate communication activities in both pre-crisis and post crisis stages and acknowledge the impact those statements have on the crisis communication process. They focus on human-provoked, organizationally induced crises, and claim that how a corporation responds to a crisis indicates the level of corporate responsibility. The four phase model includes an issue management stage, a planning and prevention stage, the crisis stage, and the post-crisis stage. The issues management phase, for example, is characterized by an assessment of the environment and data collection to determine potential trouble spots and the subsequent development

of a communication strategy. Phase two, planning and prevention, includes policy determination in which managers assess an organization's relationships with its publics, study the depth and breadth of the situation, prepare contingency plans, and select a spokesperson. During phase three, the crisis, the focus is on the organizations message and how it is received by its publics. Post-crisis, the fourth phase, is characterized by an evaluation of the crisis management activities and the development of strategies to off-set any damage suffered during the crisis. Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995)emphasize the importance of research during each phase and contend that all crisis management activities must demonstrate an awareness of public attitudes.

One weakness with both the Sturges (1991, 1994) and Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt models is the normative nature of the models. Crises are not all the same as the crisis typology literature attests; rather, they vary by origin, effect, veracity of evidence and the speed at which they occur. One method that acknowledges the differences in crises is found in the crisis typology literature. This body of research separates crises by type as indicated by the origin of the crisis.

Crisis Management Typologies

Several scholars have developed typologies that are representative of the most common forms of crises. The research is consistent in its findings and allows managers to identify a crisis as defined by each framework. The first of such typologies is Engelhoff and Sen (1992) who developed an information-processing model of crisis management that distinguishes between crisis types and the communication, decision

making, and dissemination of information that occurs both internally and externally. The model "views crisis management as an information-processing situation and organization . . . must cope with crises as information-processing systems" (p. 444). The term information-processing includes communication, decision-making and the containment of information in organizations which can best be understood in terms of how organizations disseminate information and the processes used to communicate within the organizational culture. This crisis typology further distinguishes between the source of the crises: technical or sociopolitical (Shrivastava & Mitroff, 1987). Technical failures are rooted in the core activities of the company (e.g., a shuttle explosion, a train crash) while sociopolitical failures are occur in an organization's operating environment (e.g., include governmental regulation, economic sanctions, or a strike). The distinction in the origin of the crisis is critical to the processing of information (Egelhoff & Sen, 1992). The second distinction involves whether a crisis is a result of an internal weakness or an external threat. Internal weaknesses are a function of organizational life and reflect how a company operates; this includes the inherent benefits and drawbacks of the procedures (Egelhoff & Sen, 1992). Conversely, external threats are described best as "everything that lies beyond the relevant environment" (p. 447). For example, external threats are not always immediately obvious or controllable by the organization (e.g., consumer terrorism, natural disasters). However, when remote environments are at the root of a crisis, an interdependency develops between that environment and the organization; this moves the crisis to a relevant environment.

Similar to Engelhoff & Sen (1992), Mitroff (1988) offers a crisis typology which groups crises into "families" based upon their structural similarity. Mitroff's grid encompasses the origin of a crisis, be it either technical/economic or human/social with the severity of the crisis. Based on these dimensions, Mitroff defines five crisis families: mega damage, psycho, breaks, external information attacks, and external economic attacks. "Mega damage" refers to environmental accidents while "psycho" crises include terrorism, sexual harassment, sabotage and rumors. The third form, "breaks", includes recalls, product defects and operator errors. External information attacks include counterfeiting, loss of information and copyright infringement while external economic attacks include boycotts, bribery and extortion. The weakness in this schema, however, is that a crisis can fall into more than one family. For example, the Exxon *Valdez* on the surface is a "mega damage," however, it also is a "break" due to operator error. Mitroff does account for this; he states that "breaks" are the cause of "mega damage," yet the model does not represent the possibility that not all "breaks" result in "mega damage."

Coombs (1995) offers a more theoretically sound, though not fully tested, schema. He distinguishes between crisis type and suggests crisis response strategies based not only on crisis type, but on evidence, damage, victim status, and performance history. Rooted in the Attribution Theory, which assumes individuals actively search for information to determine the cause of an observed behavior, Coombs' theory cross-types two dimensions, internal-external causes and intentional-unintentional causes, to form four crisis types. The internal-external dimension equates with the

locus of control; as such it defines the catalyst of the crisis as an internal or external agent. (Coombs, 1995; Russell, 1982) (e.g., poor management decisions). Conversely, external means the crisis occurred due to the actions of a person or persons outside the organization. The second dimension, intentional-unintentional corresponds with the issue of controllability (Coombs, 1995). It is reasonable to assume that an intentional act, one done purposively, is easier to control than that of an unintentional act and thus has different communication implications. When the two aforementioned dimensions cross, four mutually exclusive crisis types are formed: faux pas, terrorism, accidents and transgressions. A faux pas is an "unintentional action that an external agent tries to transform into a crisis" (p.454). Faux pas typically center around social responsibility; here the organization has to defend the appropriateness of its actions against an interest group. Accidents occur during the course of normal operations and are unintentional; examples include product defects, and natural disasters. These accidents are either human-induced or an act of nature (Egelhoff & Sen, 1992; Newsom, et. al., 1992; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). The premise, of course, is that the cause of the accident has implications for the type of communication strategy chosen by the organization. Transgressions, conversely, are organizational decisions or actions that knowingly place publics at risk or harm them in some way (e.g., defective products, disregard for safety procedures, and violation of laws). Terrorism is an act designed to hurt the organization that is done intentionally by an outside force, (e.g., product tampering and sabotage).

Coombs takes the crisis types and applies three variables that affect crisis

management: veracity of evidence, performance history and damage. These three variables, coupled with Coombs' crisis typology, lead to recommendations for a crisis response strategy. Nonexistence strategies include denial, clarification, attack and intimidation, and seek to eliminate the crisis. Distance strategies acknowledge a crisis while trying to minimize the linkage between the organization and the crisis. Specific strategies include excuse and justification. Ingratiating strategies work to gain public approval for the organization while mortification strategies hope to win forgiveness of publics and acceptance of the crisis.

The framework proposed by Coombs (1995) is the first time the variables of crisis type, veracity of evidence, performance history and damage have been brought together to form crisis response strategy recommendations. The weakness of the model is that it has not been tested; therefore, the crisis response strategies recommended, while intuitively valuable, are yet unproved in their ability to help an organization survive a crisis.

Prior to Coomb's (1995) research, Marcus and Goodman (1991) used agency theory and signaling theory as a framework for their research on the dilemmas of corporate policy presentation during a crisis. Their research provided quantitative data which suggests that the most effective response to a crisis, in the eyes of investors, is denial. The study analyzed accidents, scandals and product safety incidents and the effects that corporate policy announcements had on investor's responses. The study classifies announcements as "accommodating" or "defensive" based on the identification and classification of policy declarations found in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Marcus and Goodman (1991) provide the only quantitative data that links organiza-
tional communication strategies to stakeholder reaction. In this study, however,
stakeholders are limited to investors; therefore, the findings may not be replicable to
other organizational publics. Nevertheless, this research most closely resembles the
framework of this thesis, with the obvious difference being the focus on the broad
public opinion of consumers rather than the narrow interests of investors.

The Corporate Communication Response Model by Bradford and Garrett
(1995) begins to fill the gap in the scholarly literature by drawing a connection
between communication strategies and public opinion research. Their model defines
various corporate responses to unethical behavior allegations and evaluates the
relative effectiveness on third parties perceptions' of the accused organization's
image. The model is based on impression management theory which assumes
individuals determine the cause for an action and base their opinion or image of the
involved party only on the information available (Hastie, 1984; Schlenker, 1980).
Bradford and Garrett's model examines situations in which organizations gave "no
response" and a "corporate response." The path of no response posits that if an
organization does not respond to accusations of wrongdoing, the prevailing negative
information directly and adversely impacts the company's image. Conversely, if an
organization engages in communicative responses, the likelihood of influencing publics
perceptions of an event is enhanced greatly.

Bradford and Garrett (1995) offer five potential communication responses: no
response, denial, excuse, justification and concession. These responses follow the

communication strategies typically seen in current research (Coombs, 1995; Egelhoff & Sen, 1992; Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt, 1995; Marcus and Goodman, 1991; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Sturges, 1994) The model also incorporates the position that the selection of communication responses must fit the situation; this line of research is well documented and supported (Coombs, 1995; Egelhoff & Sen, 1992; Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt, 1995; Marcus and Goodman, 1991; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Sturges, 1994). Bradford and Garrett specifically conclude that third party perceptions of corporate image are negatively impacted if no communication is offered. In support of this premise, the study also found that the concession response option generally is received more favorably by third party observers across all situations. This disparity as discussed later, is in direct conflict with Marcus and Goodman (1991) who states that investors respond most favorably to denial statements. Bradford and Garrett' model, while useful, is limited in scope; unethical behavior represents a small segment of current typology research. In addition, the model does not account for pre-existing opinions about the organization's image which also may serve as factors in the determination of a communication response strategy.

