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Matching Crisis Types to Appropriate Crisis Response

Strategies: An Examination of the Symbolic Approach

(Under the direction of RUTH ANN LARISCY)

In 1988, Benson identified a knowledge gap between identifying crisis response strategies and determining how these strategies should be used. Coombs (1995) offered a decision process for choosing the appropriate crisis communication strategy based on the symbolic approach. This study examined the theoretical foundation and utility of Coombs's guidelines for selecting the appropriate crisis response strategy for the accident crisis type. The following research questions were posed: did crisis managers use the strategies predicted by Coombs's guidelines? If not, did patterns exist within the case studies to recommend a specific strategy or set of strategies that could be used by organizations involved in similar crises? A rhetorical analysis of newspaper accounts from three actual product recall cases was conducted. The results indicated that crisis managers used the strategies predicted by Coombs's guidelines for the accident crisis type.

INDEX WORDS: Crisis management, Public relations, Crisis response strategies, Crisis types

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STRATEGIES: AN EXAMINATION OF THE SYMBOLIC APPROACH

by

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B.A., Virginia Commonwealth University, 1995

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2000

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my major professor and thesis committee chair, Dr. Ruth Ann Lariscy, for her guidance throughout this project. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Jeff Springston and Dr. Karen Miller, for taking the time to serve on my thesis committee.

I wouldn't have made it through the program without several wonderful friends, who made my time in Athens very special.

And finally, I would like to thank my husband Brad for his encouragement and support while I finished my degree.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Justification & Background

Image is essential to an organization's survival and success. The biggest threat to an organization's image is a crisis. Handled well, a crisis can strengthen a brand, as with Tylenol. Handled poorly - think Exxon - a crisis can damage a brand for years. Over the past two decades, crisis communication has become increasingly important to public relations research and practice. More specifically, a new perspective, dubbed the symbolic approach, has developed, which examines "how communication can be used as a symbolic resource in attempts to protect an organization's image" (Coombs, 1995).

The symbolic approach is based on two assumptions. First, one goal of crisis management is image repair, through the use of symbolic resources or crisis response strategies. Second, the characteristics of the crisis influence the communicative choices available to the crisis manager. Hence, the crisis manager needs to be aware of the crisis response strategies available and needs to

understand how to analyze the crisis situation in order to choose the most appropriate response. Researchers have tried to identify crisis types and determine the range of crisis responses available, but have yet to refine a system for analyzing crisis situations. Many classification schemes exist for defining crisis types; the dimensions used to identify these include violent-nonviolent, severe-normal damage, technical-sociopolitical failure, and high-low deniability. Researchers have also identified a broad range of crisis response strategies. Ware and Linkugel's (1973) typology of rhetorical strategies used in apologia discourse, Allen and Caillouet's (1994) study of impression management strategies, and Benoit's (1995) image restoration theory offer numerous crisis response strategies that can be used by organizations during a crisis.

A knowledge gap exists, however, between matching crisis types to appropriate crisis response strategies. In a 1995 study, Coombs proposed guidelines for selecting the appropriate crisis response strategies. He suggested that attribution theory, which posits that people make judgments about the cause of events based on the dimensions of locus, stability, and controllability, provided a framework for explaining the relationship between crisis response

strategies and crisis situations. He integrated the various discussions of crisis response strategies, eliminating overlapping strategies and grouping similar strategies into larger categories, and identified a final repertoire of strategies. Coombs then defined the crisis situation factors that affect the attributions publics make about crises and explained how these factors impact crisis response strategy selection. Coombs's guidelines suggest that the crisis situation shapes the use of crisis response strategies.

Objective

This study will examine the validity of Coombs's guidelines for choosing crisis response strategies by evaluating the rhetorical discourse of three organizations during actual crises. Specifically, this study attempts to answer the following research questions: do crisis managers use the strategies predicted by Coombs's guidelines? If not, do patterns exist within the case studies to recommend a specific strategy or set of strategies that can be used by organizations involved in similar crises?

Prior research (Coombs & Schmidt, 1999) suggests that a multi-case study can provide prescriptive knowledge about crisis response strategy selection. Coombs and Schmidt (1999) wrote that "researchers can be more confident in the

implications of a case study if a number of case studies are conducted and a pattern of similar results emerges." Coombs's guidelines begin with determining crisis type. I used Coombs's two-dimensional crisis type matrix to identify three case studies that are considered accidents. Accidents are defined as unintentional acts that happen during the course of normal organizational operations. The crisis is internal, meaning it was caused by the organization, and unintentional, meaning it was not committed purposefully by the organization. Specifically, I will look at three organizations that experienced public relations crises due to product recalls. I will conduct a multi-case study of the following crises, comparing the organizational response of each to that proposed by Coombs's guidelines:

- In 1994, Schwan's Sales Enterprises was involved in the "biggest documented case of food poisoning traced to a single food source" (Sellnow, 1998). More than 224,000 people suffered salmonella poisoning after eating bacteria-tainted Schwan's ice cream.
- In 1996, Odwalla, a juicemaker that did not pasteurize or heat-treat its juices, had its products linked to the death of a 16-month-old infant and to more than 60 illnesses.

