

Response Type Impact on Organizational Credibility in the Wake of Negative News: An Armed Forces Application

Since credibility, as a corporate asset, and element of organizational reputation, is difficult at best to measure, and empirical correlations to public opinion are still more difficult to define, organizations must rely heavily upon communications research to provide insight into the effect of military responses to crisis on public opinion. In a military environment, one that traditionally promotes disclosure of lower amounts of information, if any at all, understanding the relationship between information disclosure and organizational credibility is imperative to ensuring a positive public image given the high profile nature of the Department of Defense.

An understanding of the relational nature of the oft blurred notions of organizational reputation, image, identity, and credibility must first be achieved, as they comprise public conceptualization of an organization, before further investigation of any one element, such as credibility, may be undertaken. Though Dutton and Dukerich (1991) found distinct differences between reputation and image, as external conceptualizations, Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) suggest the interplay between identity and image is ultimately too complex and elusive to derive definitive notions of each. Reputation then, articulated as the total organizational

concept, as it is here, is derived from assessments of image and credibility. As such, for the purposes of this study, image is noted as an external affective component, while credibility itself is comprised of several factors appealing to both cognitive logical and affective perceptions from both internal and external audiences.

Hovland and Weiss (1951-1952) noted an important factor of effective communications to be the attitude of the audience toward the message source. This attitude subsequently influences, either positively or negatively, and is influenced by the message recipient's opinion of the message source as credible or not credible. Hovland and Weiss (1951-1952) also suggest message acceptance is reduced when originating from a low credibility source. Kelman (1961) conceptualized this credibility as a two dimensional concept of both cognitive and affective components. These components, factors or judgments of credibility include, for the purposes of this study, expertness, character, and sociability. Organizational trust is another factor measured in this study, and attempts to determine respondent perception of internal trust within an organization, as an influencer of credibility. In this case, organizational trust relates to the various organizational activities such as goal setting, performance appraisal, and cooperative behaviors

within the organization (Schockely-Zalabak, Ellis, & Winograd, 2000).

The relationship between factors suggests credibility, the message recipient's assessment of the sender's trustworthiness, character, and expertness, and to some extent likeability, is not singular. That is, message acceptance, articulated as an increased positive assessment of credibility, is both derived from and in some capacity contributes to the phenomenon of credibility (Chebat, Filiatrault, & Perrien, 2001). Thus, not only is a strong positive public opinion of the military germane to related support of defense initiatives, but likewise is essential to overcoming negative impacts of crises. That is, increased levels of disclosure promote increased levels of credibility, contributing positively to military reputation.

For the military, the measure of public assessment of organizational credibility is pertinent to overcoming crisis cases, specifically where direct impact on civilian populations is concerned, as in the case of an environmental hazard resulting from non combat military operations. But more significantly, organizational credibility, as influenced through maximum disclosure, can be leveraged, and subsequently accentuated, in the wake of adverse situations in relation to military training and combat operations. While the military, by the very nature of its mission concerning national security, as

well as its role in the global community concerning humanitarian operations, and as a member of the United Nations in both interdiction and peacekeeping operations, is not privileged to disclose all information pertaining to such operations, the willingness to disclose as much as is appropriate to security concerns will positively affect public opinion.

As crisis communications have evolved significantly over the course of the last three decades, its study focuses on employing situational theory to strategic, post crisis, long term image and reputation repair. Proactivity, specifically in the immediate wake of negative news and in the form of increased information disclosure, as opposed to withholding information from public release, serves to frame messages positively, lessening significantly the negative impact of crisis reaction. Crises are characterized by low probability/high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of an organization (Weick, 1998).

Crises threaten an organization's impression (image) or public legitimacy (Coombs, 1998). Image is essential to organizations (Benoit, 1997). Communication during an organizational crisis has been overlooked as a tool for contributing to the long term benefits of an organization experiencing crisis (Sturges, 1994). It is a mistake to believe any organization, especially the military, given its operational

nature, can avoid or prevent all possible crises (Coombs, 1999). Research confirms ineffective crisis communication can severely hamper an organization's recovery from an adverse situation, while effective communication can significantly reduce harm brought on by such a situation (Benson, 1988).

Indeed, crisis communication is a risky aspect of public relations and while the stakes are high in crisis management, the margin for error is low (Barton, 1990) As such, this study seeks to identify empirical correlations between levels of information disclosure and public perceptions of organizational credibility, assuming that any amount of disclosure is better than an absence of response. Two main assumptions underpin the investigation. First, respondent attitude toward the military should increase, as well as respondent confidence in the expertness of the organization, as levels of disclosure increase. Secondly, the impact of apology, when issued with increased levels of disclosure, should increase respondent perception of organizational trust and credibility. That is, transparency is key to successful military reputation management.