Once a crisis occurs and an organization responds, minimal information exists about the impact the chosen communication strategy has on organizational stakeholders. With the exception of Marcus and Goodman's (1991) research on investor response, current theories of crisis management have not been tested on other organizational publics. An understanding of the role public opinion has in determining the success or failure of an organization's crisis communication strategy is crucial to

predicting company response during a crisis. Sturges (1994) research of public opinion during a crisis serves an entree into the discussion of the effect of crisis communication strategies on public opinion.

The Court of Public Opinion

Since the turn of the century, scholars have drawn a connection between public opinion and communication (Cooley, 1902). Fifty years hence, Cantril (1948) published the Laws of Public Opinion in which he outlined the connection between words, events, and the formation of public opinion. He suggests that the magnitude of an event coupled with high levels of self-interest influence public opinion and, when that opinion is unstructured, communication activities can influence its formation. Cantrils' research was the first to link public opinion to crisis communication and has served as the basis for much of the recent scholarly research.

A person's attitudes and perceptions are a compilation of "objective" reality and individual beliefs about the world or a situation (Fields 1971). Glynn (1997, 1984) suggests that public opinion is an "expression of the interaction between an individual's actual opinions and their perceptions of others' opinions" (p.157). It is the compilation of opinions that serves as the conduit from individual to group or public opinions. Communication is central to the formation of public opinion; it serves as the primary vehicle in the development and maintenance of public opinion. As the size of an organization's public increases, public opinion is maintained through communication activities (Glynn, 1997). Accordingly, mass communication, by its very

nature, develops, modifies and maintains public opinion (Davidson, 1975).

Sturges, Carrell, Newsom and Barrera (1991) further develop the link between public opinion formation and communication with a focus on the implications for crisis communication management. They contend that the objective of crisis management is to "influence public opinion to the point that post-crisis opinions of any constituent audience are at least as positive, or more positive, or not more negative, than before-hand" (p. 23). The establishment of a group or social norm is a strong factor in the development of individual opinion (Glynn, 1997; Sturges, et. al, 1991). Consequently, as individuals interact, the outward expressions of these opinions result in the forma-tion of a group opinion which subsequently guides behavior (Hart and Scott, 1975).

Organizations in crises choose communication strategies that simultaneously protect the organization and positively influence public opinion. Otherwise, the con-sequences of negative public opinion include reputation damage and fluctuations in stock performance and profits. It is clear that it is easier to modify opinions before they are solidified by an event and corresponding communication activities (Cantril, 1947; Sturges, et. al, 1991). Once opinions are formed they become an individual's social reality and are more difficult to change (Glynn, 1997; White, 1987).

The current literature provides a theoretical base that links public opinion to crisis communication. It does not, however, quantitatively demonstrate the effects of rhetorical strategies on public opinion or link those strategies to long term reputation damage. Case studies serve as an excellent tool as a basis for the aforementioned analysis. This thesis analyzes eight cases and provide quantitative data linking public

opinion to crisis communication.

Case Studies

NASA's Challenger

On January 28, 1986, the space shuttle Challenger exploded, killing all seven astronauts aboard. Approximately 2,500 persons watched the launch at Cape Canaveral while millions more witnessed the explosion on live television broadcasts. The image of the Challenger disaster was indelibly printed on the national conscious-ness from that day forward (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Seeger, 1986; Vaughn, 1996). The Challenger mission was to serve as a symbol of the union between space explora-tion and the future of education, and to highlight the inclusion of civilians in the space program (Seeger, 1986). *The New York Times* reported the mission would be a public relations windfall for NASA by inspiring the imagination of the nation's children (Mister, 1986). Instead, the highly successful American space shuttle program ended 73 seconds after launch in a fiery explosion and with it the infallible reputation and publics trust of NASA (Gourna, Hirokawa & Martz, 1986; Moore, 1992; Vaughn, 1996).

Americans and NASA had grown increasingly complacent about the space shuttle program. With the obvious exception of the Challenger, all of the previous shuttle voyages had been successful. This sense of complacency and confidence increased the likelihood of a disaster and the dramatic public reaction of shock and

anger that occurred (Vaughn, 1996).

As the Challenger exploded so did NASA's reputation. Concerns for continued governmental funding and public support for the space program immediately came to the foreground. As NASA struggled to make sense of the tragedy, it became engaged in a public relations fight for its life.

Prior to the launch, NASA was susceptible to decision-making dominated by public opinion (Starbuck & Milliken 1988; Vaughn, 1996). Due to pressure from Congress, the media and its employees, NASA felt unable to postpone the Challenger launch for a second time. In the weeks prior to the fatal launch, the press criticized NASA. Unfavorable news reports, such as those that occurred on CBS *Evening News* which criticized: "Yet another costly, red-faces-all-around space shuttle launch delay," (Moore, 1992, p. 277) and ABC *World News* Tonight which intoned: "Once again a flawless liftoff proved to be too much of a challenge for the Challenger" (Moore, 1992, p. 277) increased the public's discontent and the impatience of NASA officials. Ingantius' (1986) critique of NASA condemns the agency for being influenced too much by public opinion:

> NASA officials, of course, should be immune from such petty anxieties and pressures. They should have the strength of character to ignore what the news media--or anyone else--have to say about launching a spacecraft. They should ignore public opinion. (20)

After the Challenger explosion, it seemed NASA officials had heeded Ignatius' criticism, albeit at the wrong time. Immediately following the accident, NASA seized all information that related to the Challenger and for a time stonewalled all inquiries

(Gouran, Hirokawa & Martz, 1986; Mister, 1986; Moore, 1992; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Rowland, 1986; Seeger, 1986; Vaughn, 1996). When the Presidential Commission began, it too conducted hearings behind closed doors. These actions further eroded NASA's reputation and increased the likelihood of long-term reputation damage.

To reduce public criticism about the investigation, the hearings ultimately were opened to the public and news media; however, this did not minimize the problems for NASA. Accounts that Morton Thiokol, the engineering firm that designed the shuttle, personnel was opposed to the launch and recommended it be postponed began to surface (Gouran, Hirokawa & Martz, 1986; Mister, 1986; Moore, 1992; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Rowland, 1986; Seeger, 1986; Vaughn, 1996). To compound the problem further, accounts surfaced that the recommendation was not well received by NASA officials who stated they were "appalled" by the suggestion (Gouran, Hirokawa & Martz, 1986; Mister, 1986; Moore, 1992; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Rowland, 1986; Seeger, 1986; Vaughn, 1996). In deference to NASA, Thiokol managers exerted what was termed by the engineers as "pressure" to change their recommendation (Gouran, Hirokawa & Martz, 1986; Vaughn, 1996). When it became clear that NASA had warnings about a possible explosion, NASA turned defensive and placed blame on outside sources which included Morton Thiokol, the media and Congress. Theoretically, this is correct; however, NASA agreed to an overly ambitious launch schedule and ultimately the failure of its own internal communication system led to the Challenger explosion (Browning, 1989; Gouran, Hirokawa & Martz,

1986; Mister, 1986; Moore, 1992; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Rowland, 1986;

Seeger, 1986; Vaughn, 1996).

The NASA Challenger explosion is not alone in its magnitude or the effect it

had on public opinion and how the organization chose to respond to the crisis. It

shares similarities with the Exxon *Valdez* that provide a valuable connection between

what on the surface appears to be vastly different crises. Organizations, such as

NASA and Exxon, operate in environments that are characterized by high risk/low

probability crisis occurrences. This environment has the potential to breed the malaise

that was characteristic of the one suffered by NASA. Exxon, too, became comforta-

ble and did not effectively plan for a crisis or completely recognize the public outcry

that a disaster, such as the spill in Prince William Sound, would create.

Exxon *Valdez*

The release of 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound on March

24, 1989, triggered a massive public outcry that challenged Exxon and CEO Lawrence

Rawl to provide a corporate response reflective of public sentiment. The challenge

proved insurmountable; the organization could not counter the poignant images of

otters covered in oil and countless dead fish on oil soaked beaches. Initially, Exxon

responded with silence, then an apologia, and finally resorted to defensive signals.

Defined in many scholarly journals, such as Management Communication Quarterly

(August, 1997), and Public Relations Review (Spring, 1991), as what not to do in a

crisis Exxon's communication strategies did nothing to minimize damage to its

reputation and did little to explain how a spill of such magnitude could be allowed to occur.

Historically, Exxon maintained a low-profile in the media (Small, 1991; Tyler, 1997; Yagoda, 1990). Its overall economic success did not rely on advertising and marketing; in fact, Exxon could be considered benign in the sense that the company had little direct significance to consumers--unless of course a spill occurred or there was an oil embargo. It is precisely this lack of media and public relations savvy that resulted in Exxon's communication catastrophe. Rawl later admitted to such problems, "You ought to always have a public affairs plan, even though it's kind of hard to force yourself to think in terms of a chemical plant blowing up or spilling all that oil in Prince William Sound" (Fortune, "In Ten Years," p. 54).