- And last year in Europe, Coca-Cola faced hundreds of sick consumers, government-sanctioned product recalls of Coke products, and media speculation that Coke cans were contaminated with rat poison.

Research Procedure

To conduct this multi-case comparison, I will analyze articles that reference the crisis during its first eight weeks. I will apply the crisis response typology defined by Coombs to identify the rhetorical strategies used by each organization. I will also examine each article for the crisis factors involved in perceptions of the crisis situation as stated by Coombs. For each case study, I will follow the crisis factors through the flowchart to determine the appropriate crisis response suggested by Coombs. I will then compare Coombs's recommendation to the actual crisis response strategy or set of strategies used by the organization. This analysis will answer the first research question: do crisis managers use the strategies predicted by Coombs's guidelines? If not, then it will answer the second question: do patterns exist within the case studies to recommend a specific strategy or set of strategies that can be used by organizations involved in similar crises?

A knowledge gap exists between identifying crisis response strategies and determining how these strategies should be used. Coombs's research seeks to fill this gap by providing guidelines for the use of crisis response strategies. This study will examine the theoretical foundation and utility of Coombs's guidelines for selecting the appropriate crisis response strategies.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In 1988, Benson set forth two challenges to fellow crisis communication researchers: 1) determine the range of crisis response strategies available to organizations, and 2) determine how to choose the proper strategy/strategies for particular crisis types. Researchers have identified a fairly detailed set of crisis response strategies using apologia discourse, accounts theory and impression management strategies.

Crisis Response Strategies

Apologia

Ware and Linkugel (1973) defined a typology of rhetorical strategies used in apologia discourse. Their examination of self-defense speeches identified four factors that characterize the apologetic form and four subgenres found within apologia. The four factors found in self-defense speeches, taken from Abelson's work on the resolution of belief dilemmas, included denial, bolstering, differentiation and transcendence. Denial occurs when the accused disavows any relationship to the offensive act.

Bolstering occurs when the accused tries to reinforce a positive relationship between the audience and himself. Denial seeks to negate the accused's involvement in the offensive act; bolstering seeks to identify the accused with the repelled audience. Both are reformatory strategies - they do not try to change the audience's opinion of the offensive act. The other factors of apologetic discourse, differentiation and transcendence, are transformative, meaning they seek to alter the audience's view of the offensive act. Differentiation occurs when the accused takes whatever it is that the audience finds offensive and places it into a new perspective that favors the accused and mitigates the offensive act. Transcendence occurs when the accused attempts to move the audience away from the specifics of the offensive act and tries to put his actions in a larger, more abstract (and hopefully favorable) context.

Ware and Linkugel (1973) used the four factors that characterize apologia - denial, bolstering, differentiation and transcendence - to define four postures, or subgenres, available for verbal self-defense: absolution, vindication, explanation and justification. Absolution combines denial and differentiation and is used to seek acquittal. When using an absolute address, the accused denies any

wrongdoing and differentiates himself from whatever the audience finds offensive. A vindicative address combines denial and transcendence and is used to preserve the reputation of the accused and to encourage the audience to see his greater worth relative to that of his accusers. Explanation combines bolstering and differentiation and is used when the accused thinks that if the audience understands his motives, they will be unable to condemn him. The justificative address is similar to an explanation in that the accused seeks understanding from the audience; however, the accused also seeks approval of his actions. Ware and Linkugel (1973) offered their conceptualization of apologia and their factor terminology as "trial balloons designed to draw the fire of others."

Apologia and Accounts

Benoit (1995) developed a theory of image restoration based on apologia and accounts. He noted that most work on apologia followed Ware and Linkugel's theory of apologia (discussed previously), Burke's theory of dramatism and Rosenfield's analog. Benoit's review of rhetorical criticism literature found that most studies share four assumptions about image restoration discourse. Apologia assumes: 1) reputation is important; 2) verbal means of redress exist; 3) attacks are pervasive enough to require a

theory of verbal self-defense; and 4) only a few defensive options are available. Benoit suggested that the rhetorical study of image restoration discourse, based mainly on content analysis of public speeches by highly visible people, is largely independent and that the theories guiding this work are more descriptive than prescriptive.

In his review of accounts literature, Benoit found several key assumptions: 1) people are concerned with image; 2) people are motivated to give accounts, or explanations, of their behavior when they feel others hold them responsible and perceive the behavior as bad; and 3) there are limited options for rehabilitating one's reputation. Benoit examined seven major account typologies (Sykes and Matza, Scott and Lyman, Goffman, Schonbach, Schlenker, Tedeschi and Reiss, and Semin and Manstead) and concluded that most discussed excuses and justifications. Benoit identified the five stages of a complete account sequence as: 1) the offense; 2) a challenge, reproach or request for remedy by the victim; 3) the account or offer; 4) an evaluation of the account; and 5) thanks or acceptance of the account. Benoit suggested that people prefer to use excuses and concessions as accounts.