As Rawl discussed, Exxon did not have a crisis management plan; thus, the response to the spill resembled that of a child learning to swim; lots of splashes but no meaningful progress. Initially, Exxon did nothing to ease the growing public rage about the *Valdez*; officials were silent. Six days passed before Rawl made his first public comments and by that time the media, fishermen, environmentalists and other interested groups had defined the crisis for the public. This is in direct contrast to what crisis management manuals teach: have a spokesperson to tell your side of the story (Benson, 1988; Coombs, 1995; Guth, 1995; Mitroff, 1988; Patterson, 1993).

After ten heated days, Exxon's CEO Rawl penned an apologia advertisement that ran in several national newspapers and magazines. The apologia stated:

We believe that Exxon has moved swiftly and competently to minimize the

effect this oil will have on the environment, fish and other wildlife. Further, I hope that you know we have already committed several hundred people to work on the cleanup. We also will meet our obligations to all those who have suffered damage from the spill.

Finally, and most importantly, I want to tell you how sorry I am that this accident took place. We at Exxon are especially sympathetic to the residents of Valdez and the people of the State of Alaska. We cannot, of course, undo what has been done. But I can assure you that since March 24, the accident has been receiving our full attention and will continue to do so. (New York Times, April 5, 1989)

Critics of Exxon's apologia, including environmentalists, Alaskans, and national politicians, contend that it came too late and did not adequately accept responsibility for the accident (Hearit, 1996). After ten days of definitional hegemony by the media and environmentalists, it would not have mattered what type of statement Exxon made for the damage had been done.

When the attacks continued even after the apologia, Exxon became even more defensive. As Exxon scrambled to salvage its reputation, it tried to portray itself as a victim of circumstance. By characterizing the spill as an unpreventable accident and placing blame on Captain Hazelwood, the state of Alaska and the Coast Guard, Exxon further damaged its position with the public (Hearit, 1996). In fairness to CEO Rawl, he is an engineer by trade. He was not trained nor had a desire to be Exxon's spokesperson; his comments woefully reflect those sentiments. Similar to NASA engineers who were dumbfounded by the public shock over a technological failure, Rawl did not understand how the public would respond to his straightforward comments and was annoyed when he was called arrogant:

Let's talk about the word arrogance. Last year customers boycotted us and cut up 40,000 credit cards. But, on average, those cards weren't being used

much, while many other customers ordered more than 160,000 cards in that same time period . . . We said we would do all we could after the Alaska spill: we took responsibility, we spent over $2 billion, and we gave Alaska fishermen $200 million on no more than their showing us a fishing license and last year's tax return. And we're 'arrogant'. That bothers the hell out of me. Maybe 'big' is just arrogant. Or maybe I get emotional and that's arrogant. Or maybe I say things people don't like to hear. Is that arrogance? You tell me. (Time, March 26, 1990)

The comments by CEO Rawl illustrate his inexperience with public relations and his lack of consideration to the effect his comments had on public opinion. If Exxon was judged solely by its post-crisis actions not rhetorical responses, it would have been applauded. Yet, while the Exxon *Valdez* was not the worst oil spill in history (internationally, it was preceded by spills in excess of 183 million gallons), it has become the most expensive to clean-up, both in terms of the environmental damage in Alaska and the reputation damage to Exxon and the oil industry (Small, 1991).

When companies such as Exxon and NASA face such horrific crisis, they are surprisingly ill-prepared. Large industries in particular find themselves either spread too thin, due to the number of global operations they have, or the organization does not want to acknowledge that crises occur regardless of the industry, the personnel and the best intentions to avoid such an event. Perhaps the most poignant example of this is Three Mile Island.

Three Mile Island

Before sunrise on March 28, 1978, a roar of steam signaled the beginning of

the worst nuclear accident ever to happen in the twenty-five year history of the civilian nuclear power program. Ground zero: Three Mile Island Unit Two. Owned and operated by the Metropolitan Edison Company, a subsidiary of General Public Utilities, Three Mile Island is encircled by several small towns and borders on the major metropolitan area of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (Dionisopoulous & Crable, 1988; Hyde, 1979; McKee, 1990).

As the roar of steam signaled to plant personnel something was wrong, the control panel became a virtual light show accompanied by alarms that registered the severity of the situation. It quickly became apparent that this was not an incident for which anyone on staff had been adequately prepared. In fact, Three Mile Island personnel and the American public had been led to believe a nuclear power accident of this proportion "couldn't and wouldn't happen" (McKee, 1990, p. 16).

The technical nature of Three Mile Island complicated the communication choices for its officials. Furthermore, due to the nature of the nuclear business there was no clear authority to lead the crisis team. In fact, people were so fragmented that in the early hours of the crisis, the only person on site to answer questions was a tour guide (McKee, 1990). Similar to the Challenger explosion, Three Mile Island officials were too busy trying to contain the crisis and assess its impact on humans and the environment to respond effectively to the media. Further, they had little training in media relations and tended to give highly technical answers (Hyde, 1979; McKee, 1990; Yates, 1990) This led to a variety of sources, at multiple locations, who provided different interpretations of a crisis that was in constant flux (Hyde, 1979).

When crises strike far from the corporate headquarters or in arenas not easily interpreted to the general public; a crescendo of fear is often an organization's worst enemy. Three Mile Island officials struggled with the development of communication strategies that adequately represented the interests of engineers, environmentalists, politicians, citizens and governmental agencies. During the formation phase of these strategies, which took a full week to develop, Three Mile Island did not win the support of its publics (Hyde, 1979; McKee, 1990). Unlike Three Mile Island, recognition of that fear and a response that demonstrated was utilized by Union Carbide in the aftermath of the Bhopal crisis.

Union Carbide

On December 2, 1984, Union Carbide was forced to face the reality that its plant in Bhopal, India had leaked a highly toxic gas, methyl isocyanate (MIC), into the air that literally thousands of Indians breathed. This chemical leak resulted in a death toll of over 3,000 and over 200,000 major injuries (Kirkland, 1985; Mitroff, 1994; Sen & Engelhoff, 1991; Wood, 1994). Similar to the Exxon *Valdez*, the horrific images of how the victims died compounded the crises. Fortune magazine described the Indians who died as: "scurrying madly in the dark, twitching and writhing like the insects for who the poison was intended" (p. 51). It was this image coupled with an innate fear in humans of something they cannot hear, see, taste or smell being their killer that helped propel Union Carbide into the headlines.

The company and its officials responded quickly and communicated high levels

of concern for the victims (Wood, 1994). The statements by Union Carbide officials often took on a personal tone and seemed distinctly different from the statements made by other organizations which faced accidents of similar magnitude. Edward Van Den Ameele, Union Carbide Manager of press relations and the first person to learn of the leak, described the situation: "And it (the death toll) just kept going up and up and up . . . It felt like I was in a continuous long-running nightmare only I wasn't asleep" (Fortune, January 7, 1985, p. 51). Chairman Warren Anderson was even more emotional. When asked about his plans for moving Union Carbide past the crisis, he answered "I *do* worry about that once in a while" and professed himself personally "shattered" by the events in Bhopal (Fortune, January 7, 1985, p. 53). So shattered in fact, he made a textbook error of immediately going to Bhopal only to find himself, a key member of the crisis response team, arrested immediately (Kirkland, 1985; Mitroff, 1994; Sen & Engelhoff, 1991; Wood, 1994). The error was the fact that temporarily he was unable to assist his company and, therefore, the victims of Bhopal. The silver lining, however, was the impression that his trip and subsequent arrest made on various publics: A chairman who was deeply concerned about the victims more so than his own safety.

Union Carbide's actions in the days after the chemical leak were indicative of an organization that recognizes the multiple publics it must address during a crisis. Immediately, medical supplies, respirators and doctors were sent to India to assist victims. Technical experts were commissioned to examine the plant and the Indian government one million dollars of immediate aid which it promptly declined. Perhaps

more significant was Union Carbide's decision to immediately halt production of

methyl isocyanate at the company's West Virginia plant and reduce stock of the gas at

all other facilities (Kirkland, 1985; Mitroff, 1994; Sen & Engelhoff, 1991; Wood,

1994). Finally, company officials held regular press briefings that one company

official described as occasions in which "we basically came forward to express our

sympathy and share with everyone all the information we didn't know" (Fortune,

January 7, 1985, p. 52).

Union Carbide's actions and statements in response to the gas leak at Bhopal

were accommodative. This strategy is unique to most organizations that face crises,

especially in situations such as Bhopal and Prince William Sound in which the crisis

brings attention to the entire industry. In the Bhopal case, the only defensive

statement came from Dan Bishop, Director of Environmental Communication at

Monsanto: "You might have thought about something like this happening as a result

of a massive explosion . . . this was unthinkable until it happened" (Fortune, January

7, 1985, p. 52).