Benoit's review of apologia and accounts literature served as the foundation for his theory of image

restoration. Benoit based his theory on two assumptions: 1) communication is best conceptualized as a goal-directed activity, and 2) one of the central goals of communication is to maintain a positive reputation. He suggested that the key to understanding image repair strategies was to consider that an attack that prompts such a response or instigates a crisis has two components: 1) the accused is held accountable for an action, and 2) the act is considered offensive. These components are affected by the perceptions of an audience about a given situation, more so than the reality of that situation. According to Benoit, in order to understand image restoration, one must accept that it is not that the organization accused is responsible for the offensive act, but that the organization is perceived to be responsible for the act by a relevant audience. He argued the same holds true for the offensive act; the most important point is whether the act is perceived to be offensive by the relevant audience. Therefore, in a crisis situation, it is important that the organization accused immediately identify its most important audience(s) (Benoit, 1997).

Benoit also explained that the theory of image restoration relies on message options. His typology of image restoration strategies included five categories:

denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification (Benoit, 1995, 1997; Benoit & Brinson, 1994, 1996, 1999). The first two strategies - denial and evasion of responsibility - address blame, while the second two - reduction of offensiveness and corrective action - concern offensiveness. The fifth strategy, mortification, deals with neither blame nor offensiveness, but rather remorse and forgiveness.

Denial occurs when the accused either rejects the charge as false, or shifts the blame elsewhere. Evasion of responsibility occurs when the accused does not deny committing the offense, but rather claims lack of responsibility for one of four reasons. The accused can claim the misdeed was a result of someone else's actions (provocation), a lack of information (defeasibility), an accident, or was committed with good intentions.

The third method of image restoration, reduction of offensiveness, has six variants: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser and compensation. Bolstering occurs when an organization plays up its positive aspects to counteract negative feelings held by its publics. Another way to reduce offensiveness would be for the organization to minimize the negative feelings associated with the event. Third, an organization

could differentiate itself by favorably comparing its transgression to similar, but more offensive, events. Transcendence, a fourth variant, attempts to place the act in a more desirable context while trying to reduce the offensiveness of the wrongful act. Fifth, an organization could try to lessen the impact of the unpleasant event by attacking the accuser. A final way to reduce offensiveness would be to offer compensation to injured parties.

Another method of image restoration that concerns offensiveness is corrective action, where the accused promises to correct the problem. The final image restoration strategy, mortification, occurs when the accused admits to the wrongful act and asks for forgiveness.

Benoit (1995) offered several suggestions for image restoration discourse. First, Benoit claimed that it is desirable for the accused, if guilty, to accept responsibility and apologize for the offensive act. If the accused is not guilty, Benoit suggested that a sustained denial effort could restore an organization's image. His research indicated that those injured by offensive actions do not consider denial and shifting the blame to be effective responses, unless the accused organization is innocent. Second, when shifting the blame, Benoit found it

was important to place blame on someone or something disassociated from the accused and plausibly responsible for the offense; however, he noted that shifting the blame was not a certain solution for image repair. Third, Benoit suggested that guilty organizations must report plans to correct the offense or prevent recurrence of the problem. Fourth, Benoit asserted that minimization may not always improve an organization's image - making a serious problem seem trivial can seem inappropriate and unethical. Fifth, Benoit suggested that the use of multiple strategies might or might not be beneficial to the accused; it ultimately depends on the situation. Hence, it is important to recognize that the powers of persuasion are limited. Finally, Benoit suggested that the salience of the victims to the audience is an important factor in image restoration discourse.

Impression Management

Allen and Caillouet (1994) developed a list of crisis response strategies based on impression management literature and neoinstitutional theory, which "identifies structural changes and policy and procedure adoption as mechanisms corporate actors use for convincing others of their legitimacy." Allen and Caillouet (1994) suggested that research into impression management strategies

"indicates individuals and organizations use similar strategies to protect their images, with similar results." They identified seven impression management strategies: excuse, justification, ingratiation, intimidation, apology, denouncement and factual distortion.

Excuses, justifications and apologies all admit fault, attempt to absolve the organization from failure, and accentuate any positive aspects of the offensive act. Excuses can be used to deny intention, volition or organizational responsibility. Justification is used to accept responsibility for the offensive act, but to deny any negative consequences occurred. Justification can be used to deny any injuries occurred, to suggest that the victim deserved the injury, to condemn the condemner, or to claim that the offensive act was misrepresented.

Ingratiation is used to gain audience approval and enhance legitimacy by "locating" the organization within the domain of public discourse. Ingratiation is also used to praise the accuser or to claim that the organization's actions are in line with its accusers and its publics. Organizations use intimidation to convey a feeling of danger and use this feeling in conjunction with threats. Apology is used to admit guilt and accept punishment. Denouncement is used to transfer guilt to an external

person or group. An individual or organization would use factual distortion to suggest that statements made about the offensive act were taken out of context or are untrue.

The work of Ware and Linkugel, Benoit, and Allen and Caillouet provides an extensive list of crisis response strategies. Taking up Benson's second challenge, several researchers have attempted to analyze the rhetorical strategies employed by organizations during crises and evaluate their effectiveness (Benson, 1988; Ice, 1991; Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Hearit, 1994; Hobbs, 1996; Benoit & Brinson, 1994, 1996, 1999). Coombs and Schmidt (1999) asserted that these case studies, while an excellent resource for descriptive information, should not be used to make generalizations about the success or failure of particular crisis response strategies in a given situation.