To think the unthinkable is perhaps an organization's best strategy in planning

for crises. In all four cases, NASA's Challenger, Exxon's *Valdez*, Three Mile Island

and Union Carbide Bhopal, no one had adequately, if at all, prepared for the unthink-

able. In product safety incidents, the unimaginable often is closer than many execu-

tives believe. The current climate of class action lawsuits and consumer advocacy

should alert organizations to the reality that crises do happen and occur with increas-

ing frequency.

Procter and Gamble's Rely Tampons

On September 17, 1980, six years after Rely tampons entered the marketplace,

The New York Times reported that the Government Center for Disease Control (CDC)

in Atlanta announced a link between Rely tampons and toxic shock syndrome (TSS).

The accusations came on the heels of Rely's national roll-out and found Procter and

Gamble in the position of having to defend its product to the 50 million American

women who use tampons annually (Mitroff & Kilman, 1993; Weinberfer & Romeo,

1989).

Initially, Procter and Gamble challenged the validity of the CDC's study,

claimed the test was "too limited and fragmentary for any conclusions to be drawn"

(The New York Times, September 18, 1980, p. C3). Two days later, the company

announced a temporary halt in production of Rely tampons. Company officials issued

the following statement:

> The FDA has indicated that it may be requiring a label change for Rely and
> other tampons. Hence, we are temporarily suspending manufacturing opera-
> tions until the question is resolved. (The New York Times, September 20,
> 1980, p. A17)

This statement is defensive. At this point in time, Procter and Gamble is laying blame

on the testing procedures and the FDA. None of the statements issued discuss the

product and its apparent link to toxic shock syndrome. Even as the company

announced the first product recall in its history, officials staunchly defend the product,

its testing procedures and the existence of toxic shock syndrome regardless of Rely's

presence in the marketplace. Edward Harness, Chairman of Procter and Gamble,

announced a product recall and sales suspension were ordered "despite the fact that

we know of no defect in the Rely tampon and despite evidence that the withdrawal of

Rely will not eliminate the occurrence of toxic shock syndrome even if Rely's use is

completely discontinued"(The New York Times, R. Severo, September 23, 1980, p.

A1)

The 299 reported cases of toxic shock syndrome between 1975 and 1980

resulted in the deaths of 25 women (Weinberger & Romeo, 1989). The CDC

estimated that seventy-one percent of the cases were associated with Rely tampons.

This connection coupled with public outcry resulted in the product recall and cost

Procter and Gamble $75 million after taxes, not including lost sales (Mitroff &

Kilman, 1993; Weinberfer & Romeo, 1989).

For many organizations involved in product-safety incidents the goal is to

move the issues "off the front page." Procter and Gamble employed this strategy with

Rely. However, some organizations find themselves compelled to fight their case in

the court of public opinion with the media as a vehicle to disseminate their positions.

Suzuki Samurai

On June 3, 1988, Consumer Reports asks the Federal Government to recall the

Suzuki Samurai (The New York Times, Levin, p. A1). The magazine claimed the

four wheel drive vehicle was prone to roll-over if maneuvered quickly and that the

problem was inherent in the design, therefore not easily corrected. By this time, over

150,000 Samurai's were on the road. Similar to Procter and Gamble's early strategy,

Suzuki criticized the Consumer Reports test as "not representative of actual driving conditions" and Doug Mazza, Vice President of American Suzuki, issued the following statement:

> The Samurai was thoroughly tested for safety, including stability and handling prior to its introduction into the United States. We have absolute confidence we are selling a safe and stable vehicle. ("Consumers Union Calls," 1988, June 3, The New York Times, p. D4).

At the same time that Suzuki proclaimed the Samurai "safe and stable," the Center for Auto Safety made an official recall complaint to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration which alleged that the four wheel drive vehicle was responsible for 41 roll-over accidents that resulted in 16 deaths and 53 injuries. Again, Suzuki responded defensively with the threat of a lawsuit if the Center continued with its recall request ("Test Change Draws Fire," 1988, June 10, The New York Times).

The threat of legal action pales in comparison to the trump card Suzuki played in its defense. On June 3, 1988, when Consumer Reports asked for the recall of the Samurai, Suzuki officials released the following statement:

> We believe Suzuki is the target of criticism because the Samurai is the leading imported sport utility vehicle from Japan and has gained tremendous media attention due to its unique styling, reliability and affordable price (The New York Times, Levin, June 3, 1988, p. D4)

The quotation is significant since the late 1980's saw an increased level of "Japan bashing" in the United States; thus, Suzuki attempted to change the definition of the crises from the Samurai and its tendency to roll-over to the United States unfair treatment of products from Japan.

On September 2, 1988, *The New York Times* reported that the Federal

Government would not issue a recall of the Samurai. However, the negative publicity had made an impact on Suzuki Samurai sales and perhaps more alarming were the seven states that brought suit against the company for misleading advertisements and promotional activities (The New York Times, March 24,1989, Hirsch, p. D5). It was this situation that resulted in the only accommodative statement made by Suzuki in regard to the Samurai. The warning Suzuki agreed to place in all Samurai advertisements read as follows: "This vehicle handles differently from ordinary passenger cars Federal law cautions to avoid sharp turns and abrupt maneuvers" (The New York Times, March 24,1989, Hirsch, p. D5). Suzuki paved the way for other companies who have chosen to fight claims of unsafe products. Researchers agree (Gates, 1993; Meyers, 1993; Serwer, 1993) that organizations who vigorously defend their actions, especially in crises where there is a loss of life, may find public sentiment against them.

General Motors Pick-up Trucks

The General Motors Corporation (GM) decided to fight back against claims that its large pick-up trucks with side saddle gas tanks manufactured between 1973 and 1987 had a propensity to explode upon impact (Gates, 1993; Hearit, 1996; Malone, 1996; Meyers, 1993; Serwer, 1993). In doing so, NBC *Dateline* gave the company the perfect vehicle to survive a crisis that may otherwise had significant negative consequences, such as a recall, governmental regulation and consumer backlash.

On November 17, 1992, NBC *Dateline* aired a segment on the GM pick-up

trucks which showed a truck upon impact become an instantaneous pyre (Gates, 1993; Hearit, 1996; Malone, 1996; Meyers, 1993; Serwer, 1993). Eleven million people watched the segment only three months before an Atlanta jury awarded the parents of Shannon Mosely, a 17 year-old who died in a GM side impact truck explosion, a record $105.2 million judgment (Malone, 1996; Meyers, 1993; Serwer, 1993). Significant was the fact that the jury gave the Moselys more than the defense had requested; subsequent interviews with the jurors indicate an anger over GM's lack of repentance in regard to the pick-up trucks (Serwer, 1993).

Six days after the verdict GM shows the jury exactly how unrepentant it was. GM's spokesperson, William O'Neill told the *Wall Street Journal*, "Our position is that we have done nothing wrong" (February 8, 1993, p.D2). And the next day, GM legal counsel Pearce said "Are we to redesign all our vehicles based on a single jury verdict?" (*Wall Street Journal*, February 9, 1993, p. A2). These statements coincided with GM's lawsuit against NBC for defamation. The lawsuit had merit since GM could prove that NBC had rigged the pick-up truck to explode. The very next day, NBC *Dateline* apologized, for a record three and one half minutes, on the air (Hearit, 1996).

GM continued its defensive posture in relation to the full-size pick-up truck accusations. In January, 1995, the U.S. Department of Transportation dropped its investigation of the 1973-1987 trucks; it cited that it could not win the court battle the automaker intended to wage (Ward's Auto World, Jan. 1995, p. 22) Throughout the crisis, GM did not offer one accommodative statement; rather issued defensive

statements whenever feasible. The automaker did, however, agree to pay $51.355 million for safety research and another $39 million for child safety seats, educational programs, a fire safety lab, burn and trauma treatment and a computer program for accidents and injuries (Ward's Auto World, Jan. 1995, p. 22) Interestingly, for all its media savvy in its defense of the pick-up trucks, GM did not publicize the aforementioned agreement and released no information as to why the organization agreed to the settlement.

In product-safety incidents such as those experienced by General Motors and Suzuki, the company is in control of product design and manufacturing. It is the organization's responsibility to meet the safety guidelines set forth for the industry. These guidelines exist to protect consumers and ensure a minimum quality standard is maintained. A case in which a fast food restaurant failed to meet such standards illustrates the peril company's face when such a failure results in public harm.