Coombs and Schmidt conducted an empirical analysis of Benoit and Brinson's (1999) case study of Texaco's racism incident and suggested that the results of image restoration case studies should be taken tentatively. An empirical test of Texaco's crisis response did not support some major conclusions made by Benoit and Brinson in their case study. Coombs and Schmidt concluded that a more rigorous application of image restoration theory, in the form of a series of similar case studies or an empirical

examination of the effect of various strategies used in a crisis case, was needed.

Crisis Response Guidelines

Coombs (1995) proposed guidelines for selecting appropriate crisis response strategies for a given crisis situation. Coombs stated that the primary objective of crisis management is to maintain an organization's image, and that attribution theory is a useful approach to studying crisis management because it explains how people judge the cause of events. Coombs used attribution theory as a framework for explaining the relationship between crisis response strategies and crisis situations.

Coombs examined the various discussions of crisis response strategies mentioned above, eliminating overlapping strategies and grouping similar strategies into larger categories, and developed a final repertoire of crisis response strategies, which included nonexistence, distance, ingratiation, mortification and suffering (see Table 1).

Nonexistence strategies try to eliminate the crisis, either through denial, clarification, attack or intimidation. Distance strategies acknowledge the crisis but try to separate the organization from the crisis. Distancing is done by using excuses to minimize the

organization's responsibility or by seeking to minimize the damage through justification. Ingratiation strategies try to connect the organization to things valued by its publics. Bolstering, transcendence and praising others are three substrategies used to gain public approval. Remediation, repentance and rectification are three mortification strategies used by organizations that seek forgiveness and acceptance of the crisis from their publics. An organization would use suffering to win sympathy from its publics.

Table 1: Crisis Response Strategies (Coombs, 1995)

Nonexistence

1. Denial
2. Clarification
3. Attack
4. Intimidation

Distance

1. Excuse
 - a) Denial of Intent
 - b) Denial of Volition
2. Justification
 - a) Minimizing Injury
 - b) Victim Deserving
 - c) Misrepresentation of Crisis Event

Ingratiation

1. Bolstering
2. Transcendence
3. Praising Others

Mortification

1. Remediation
2. Repentance
3. Rectification

Suffering

Coombs identified four crisis types using attribution theory. According to attribution theory, people judge the cause of events based upon the dimensions of locus, stability and controllability. Coombs used locus of control (was the act committed by the organization or by someone outside the organization) and controllability (was the event an unintentional or intentional act), to develop a two-dimensional crisis type matrix. When the dimensions were crossed, four mutually exclusive crisis types occurred: faux pas, accidents, transgressions and terrorism.

A faux pas is defined as an unintentional act that an external agent tries to transform into a crisis. The organization commits an act that it considers appropriate, with no intention of wrongdoing, then an external agent redefines the act as inappropriate. Since perceptions of organizational responsibility exist, nonexistence and distance strategies are considered viable responses for a faux pas. Accidents are defined as unintentional acts that occur during the course of normal organizational operations. Organizations involved in accidents usually produce minimal attributions of organizational responsibility, therefore the excuse strategy is a viable crisis response. Transgressions are defined as intentional

acts taken by an organization that knowingly place publics at risk. Because attributions of organizational responsibility are high, mortification strategies provide the best response for transgressions. Terrorism is defined as an intentional act taken by external actors. The uncontrollable nature of a terrorist action makes suffering a viable response.

Along with crisis type, Coombs identified three crisis factors that affect the way publics judge crises: veracity of evidence, damage and performance history. Evidence is defined as proof of whether or not a crisis actually occurred. Evidence can be either true or false. Damage refers to the amount of damage associated with the trigger event. Damage can be either severe or minor; however, since damage is a matter of interpretation, the media's portrayal of the severity of damage is critical. Along with damage comes victim status. Victims are those publics that suffer physical, mental or financial damage, while nonvictims do not suffer but want assurances that the crisis will not effect them. Performance history is relative to the attribution theory of stability. A crisis is considered unstable if the organization has a positive performance history, meaning publics are less likely to blame the organization for the crisis. If the organization has a

negative performance history, the crisis is stable and the organization is likely to be blamed for the crisis.

Coombs developed guidelines for choosing appropriate crisis response strategies based on the crisis factors mentioned above. He created a decision process based on the four crisis types identified by his two-dimensional matrix. An assessment of the crisis factors (veracity of evidence, damage and performance history) determined the appropriate crisis response strategy for each crisis type.

Coombs's research has its limitations. Guidelines based on financial or social objectives, instead of the objective to protect the organization's image, might suggest different crisis response strategies (Tyler, 1997). His guidelines are limited to four distinct crisis types, use only three crisis factors, and divide publics into just two groups (victim/nonvictim). In addition, the crisis response strategies are largely untested and the assumptions of how publics judge crises, although theory-based, is untested. However, Coombs (1995) does not claim to promise success with his guidelines; he simply offers them as "recommendations for making reasoned choices when communicating to publics after a crisis."

Since his 1995 study, Coombs has written further on the subject of crisis response strategies. A 1996

experiment found support for Coombs's crisis type categorization system and the matched crisis response strategies for accidents and transgressions. In a 1998 study, Coombs found that crisis response strategies could be put on a continuum related to crisis responsibility, so that the crisis response was linked to the crisis situation analysis. He also suggested that crisis types might be better placed on a continuum of low to high personal control rather than his previously identified two-dimensional matrix.

Conclusion

Research into crisis types and crisis response strategies is plentiful; however, a gap exists between matching crisis types to appropriate crisis response strategies. This paper will examine the effectiveness of Coombs's guidelines for predicting appropriate crisis response strategies for a given crisis type. Whether or not Coombs's guidelines prove viable or not, this research will provide descriptive information about the crisis response strategies three organizations chose to use in similar crisis situations.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

This study attempted to answer the following research questions: do crisis managers use the strategies predicted by Coombs's guidelines? If not, did patterns exist within the case studies to recommend a specific strategy or set of strategies that could be used by organizations involved in similar crises?

Coombs (1995) suggested that the predictions made by his guidelines could be examined using actual crisis cases. In addition, Coombs and Schmidt (1999) found that "using a series of similar case studies would allow the researcher to find patterns that would indicate the effect of specific strategies in a particular type of crisis." This qualitative, multi-case study was designed to evaluate the validity of Coombs's guidelines for choosing crisis response strategies through a rhetorical analysis of actual image restoration attempts. My examination of each crisis conformed to the methodological framework of previous case studies cited in the literature review. For each case study, I provided a situation analysis, an evaluation of

the organization's crisis response, and finally, a comparison between the organization's response and the strategies suggested by Coombs.

Selection of Cases for Analysis

I used the initial variable in Coombs's decision process, crisis type, as the defining parameter for each case study. Out of the four crisis types identified by Coombs, I perceived accidents to have the most utility to public relations research. Accidents are beyond the control of any organization and can occur at any time to anyone. In order to identify similar crises, I narrowly defined crisis type as a product recall, which was considered an accident according to Coombs's two-dimensional crisis type matrix. Coombs defined accidents as unintentional acts that happen during the course of normal organizational operations. The crisis is internal, meaning it was done by the organization, and unintentional, meaning it was not committed purposefully by the organization. Since I wanted to conduct a multi-case comparison, I chose three organizations that experienced public relations crises due to product recalls: Coca-Cola, Odwalla, and Schwan Sales Enterprises.

Procedures

To conduct this multi-case comparison, I analyzed newspaper articles that referenced the crisis during its first eight weeks. I chose this time frame because Coombs (1995) stated that his guidelines emphasized communication during the later phases of the crisis life cycle, and I found that eight weeks encompassed the majority of this life cycle. For each case, I searched the Lexis-Nexis database using the company name, the keyword "recall" and the time frame as parameters. Coca-Cola had the highest return, with 89 articles, and Schwan's the lowest, with 31 articles; Odwalla was in-between with 51 articles.

Overlapping articles (those that reported the same information on the same day) were eliminated and the rest were used to evaluate each crisis. Based on my analysis of previous image restoration case studies, I concluded that an examination of newspaper articles, as opposed to public relations materials released by an organization during a crisis, provided a more accurate account of the rhetorical strategies that an organization's publics were exposed to and used to make attributions about a particular crisis.

Methodological Framework

I constructed a situation analysis for each case study from the news reports and identified the rhetorical

strategies used by each organization based on the crisis response typology defined by Coombs (1995). I also examined each article for the crisis factors involved in perceptions of the crisis situation as stated by Coombs. For each case study, I followed the crisis factors through Coombs's decision flowchart and determined the appropriate crisis response suggested by Coombs. I then compared Coombs's recommendation to the actual crisis response strategy or set of strategies used by the organization.

Crisis Response Strategies

For each crisis, I provided an overview of the situation and applied Coombs's (1995) typology of crisis response strategies to identify those used by the organization involved in the crisis. Coombs used previous research to define five potential crisis response strategies: nonexistence, distance, ingratiation, remediation, and suffering. Nonexistence strategies try to eliminate the crisis, either through denial, clarification, attack or intimidation. Distance strategies acknowledge the crisis but try to separate the organization from the crisis. Distancing is done by using excuses to minimize the organization's responsibility or by seeking to minimize the damage through justification. Ingratiation strategies try to connect the organization to things valued by its

publics. Bolstering, transcendence and praising others are three substrategies used to gain public approval.

Remediation, repentance and rectification are three mortification strategies used by organizations that seek forgiveness and acceptance of the crisis from their publics. An organization would use suffering to win sympathy from its publics.