Jack-in-the-Box

The 1,231 Jack-in-the-Box units nationwide are owned by Foodmaker, Inc. (Brooks, 1994). As with all fast-food restaurants, Jack-in-the-Box is required by law to cook its hamburgers to minimum temperature of 140 degrees to effectively eliminate bacteria such as E-coli. On January 3, 1993, it became clear that in some units this guideline was not being followed; health officials reported 400 victims of E-coli poisoning in Washington state (Brooks, 1994; Little, 1997; Martin, 1995; Soeder, 1993). Fifteen days later the link was evident between the poisonings and Jack-in-the-

Box restaurants in the Seattle area. The company responded with the destruction of 20,000 pounds of possibly contaminated meat, selected new meat suppliers, established a toll-free complaint number, and increased cooking temperatures (Brooks, 1994; Soeder, 1993; Theno, 1997). The quick response, however, became stunted when on January 22, Michael Cole, a two year old died. He was the first of four children who died from E-coli contamination. As with many crises, the image of his death was nearly impossible for the organization to minimize (Brooks, 1994; Soeder, 1993).

On February 1, 1993, one month after the outbreak began, Jack-in-the-Box issued its first statement. Jack-in-the-Box President, Robert Nugent, announced the organization would pay for all hospitalization costs of victims: "We are committed to meeting all of our responsibilities in connection with this devastating situation. If people need our help with hospital costs, we want to give it immediately with no strings attached" (Soeder, 1993, p. 35). This accommodative statement coincided with defensive statements that blamed meat suppliers for the contamination and criticized state health officials for not informing the company about the need for higher preparation temperatures (Brooks, 1994; Soeder, 1993).

Jack-in-the-Box and its parent company, Foodmaker, Inc., ultimately withdrew its accusations against the meat suppliers and state health officials. Their statements, albeit few and far between, were accommodative in nature (Brooks, 1991; Liddle, 1997; Soeder, 1993). Within six months, the chain had begun to recover. The recovery evolved from aggressive marketing and public relations activities that included

price promotions, advertisements that explained how the contamination occurred, and the promotion of non-beef menu items (Soeder, 1993).

Summary

Each of the crises analyzed in this thesis have unique characteristics. However, the modality chosen to respond to crises is remarkably similar. Whether defensive or accommodative, all the organizations were in a position to account for their actions. This is a difficult task in good times and, as the cases illustrate, in times of crises the statements chosen have an impact on organizational reputation and how the crisis is reported by the media. Next, Chapter III will discuss the methodology this thesis will use to test the four hypotheses in order to determine the relationship between communication strategy and public perception of an organization's image.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The ability to assess the impact of a crisis on an organization and its image is an integral part of crisis management research. When the *Valdez* began spewing oil into Prince William Sound, the Exxon Corporation faced not only an environmental but an image crisis as well. Communication activities served a larger purpose than information distribution; rather, when and how the organization reacted, the language it used, and the subsequent response from its publics laid the groundwork for Exxon's ability to survive the crisis. This thesis proposes that organizations that are cognizant of the link between crisis communication activities and public opinion will experience fewer negative consequences from the crisis. Subsequently, this chapter details methodologically how the relationship between crisis communication and public opinion will be assessed.

Researchers primarily have focused on rhetorical analysis in understanding the role of communication in crisis management (Barton, 1991; Coombs, 1995; Hearit, 1996; Mister, 1986; Seeger, 1998; Seeger, 1986). This line of research is a valuable tool to understand how organizations communicate during crises; yet it is source-centered: it catalogues the strategies used by corporate persuaders. It cannot quantitatively address the efficacy of these strategies and their requisite effect on public

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opinion. One exception to this direction of crisis research is found in the program of study undertaken by Coombs and Holladay (1996) who explore how crisis type, organizational performance and communicative response are associated with the image of an organization. The Coombs and Holladay approach is complimented by the work of Marcus and Goodman (1991), who focus on investor response to policy declarations made by an organization during a crisis: this provides an assessment of a different, albeit, equally important public to an organization: its stockholders. While different in locus, both lines of study are valuable to understanding the connection between crisis communication strategies and public opinion; therefore, this thesis will combine the two research approaches to investigate the hypotheses presented in Chapter I:

H1: If accommodative statements are offered in response to a crisis, public opinion of the organization's image will be more positive than if defensive statements are given.

H2: If defensive statements are offered in response to a crisis, public opinion of the organization's image will be more negative than if accommodative statements are given.

Overview

In order to test these hypotheses, this study will first revisit the crises surveyed and categorized in Chapter II as product safety incidents or accidents. Next, policy declarations obtained from *The New York Times* will be coded as either

accommodative or defensive in content. The purpose of the coding is to provide a content analysis framework for use in the survey instrument. After coding, the statements will be incorporated into a survey to be administered to undergraduate and graduate Communication students at a large Midwestern University.

The survey in question will be a nineteen question instrument that uses a five-point scale anchored by strongly agree and strongly disagree. Participants will respond to questions about organizational trustworthiness, responsibility and future involvement. Finally, several statistical analyses are to be performed to determine the relationship between crisis communication activities and organizational image. Specifically, a 1 x 3 design is used to determine the significance of the relationship between the independent variables; accommodative, defensive and control surveys; and the dependent variable, organizational image, in each individual case study. It is the intent of this thesis to test the idea that organizations that take a conciliatory approach in their crisis management will be viewed more favorably by auditors of organizational messages than those who take a defensive stance.

Statement Identification and Classification

This study relies on the accurate coding of the statements issued by the organization during the crisis. The statements provide the basis for the survey design that requires respondents to answer questions about organizational image. Specifically, the statements each organization made, respective to the individual crisis, will be coded as accommodative or defensive. This coding serves as the basis for the survey

and the final determination of the relationship between crisis communication and organizational image. The framework used for statement classification is Marcus and Goodman's (1991) systematic approach to policy declaration classification.

The Marcus and Goodman study examined the *Wall Street Journal* for policy declarations due to its focus on investor responses to policy declarations. Due to this study's focus on public opinion, as opposed to investor response, it uses policy declarations from *The New York Times*, a recognized national newspaper of record (Lacey & Llewllyn, 1995). It is reasonable to assume that policy declarations noted in *The New York Times* are representative of other media reports. Due to the nature of the accidents analyzed, the following criteria was established to provide a contextual timeframe defined by media placement in relation to immediacy and relevancy. The policy declaration analyzed will meet the following criteria: (a) they are attributable to an organizational spokesperson; (b) they provide new information about the accident and address the specific crisis being studied; and (c) the statements are limited to those appearing in front page articles within the first two weeks after the crisis occurred.

The corporate communication statements will be reviewed and classified as either accommodative or defensive to provide a basis of distinction for use in the survey. Accommodative statements are operationalized as those in which managers accept responsibility, admit to the existence of problems, and attempt to fix the situation (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Such statements include apologies, expressions of guilt, remorse, and the intent to make restitution. Examples of accommodative statements include: "We have done an excellent job of ferreting out the

weaknesses," and "We feel very badly about the damage to the environment." Conversely, defensive statements are characterized by the denial of a problem, the assignment of blame for the incident, the movement to resume normal business operations, and attempts to alleviate any public doubt about company solvency (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Statements such as the following are defensive in nature: "There is no intent to cover up and keep things quiet" and "I don't want to point fingers but the facts are we're getting a bad rap on that delay."

Coding will be done by two graduate students in Communication, who will receive training to code the statements. The coders will be told which organization is attributable to each set of statements. Statements will be identified by the coders on individual index cards and coded in separate codebooks. In accordance with Marcus and Goodman (1991), if the coders do not agree on the classification of a particular statement, the primary researcher will determine the announcement's classification.

[The establishment of the aforementioned criteria resulted in a reduction of the number of cases that will be tested. Originally, all eight cases reviewed in Chapter II were to be included in the survey design; however, upon closer examination of the cases and the corresponding communication activities, it became clear that not all the cases could be compared consistently. Specifically, the coding of the product safety incidents did not provide an adequate number of statements by which to gauge public opinion response. Furthermore, policy declarations were repetitive in context and did not appear in front page articles. Two of the accidents posed similar problems; the Three Mile Island case was deemed too far removed from respondents frame of

reference and the Union Carbide accident resulted in limited policy declarations and sporadic media coverage which limit the availability of corporate communication statements. Therefore, in its final form, two cases were chosen for study: the NASA Challenger and the Exxon *Valdez*. These two accidents represented cases of which the survey population would have some knowledge, received similar levels of media coverage, and provided both accommodative and defensive statements for analysis.]

Survey Design

After the statements are coded, the second step of this study consists of the application of a survey to test the current perception of the image of NASA and Exxon. The survey design follows the schema developed and tested by Coombs and Holladay (1996) who explored how crisis type, organizational performance history and crisis response are associated with the image of an organization. The Coombs and Holladay (1996) design utilizes nineteen statements which they developed based on McCroskey's (1966) measure of character in order to assess corporate image perceptions. Respondents to the Coombs and Holladay survey typically are asked to answer the questions based on a fictitious scenario and corresponding corporate statements. Responses are recorded on a five-point scale that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Two distinctions exist between the Coombs and Holladay survey and the instrument used in this study. First, Coombs and Holladay focus on the symbolic approach to crisis management and include the manipulation of three factors: crisis

type, performance history and crisis response strategy. This instrument examines a single crisis typology, accidents, in relation to accommodative or defensive communication strategies to assess their effect on organizational image. Second, the Coombs and Holladay instrument relies on fictitious scenarios and corporate statements. Conversely, the respondents to this study's survey will respond to questions about existing organizations, the NASA Challenger and Exxon *Valdez*, and the actual statements given by organizational representatives.