Crisis Factors

In addition to providing an overview and defining the crisis response strategies used during each case study, I identified the crisis factors that Coombs (1995) suggested influence the attributions publics make about a crisis: veracity of evidence, damage, and performance history. Evidence is defined as proof of whether or not a crisis actually occurred. Evidence can be either true or false. Damage refers to the amount of damage associated with the trigger event. Damage can be either severe or minor; however, since damage is a matter of interpretation, the media's portrayal of the severity of damage is critical. Along with damage comes victim status. Victims are those publics that suffer physical, mental or financial damage, while nonvictims do not suffer but want assurances that the crisis will not effect them. Performance history is relative to the attribution theory of stability. A crisis

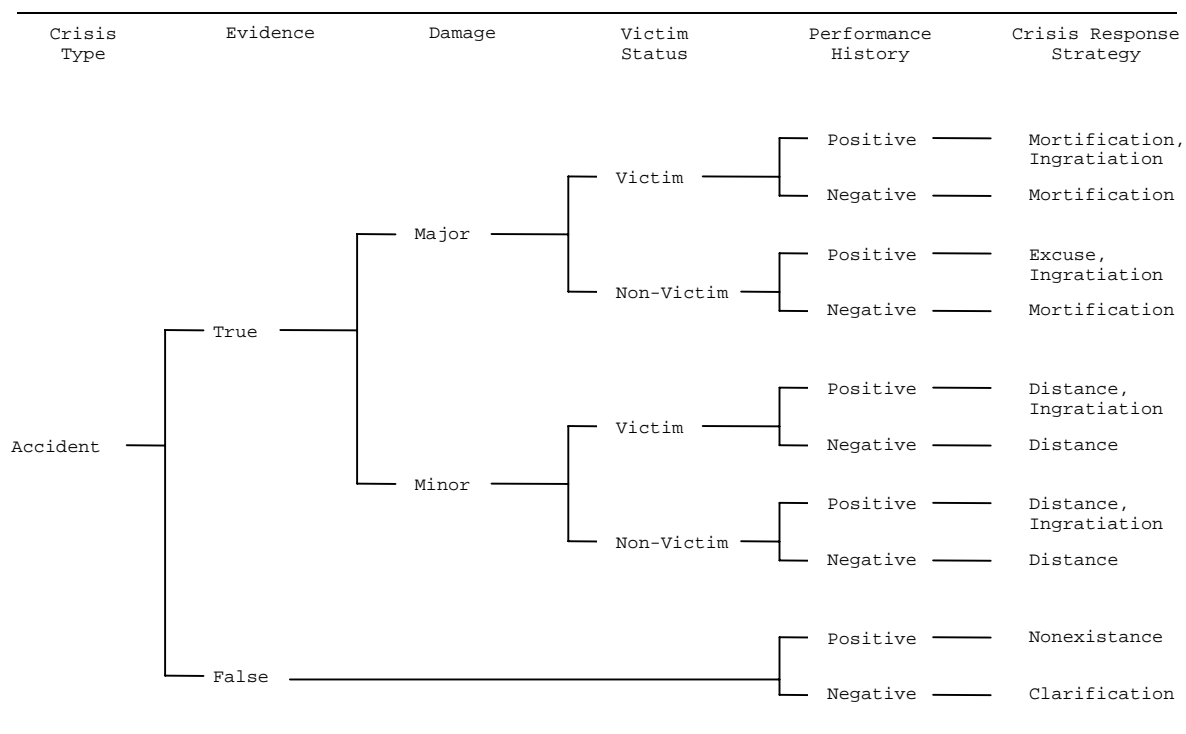
is considered unstable if the organization has a positive performance history, meaning publics are less likely to blame the organization for the crisis. If the organization has a negative performance history, the crisis is stable and the organization is likely to be blamed for the crisis.

For each case study, I followed the crisis factors through the flowchart to determine the appropriate crisis response suggested by Coombs (see Table 2). According to Coombs (1995), for accidents, evidence can be either true or false. If true, then damage and performance history must be assessed. Coombs suggested that severe damage requires some sort of mortification for victims regardless of performance history, and for nonvictims when the organization has a negative performance history. Coombs recommended that organizations with a positive performance history couple ingratiation with mortification strategies for victims and with excuse strategies for nonvictims.

Coombs advised that victims and nonvictims were more willing to accept excuses and justifications when damage was minor. He also suggested that organizations with a positive performance history combine distance strategies with ingratiation strategies for victims and nonvictims alike.

If evidence is false, Coombs recommended distance strategies because the organization in question needed to clear its name. He suggested that while damage and victims were irrelevant because nothing happened, performance history was important in determining which nonexistence strategy to use. Coombs advised that an organization with a positive performance history has the credibility to use any nonexistence strategy, while an organization with a negative performance history should use clarification because it couples denial with evidence to support the claim, thus building credibility through use of evidence.

Table 2: Accident Decision Flowchart (Coombs, 1995)



After comparing Coombs's recommendation to the crisis response strategies employed by each organization, I evaluated the effectiveness of the strategies used based on the reaction of victims and nonvictims. Because the cases analyzed were product recalls, I considered the strategies to be effective if victims did not sue, and if government authorities (nonvictims) either lifted product bans or exonerated the organizations of guilt.

CHAPTER IV

CASE STUDY: COCA-COLA

Coca-Cola is a company known for its attention to quality control, brand protection and public relations (Deogun, Johannes, Hagerty, Stecklow, 1999). But for three weeks in 1999, Coke's image was called into question when the company experienced the biggest product recall in its 113-year history. The crisis began in Belgium and spread rapidly to France and other European countries when hundreds of consumers fell ill after drinking Coca-Cola products. Rumors spread through European newspapers that Coke's beverages were contaminated with rat poison (Deogun et al., 1999) and it was widely reported, although unsubstantiated, that at least one consumer suffered from hemolysis - the excessive destruction of red blood cells (Unger, 1999a).