In order to ascertain pre-existing opinions and their subsequent effect on the participants perception of organizational image, this study asks each participant to respond to two surveys. The initial control survey features a brief explanation of the crisis followed by items from the Coombs and Holladay questionnaire. Next, each participant will be asked to respond to a survey that features the same explanation of the crisis as in the control survey followed by eight accommodative or defensive statements. The respondents are then asked to complete the survey based on these statements.

The inclusion of control surveys in this study is a significant departure from current research. The incorporation of actual case studies, in comparison with the fictitious cases used in current research, demands that a measure be established to control for existing bias and opinions of the respondents. In addition, the control survey provides a means to begin the discussion of crisis lifecycle as it relates to the lifespan of a crisis in the minds of the public. To further eliminate bias or inequalities in the data presented, the accommodative and defensive statements were chosen based

on the clarity of the statement and content to provide comparable comparison between the surveys.

Statistical Analysis

The overall goal of this study is to determine the relationship between crisis communication and public opinion. Specifically, data about existing public opinion, the role of respondent age in response to the survey and the difference between accommodative and defensive statements on public opinion will be gathered and discussed in relation to public opinion and crisis communication.

Several statistical analysis will be performed to yield answers to the aforementioned hypotheses. First, independent sample t tests will be used to examine the differences between the accommodative response surveys to the defensive response instruments (Williams, 1992). The independent sample t test will provide comparison data to determine if the type of statement issued, either accommodative or defensive, results in a more favorable opinion of organizational image. The survey combinations will create the following scenarios: accidents/accommodative response and accidents/ defensive response, which then will be compared.

In addition, a linear regression analysis will be performed to determine the residual effects of participant knowledge about the crisis (Williams, 1992). Specifically, the control surveys, the predictor variable, will be analyzed and compared to the statement survey of each participant in order to ascertain pre-existing opinions and their subsequent effect on the participants' perception of organizational image. An

evaluation of a respondents' score on the control survey will provide indication of existing opinions and help explain the respondents' score on the survey that contains organizational statements. Next, to determine the statistical significance of the correlation between the control survey and the statement survey scores, an F test will be completed (Williams, 1992). An F test is commonly used by researchers to determine whether the predicted variance is significantly greater than the unpredicted variance. In accordance with standard academic standards, this study will measure statistical significance at the .05 level; however, mention will be given to statistics in the .10 category as well. The inclusion of the .10 statistics will allow for a broader discussion of the results and perhaps highlight areas for future research.

The dependent variable measured in the instrument is organizational reputation. Following the work of others, this study conceptualizes a corporation's perceived image as characterized by four dimensions: honesty, responsibility, concern and responsiveness (Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Buono and Nichols, 1985; Carroll, 1979; Cox, 1962; McCoy and Atkins, 1989; Sethi and Falbe, 1987; Worcester, 1986). Accordingly, the nineteen statements developed by Coombs and Holladay (1996) are utilized in this study to measure organizational reputation. Examples of items include: "The company is basically honest," "The company is not concerned with the well being of its publics," and "I do trust the organization to tell the truth about the incident." Responses are recorded on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Finally, to assess the effectiveness of the instrument, a reliability test will be

performed. The Cronbach's alpha will determine the internal consistency of the image items tested (Williams, 1992). This will serve as an indicator of ambiguous questions and test the degree to which the instrument is reliable. The reason for performing a reliability analysis on the survey is to determine the internal consistency of the instrument since it has been adapted from the original version with regard to the case type and statements included. Thus, the reliability test will provide data which can then be compared to the results of the Coombs and Holladay (1996) study which yielded an internal consistency of .82 (Cronbach's alpha). This is less than desirable; therefore, a reliability test will be performed on the survey to ascertain its reliability when used with actual case studies.

Data Collection

The site of this study is a large Midwestern university on both its main and branch campuses. Surveys will be distributed in May 1998 to sixty graduate and sixty undergraduate students in communication classes. Each respondent will complete two crisis scenarios and the accompanying measures. The scenarios will be paired so that each respondent receives one control instrument and one instrument with either accommodative or defensive statements. Each measure will be completed after reading each scenario. Respondents will be asked to complete the survey during the first twenty minutes of a scheduled class period.

Conclusion

This analysis seeks to answer the question: How does crisis communication affect public opinion? Having explicated the methodology to answer this question which involves qualitative and quantitative analysis, the study offers a number of potential yields. First, it attempts to differentiate between the effect of accommodative and defensive responses to a crisis. Second, this study is of value due to its attempt to assess the impact of *actual* corporate statements on public opinion, a link that historically has not been drawn in the literature. Finally, it offers an analysis that, due to the nature of the cases chosen, offers the suggestion of a long-term assessment of the impact of crises on organizational image.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Currently, the development of a quantitative research base for crisis communication is limited. To date, only Coombs and Holladay (1996) have attempted to examine crises in this manner. Part of the problem is the nature of the topic. The issue of proprietary information, for example, makes it difficult to obtain data on many organizations in a timely manner. This, combined with the field's historical connections to rhetorical study and the relative infancy of crisis management research, has resulted in a significant disparity between the qualitative and quantitative research studies available for discussion.

This thesis has attempted to draw from rhetorical theorists who use "real life" crises and couple that with the rigor of social scientific methods in order to provide additional quantitative data in regard to "real life" crisis situation. To achieve this goal, participants were asked to respond to statements issued by two organizations during a described crisis. Both cases are well known; therefore control surveys were also incorporated into this study. To understand participant responses, several statistical analyses were performed to answer the hypotheses initially posed in Chapter I. This chapter presents the findings and details the results which address each hypothesis.

Demographics

The sample consisted of 103 participants who ranged in age from 17-56. The reason for the large age range is that surveys were given to both undergraduate and graduate students in an attempt to ascertain if age was a confounding variable in the study. As such, undergraduates (n=57) had a mean age of 20, while graduate students (n=46) had a mean age of 34. The results did not indicate a significant difference in the age of participants relative to responses in the control and statement situations.

Reliability Analysis

A reliability analysis, using Cronbach's Alpha, of the nineteen item survey produced an internal consistency of .7538. Based on academic standards, this result is acceptable, with the minimal acceptance level being at .7. When compared to the work of Coombs and Holladay (1996), which resulted in an internal consistency of .82 on only ten of the nineteen items, this is a considerably more solid result since all nineteen items were included in this study's analysis.

Manipulation Checks

To determine group independence and homogeneity based on the two cases an independent sample t test was performed. The results indicated statistical significance (t=4.439, df=91.0, p=.0000) between the two control surveys with the Challenger control group having a consistently higher score (M=50.37, SD=8.74) than the Exxon

group (M=42.35, SD=8.37). As expected, the control groups of each case were viewed differently and independently by respondents.

Next, to assess the residual effects of participant knowledge about the crisis, as indicated on the control surveys, a correlation coefficient was calculated. Since each participant was given two different organizational scenarios (i.e., Challenger control paired with an Exxon response survey), it was important to determine if a relationship existed between the control response scenario and scenario response survey. As illustrated in Table 1, the results were insignificant with the exception of the Exxon control and Challenger accommodative combination (p=.0063). Again, as expected, participants responded to the surveys independent of one another, with the previously noted exception.

Test of Hypotheses

To address Hypotheses One and Two, a two-way ANOVA was performed using crisis scenario type and either accommodative or defensive statements as the

Table 1

Analysis of Variance for Crisis Scenario and Statement

Effect	df	SS	MS	F	p
Scenario	1	662.9	662.9	6.96	.0097
Group	1	1422.9	1422.9	14.94	.0002
Scen. x Group	1	3.075	3.075	0.03	.8578
Error	95	9050.0	95.26		

independent variables and total organizational image score as the dependent variable. Overall, the analysis of the two scenarios showed statistically significant differences between the NASA Challenger and the Exxon *Valdez* scenarios (F = 6.96, p .0097). The NASA Challenger consistently received a better organizational image score in relation to its crisis communication strategies (M=49.255) than did the Exxon *Valdez* (M=42.803). These results indicate that respondents tended to perceive Exxon more negatively than NASA irrespective of the crisis or statement issued.