Critics said the crisis "revealed a different Coca-Cola, one that stumbled repeatedly, making an unfortunate situation even worse" (Hays, 1999c). Coca-Cola executives were accused of minimizing the reported illnesses (Hays, 1999c) and providing vague explanations for the cause of

those illnesses (Deogun et al., 1999). The final result was a recall of more than 14 million cases of Coke products from five European countries (Deogun et al., 1999).

Situation Analysis

The problems for Coca-Cola began on May 12, when a pub owner in Herentals, Belgium, near Coke's Antwerp bottling plant, reported that four of his customers had become sick after drinking foul-smelling Coke from glass bottles. Coca-Cola Enterprises (CCE), which operates Coke's Belgium bottling plants, said that it investigated his complaint, but found no problems at the Antwerp plant. On June 8, the bottling plant was contacted again by a school administrator in Bornem when children began complaining that the bottled Cokes they bought in the school cafeteria smelled bad. By the end of the day, some children were feeling dizziness and nausea, and over the next 24 hours, 42 children were hospitalized.

CCE responded by sending employees to pick up two cases of bottled soda for testing; officials sent a letter to the school the following day apologizing for any inconvenience and offering to pay for all medical expenses. The letter stated that the company had launched an investigation and an analysis showed that "it was a deviation in taste and color that might have caused the

symptoms experienced by the children, but that there was no health threat" (Deogun et al., 1999). CCE's tests revealed that some of the drinks produced on June 4 had an acid-type odor, so officials initiated a voluntary recall of products that were bottled in the Antwerp plant from June 2 through June 4, even though the exact cause of the odor was still unknown (Deogun et al., 1999).

On the same day as the Bornem children got sick, town officials in Belsele, 10 miles away, reported that foul-smelling Coke cans were found in a vending machine. These cans were produced at CCE's plant in Dunkirk, France. On June 10, seven students and one teacher in Bruges became ill after drinking cans of Coca-Cola and Fanta, also produced at the Dunkirk plant. On June 11, a senior CCE executive met with Belgium's Minister of Health, Luc Van den Bossche, in an effort to reassure the minister that Coke products were not a health threat for Belgians. During the meeting, they learned that 15 children were being hospitalized in Harelbeke after drinking cans of Coke and Fanta. These drinks called into question yet another bottling plant, this one located in Ghent. That evening, the ministry set up a call center to field questions about Coke and received more than 200 calls over the next three days.

On June 14, the director of a parochial school in Lochristi contacted the hotline to inquire about the cans in his school's vending machines. He said that the hot line operator told him that the company believed there was no real problem, but to remove all cans stamped with the codes DU, DV and DW. School officials removed the suspect cans and told children that the Coke and Fanta products were safe. By the end of the day, 42 children were hospitalized. When school officials called the hot line to report this new problem, they were told that the list of recalled codes they had received was incomplete, and that Fanta cans, as well as Coke cans labeled DX and DP, needed to be removed (Deogun et al., 1999).

After learning of the Lochristi illnesses, the Belgian Government instituted a complete recall, banned sales of Coca-Cola products from the Antwerp, Dunkirk and Ghent bottling plants, and shut down production at the Antwerp and Ghent plants. On June 15, eight more students were hospitalized in Kortrijk and other governments followed Belgium's lead: France banned sales of soft drinks from the Dunkirk plant, Luxembourg banned Coca-Cola products, and the Netherlands banned Coca-Cola products shipped from Belgium. Germany followed on June 16 with a ban of all

Coca-Cola products produced at the Dunkirk plant (Hays, 1999c).

Coca-Cola officials did not provide a public explanation for all of the illnesses until the evening of June 15, at a press conference in Brussels. The company dismissed the reported illnesses and issued a statement saying, "after thorough investigation, no health or safety issues were found" (Swardson, 1999). A spokesman in Atlanta said any consumers who were ill had been "examined, treated and released" (Swardson, 1999). Coca-Cola officials insisted that Coke products were safe to drink despite the reported illnesses (Hays, 1999a). Coke suggested two unrelated incidents might have caused consumers to feel sick: "defective carbon dioxide injected into bottles at the Antwerp plant and a fungicide sprayed on wooden pallets that got on the outside bottom of cans at the Dunkirk plant" (Unger, 1999d).

In his first public statement on June 16, Coca-Cola Chairman M. Douglas Ivester promised an investigation into the cause of the illnesses and said, "the company was taking all necessary steps to ensure that...products meet the highest quality standards" (Unger, 1999b) and "we deeply regret any problems experienced by our European consumers" (Hays, 1999c). However, the statement fell short of

admitting Coke products made anyone sick and Ivester did not travel to Belgium until June 18, 10 days after the initial illnesses were reported.