Next, an analysis was performed on the accommodative and defensive state-ments. The analysis of accommodative versus defensive statements on organizational image yielded a statistical significance of F=14.94, p=.0002. Accommodative state-ments were scored more positively (M=49.152) than defensive statements (M = 40.375). Respondents viewed accommodative statements more positively than defen-sive statements in both crisis scenarios presented. Finally, no interaction exists when crisis scenario and response are analyzed together (F=0.03, p=.8578), thus indicating an additive effect. Overall, the results of the analyses provide support for both Hypotheses One and Hypotheses Two that posit accommodative statements will result in a more positive organizational image that defensive statements. Table 2 summar-izes the analyses.

Summary

The yields presented in this chapter provide support for the hypotheses investi-gated in this thesis, thereby bridging the gap between fictitious and reality-based case

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Control and Scenario Pairings

Variable	M	SD	r	p	s
Chall. Control	51.724	9.953	-0.287	.1641	
Exxon Accom.	43.800	8.436			
Chall. Control	44.142	12.623	.2473	.4154	
Exxon Defen.	39.692	8.209			
Exxon Control	46.666	9.045	.5031	.0063	*
Chall. Accom.	51.142	7.924			
Exxon Control	38.346	8.560	-0.0366	.8618	
Chall. Defen.	49.538	9.630			

study. The hypotheses tested indicate that organizational image is more positively influenced by the use of accommodative statements than defensive communication strategies, regardless of crisis. In addition, the results show that in the control scenario, respondents rated organizational image in between the scores given for accommodative and defensive responses.

The research also indicates quantitative support for many of the foundations of crisis management; specifically the response scenario models presented by Benson (1988), Coombs (1995), Hearit (1995) and Pearson and Mitroff (1993). This development begins to open discussion between the theoretical and practical application areas of the discipline. The final chapter will focus on the discussion of the research results, review study limitations, and outline implications for future research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Crises are a natural by-product of today's tightly coupled organizations. As such, it becomes necessary for organizations to understand the dynamics of crisis management and how communication activities help shape organizational image. What an organization says to its publics, and how and when it is said influences the extent of damage to organizational image. However, crisis communication activities, by definition, pose unique challenges to an organization in regard to image protection, shareholder expectations and long-term organizational solvency. This study has focused on organizational image from the viewpoint of public opinion and addressed the communication activities of two specific crises: the explosion of the NASA Challenger and the spill of oil by the Exxon *Valdez*. This study, with its use of case studies and organizational image survey instruments, represents the first empirical evidence in support of the different effects specific communication activities have on public opinion. As such, it addresses the recent challenge to investigate audience responses to crisis messages and the suggestion that multiple methods be utilized in this pursuit (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998). The results presented in this thesis allow for insight into how organizational image is measured by the general public in the wake of a crisis and the subsequent communication statements issued by organizational officials.

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Communication Strategies and Public Response

Organizational communication scholars have developed an expansive body of literature that analyzes various communication strategies in relation to crisis communication. The goal of this research is "to develop communication models and frameworks that inform practice and that help limit and alleviate the damage to both organizations and other crisis stakeholders, such as the community, victims and their families" (Seeger et.al., 1998, p. 245). Accordingly, much of the literature (i.e., apologia) indicates that the selection of a certain strategy can repair certain relationships while alienating others (Ice, 1991). The development of an empirical research base will serve to further researchers' knowledge of the outcomes that various strategies produce.

This study analyzed the effects of two specific communication strategies: accommodative and defensive statements in two separate crises. The sole focus on these two statement categories allowed for analysis of crisis communication at a broad level. While this is a distinctly more expansive categorization than many current models use, this study sought to test concepts generally before delving into the various sub-categories of statements. The results consistently indicate that accommodative statements are viewed more favorably than defensive statements, regardless of crisis scenario. This finding supports current qualitative research by communication scholars which suggests that organizations that employ accommodative as opposed to defensive communication strategies will survive a crisis more positively (Benson,

1988; Coombs, 1995; 1996; Hearit, 1994, 1995; Seeger, et. al, 1998). The signif-icance of these findings cannot be underestimated. First, the emergence of data which illustrates organizational communication activities and the publics responses to the statements as printed in *The New York Times* breaks new ground in the field. It is now possible to cite the Challenger and *Valdez* as cases in which, regardless of the crisis magnitude, accommodative statements were viewed more favorably by the respon-dents. This provides insight to practitioners as they determine the direction of their crisis communication plans. While exploratory in form, this study provides quantita-tive data to understand the impact of various crisis communication strategies. Second, this analysis strongly suggests that statements directly influence public perception of organizational image, thereby implying that even in the most severe crisis a possibility exists to improve or worsen the organization's image through the communication strategies chosen. Finally, this study serves as a building block for more detailed analysis of the various rhetorical strategies available to organizations. For example, within the broad definition of defensive statements there exists specific techniques such as denial or blaming. The development of more detailed empirical evidence for specific strategies would help further define this research area.

The inclusion of control surveys allowed for comparisons of the effects of the statements to be studied. The results of the control groups indicate that when no statements were provided, the mean scores fell in between the accommodative and defensive scores. This indicates that there is a distinct difference in participants' reactions to the scenarios and statements given. Again, this begins to illustrate that

participants responded progressively, with accommodative receiving the most positive score, defensive the most negative, and the control surveys in between the two scores. The neutrality of the control surveys serves as a barometer for organizational image to be used to monitor the effects of organizational statements. The outcomes from this study are useful tools to understand how an organization can impact, positively and negatively, its image in relation to a crisis. While more research needs to be done, the difference in participant response to organizational image in relation to response strategy indicates that the chosen rhetoric of an organization does impact its publics and consequently its image.

<div align="center">Image Restoration</div>

The restoration of a damaged image due to a crisis takes considerable effort. In both the Challenger and Exxon cases, organizational officials worked feverishly to disseminate information to influence positively the outcome of the crisis. These types of activities are analyzed in research on image restoration that can be classified into three main genres. All three categories provide detailed explanations of how specific communication strategies can be employed, potential outcomes and relevance to an organization and its publics. Benoit (1995) has developed a comprehensive body of work on image restoration that identified five strategies. These strategies (denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of the offensiveness of the event, corrective action and mortification) have been adapted by other researchers and used to evaluate numerous case studies. Another area of image restoration delves in the area of

corporate apologia. Hearit (1994, 1995) suggests that in corporate apologia three "protypical appearance/reality disassociations" are used by organizations. Specifically, these types of apologia include efforts to deny guilt, differentiation of guilt by scape-goating, and apologizing. Finally, Coombs (1995) developed a model that incorpor-ates five primary responses and illustrates a linear progression between locus, stability and response. This is the model tested by Coombs and Holladay (1996) on fictitious scenarios which serves as the basis for this study.

The aforementioned literature provides detailed accounts of communication strategies available to organizations during a crisis. While the terminology differs and the depth and breadth of each classification changes, all can be related back to the accommodative and defensive categorization utilized in this study. For example, Benoit's corrective action is accommodative in nature while evasion of responsibility is defensive. Similarly, Hearit's denial and differentiation are defensive while apologia is accommodative. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the accommodative statements in current communication literature would be viewed more favorably than defensive statements in subsequent studies. It is imperative that the scholarly research that investigates current theories with quantitative methodology be expanded to include different crisis scenarios and a more specific classification of communication responses to increase the relevance of these findings.

Similar to the work by communication scholars, Marcus and Goodman (1991) analyzed the effects of communication responses on investors. The empirical evidence presented in the study supports the conclusion that following accidents investors react

negatively to accommodative signals and positively to defensive signals. This is in contrast to the results of this study which show public view of organizational image is more positive after an accident if accommodative statements are offered. These disparate conclusions provide support for current literature which suggests that the selection of a particular strategy for one group of stakeholders may have adverse effects on others (Ice, 1991). Reconciling these disparate conclusions for different groups is perhaps the central problem of crisis communication research.

In the final analysis, this research illustrates that organizational image is positively influenced by accommodative statements in relation to a given crisis and the converse holds true for defensive statements. The result trends were the same for both cases; however, the Challenger consistently scored more positively than the *Valdez*. This raises an interesting issue: is an organization, regardless of crisis, limited in its ability to achieve an overall positive image rating due to the nature of its business? The results of this study appear to indicate a preliminary answer of yes. While the crises received the similar amount of media coverage and were relatively close in time; the Challenger was viewed more favorably by respondents, regardless of communication strategy. It is, therefore, possible that the nature of the space shuttle program and its pre-crisis image rating provides a more positive benchmark than that afforded Exxon. This is supported further by the data since the control surveys did not, in either case, indicate a confounding variable; consequently, further research needs to be done to determine the relevancy of this provocative finding.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Perhaps the most significant is also the study's greatest strength: the use of actual crises. The use of case studies provides knowledge about how crisis affect "real life" organizations and begins to address the complexity of an organization in crisis. This is critical to the development of the crisis communication literature since researchers need to understand the practical application of various theories. However, there is a plethora of potential confounding variables that are worthy of discussion. First, only a sample of the statements issued in each crisis were used in the surveys; thus the information available for participants was limited. While the statements were representative of the entire body of printed material on the crisis, each respondent only saw the eight statements presented. In many crises more than eight statements are given by the organization and these statements are provided while other media activity occurs. As such, it is the sum of all communication activities that influences organizational image from a public opinion viewpoint. Second, the survey did not assess other variables that may exist such as political, economic, and environmental factors, and most notably, pre-crisis organizational image. The lack of measurable information about the aforementioned results in an inability to account for other organizational activities which may be part of the overall schema. Finally, the crises used in this study occurred nine and twelve years ago; therefore, respondents' opinions about the organization could have been influenced by more recent activities or altered due to the passing of time.

The study also is limited by the use of college students as survey respondents. While this has been minimized to some extent by the inclusion of graduate students in the sample, it is notable since this population does not serve as a representative sample of the general public.

<center>Future Research</center>

As the field of crisis management research continues to grow, more quantitative studies will result. This study is a first step in the effort to understand what happens to organizational image in the aftermath of a crisis. The incorporation of actual crises further lends itself to support current theories about the impact communication strategies of on organizational image during a crisis.

Future research should begin to address the limitations presented in this study. Specifically, research should be conducted that enables scholars to better understand the entire organizational dynamics and how crises are impacted by peripheral issues such as previous organizational image, existing product lines, business climate, environmental, political and economic factors. This type of research dictates a longitudinal study that follows one or more organizations over several years through times of calm and crisis.

The results of this study also indicate a consistent difference in participants responses to the NASA Challenger and the Exxon *Valdez*. In all situations, the Challenger was viewed more positively than the *Valdez*. Therefore, future research could investigate the differences between the nature of the organization (e.g.,

governmental, non-profit, business), and how publics view the crisis. It is reasonable to assume that the type of industry in which an organization operates will have some impact on how it is perceived during a crisis; the degree to which this is accurate would be a valuable tool in understanding crisis implications. Some possible categorizations include industrial, service, not-for-profit, academic, governmental and technology.

While the crisis models to date have been very effective in lending suggestions as to how best to respond to a given crisis, one key component is missing. Not all crises are the same, nor are the organizations that experience a crisis. As such, future research should begin to develop a model that assigns value to different aspects of an organization (i.e., current image, product-line, goodwill, employee satisfaction, stock price), and helps an organization determine the best strategy for its unique situation. Ideally, this concept would include measurements at the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages to assess accurately the impact of the communication strategies chosen.

Currently, this idea is best represented by the symbolic approach (Coombs, 1996). The symbolic approach posits that communication helps shape an organization's image and that the crisis response should be linked to the type of crisis situation. Based on this premise and the neoinstitutionalism and attribution theories, the symbolic approach yields a model with five crisis response strategies and four crisis types. Future research should include a concurrent discussion of these theories in relation to actual cases to explore the individual dynamics each crisis presents.

Conclusion

History illustrates the impact crises can have on organizations and entire industries. The ability to manage a crisis in a manner that minimizes long-term damage is an invaluable tool to managers. As researchers, we can explore various frameworks and strategies to gain knowledge about the fundamental workings of crises. This study represents a first step in the review of actual cases and how the communication strategies employed influenced organizational image.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study that impact future research. First, organizational statements have an undeniable impact on public perception of organizational image. Hence, it is imperative that communication managers understand the communication strategies available and the potential impact of such statements. Second, the relationship between accommodative, defensive and control surveys illustrates a progressive relationship with regard to organizational image. This warrants further research to determine the extent of such a relationship. Finally, the study indicates a negative relationship between the public and investors when compared with the research of Marcus and Goodman (1991). This is of critical importance since scholarly researchers agree that while one strategy may repair or improve relations with one group while alienating another (Cheney, 1991; Ice, 1991).

The research presented in this study is an important first step toward the expansion of quantitative data in the field of crisis communication. While several limitations exist, the data supports current qualitative research and allows for further development of crisis communication models.

Appendix A

Human Subjects Institutional Review
Board Approval Letter

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Date: 16 April 1998

To: Keith Hearit, Principal Investigator
        Amy O'Connor, Student Investigator

From: Richard Wright, Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 98-04-06

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "Crisis Communication and Organizational Image: An Analysis of Crisis Communication Strategies on Public Opinion" has been **approved** under the **exempt** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may **only** conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below.   In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: 16 April 1999

Appendix B

Organizational Image Surveys

INSTRUCTIONS: Please read the case descriptions below. Following each case description are six statements company officials made regarding the incident described. Think about the cases you have just read and the corresponding statements. If you are not familiar with the case(s), please answer to the best of your ability.

The items below concern your impression of the organization and the crisis. Circle one number for each of the questions. The responses range from 1 = STRONGLY DISAGREE to 5 = STRONGLY AGREE.

NASA Challenger

On January 28, 1986, the space shuttle Challenger exploded, 73 seconds after launch, killing all seven astronauts aboard. The Challenger mission was to have been the 25th mission of the reusable shuttle fleet that was intended to make space travel commonplace. The worst accident in the history of the American space program, it was witnessed by thousands of spectators.

a. As you know, the space shuttle program is built around a team effort.
b. Flight safety is our No. 1 priority in the space shuttle program.
c. It's been an open agency and we're trying to maintain that.
d. We have done an excellent job in ferreting out the weaknesses.
e. It will take all the data, careful review of that data, before we can draw any conclusions on this national tragedy.
f. We are going to do a very detailed assessment of the set or circumstances to try and understand what occurred and we will then, in turn, assess the impact from that to determine where we go in the future.
g. What we have done here today is to move very quickly so that all relevant data could be impounded in order to preserve as much information as we can.
h. The space shuttle program experienced a national tragedy with the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger.

1. The organization is basically honest.

1	2	3	4	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE		DON'T KNOW		STRONGLY AGREE

2. The organization is concerned with the well-being of its publics.

1	2	3	4	5
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a.   And Thiokol recommended to proceed in the launch. So they did recommend launch.
b.   There was absolutely no pressure to get this particular launch up. We have always maintained that flight safety is our top priority - consideration - in the program.
c.   There is no intent to cover up and keep things quiet.
d.   I do not dispute that the agency's general safety assessment methods are less thorough than the best available.
e.   There is just nothing to report - there were no problems in the control room.
f.   I am clearly not in a position to speculate today the length of time involved in making that determination (to fly again).
g.   We knew impounding the film might be illegal, but we are asking for cooperation from news organizations because the film might have clues to what happened.
h.   All I can say is that it appeared from those photos that there was an explosion, and that's about all I can say at this point in time.

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STRONGLY DISAGREE		DON'T KNOW		STRONGLY AGREE

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    a. We believe that Exxon moved swiftly and competently to minimize the effect this oil will have on the environment, fish and other wildlife.
    b. We are confident we have the expertise needed to deal with the situation.
    c. Nobody ever anticipated a spill of this magnitude when the pipeline plan was being assembled.
    d. I want to tell you how sorry I am this accident took place.
    e. One of my people said there was a history of Captain Hazelwood drinking of five years or more.
    f. Exxon accepts full financial responsibility for the damage.
    g. Exxon had flown helicopters, equipment and other clean-up materials to Alaska within hours after the spill.
    h. We feel very badly about the damage to the environment.

1. The organization is basically honest.

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STRONGLY DISAGREE		DON'T KNOW		STRONGLY AGREE

2. The organization is concerned with the well-being of its publics.

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    a.   I don't want to point fingers but the facts are we're getting a bad rap on that delay.
    b.   We needed authorization. As an oil company we can't just go out and start spraying clean-up solvents.
    c.   At that time, we did not have the adequate equipment to gather the oil, nor did we have permission to begin burning.
    d.   This incident should never have happened. In my view, it was a human failure that it did happen.
    e.   You can't be any more legally qualified to do this work than Captain Hazelwood.
    f.   Obviously, you don't know what its going to cost now. I cannot immediately determine the extent of the company's insurance coverage and liability.
    g.   A lack of authorization from Alaskan and Coast Guard officials contributed to the delay in efforts to clean up the oil spill.
    h.   The company does not expect major environmental damage as a result of the spill.

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14. The organization said it accepted responsibility for the crisis.

1	2	3	4	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE		DON'T KNOW		STRONGLY AGREE

15. The organization took steps which would help prevent a similar crisis from happening again in the future.

1	2	3	4	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE		DON'T KNOW		STRONGLY AGREE

16. The organization is the party most responsible for the crisis

1	2	3	4	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE		DON'T KNOW		STRONGLY AGREE

17. Circumstances, not the organization, are responsible for the crisis.

1	2	3	4	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE		DON'T KNOW		STRONGLY AGREE

18. The blame for the crisis lies with the organization.

1	2	3	4	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE		DON'T KNOW		STRONGLY
AGREE				

19. The blame for the crisis lies in the circumstances, not the organization.

1	2	3	4	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE		DON'T KNOW		STRONGLY AGREE

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