Government officials and consumer groups remained skeptical about Coca-Cola's explanation for what was causing the illnesses. Van den Bossche publicly stated that Coke products would remain banned in Belgium until "the firm could show the exact cause of the contamination and prove that it had taken measures to prevent new cases of illness" (Bremner, 1999). He also criticized Coke's lack of cooperation, stating, "It is a little disturbing that a big firm with worldwide fame did not take far-reaching measures more spontaneously and more promptly" (Bremner, 1999). Consumer groups across Europe began to publicly wonder why people were getting sick if there was nothing wrong with Coke products. A spokesman for a Belgian consumer organization said, "I have the strong feeling that nobody at Coca-Cola is really informed," and a scientist from a German consumer group stated, "We couldn't get any information from the company until we had made scores of calls" (Ignatius, 1999).

On June 21, Ivester sent a memo to Coke's 28,000 employees, announcing that he would apologize and telling them that "the company's quality control processes in

Belgium faltered" (Hays, 1999c). An advertisement that ran in Belgian newspapers on June 22 featured a photograph of Ivester and read, "I should have spoken to you earlier, and I apologize for that. Over the past several days in Belgium, we allowed two breakdowns to occur in fulfilling the promise of Coca-Cola" (Hays, 1999c). Coke ran a full-page advertisement that day in French newspapers that claimed Coke products were safe and offered a toll-free number for people to call with safety questions (Hays, 1999b).

Coke continued to shift the blame away from its products by releasing a report from Robert Kroes, a professor of toxicology at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. Coke had hired Kroes to analyze data from its own labs and from other independent labs that had tested contaminants found on or in Coke containers. His report found that the levels of impurities were too small to pose a health risk. Coca-Cola publicized the fact that tests commissioned by the Belgian and French government failed to find any explanation for the illnesses, and released information regarding tests that other scientists conducted for Coke, which suggested that psychosomatic overreaction to the bad odor on the cans caused consumers to feel sick (Deogun et al., 1999).

On June 23, Belgium lifted the ban on Coke's bottled and canned soft drinks after Ivester met with Van den Bossche and agreed to several conditions to ensure product safety. At a news conference, Ivester defended Coca-Cola from critics who said the company was "slow in responding to the crisis" and said he had taken a lower profile during the crisis at the request of the Belgian authorities (Cowell, 1999). He reinforced the company's earlier pronouncements regarding the safety of Coke's products, stating "one of the first things I'll do is buy everybody in Belgium a Coke," and insisted that public health comes first for Coca-Cola (Cowell, 1999). A 90-second TV spot aired in Belgium that night in which Ivester apologized to consumers for any "discomfort or inconvenience," thanked them for their patience, and assured customers that Coke was "committed to working very, very hard to earn [their] trust again" (Unger, 1999c). By June 25, the other countries lifted their bans on Coca-Cola products.

Coke's Response

After learning that European consumers of Coke products were falling ill, Coca-Cola executives used the excuse crisis response strategy in their initial attempt at image repair. When this strategy seemed to fail and Coke's products were recalled and banned in several European

countries, Coca-Cola executives made use of three mortification strategies to encourage the Belgian government to lift its ban on Coke products.

Excuse is a distance strategy that minimizes the link between the crisis and the organization. Denial of volition is an excuse tactic that organizations use to shift the blame for responsibility of a crisis from themselves onto something or someone else (Coombs, 1995). Throughout the contamination crisis, Coca-Cola executives used this tactic to claim its drinks were safe and to shift the blame for the illnesses away from Coca-Cola products. CCE officials first used denial of volition when school children in Bornem fell ill. The company sent a letter to school administrators apologizing for the incident and offering to pay any medical expenses incurred, but also added that while their analysis showed a possible deviation in taste and color, nothing was present in the drinks that would threaten the health of the children. In fact, CCE officials did not have any idea what had caused the illnesses (Deogun et al., 1999). Coke did not begin to recall its products from all three plants in question until June 11, three days after the Bornem school children were reported ill and also after the botched meeting with Belgium's health minister.

During this time, Coke used two unrelated incidents, defective carbon dioxide in bottles and fungicide on the outside of cans, to explain why consumers might have felt sick even though the products were safe to drink. Coca-Cola executives released lab reports that supported the company's claims that Coke products did not pose a health risk. In addition, Coke released consultant reports that suggested consumers who thought they were ill were actually having a psychosomatic reaction to the recent dioxin scare (Deogun et al., 1999).

When these explanations did not placate consumers or government authorities, Coca-Cola's executives began using mortification strategies in an effort to win back consumer trust and encourage government authorities to lift their ban on Coke products. Coombs's (1995) identified remediation, repentance and rectification as three mortification strategies that "attempt to create acceptance for a crisis" (Coombs, 1995). Remediation "willingly offers some form of compensation or help to victims," repentance "involves asking for forgiveness," and rectification "involves taking action to prevent a recurrence of the crisis in the future" (Coombs, 1995). Coca-Cola offered to help its victims by setting up a toll-free hotline that consumers could call with safety questions. The company

sought forgiveness from consumers in advertisements that ran after June 22, in which Ivester expressed his apologies to Coke's European consumers. Finally, Ivester used rectification in his first public statement on June 16, when he assured Coke's publics that the company would find out what happened and take steps to ensure quality in the future. Ivester also had to agree to several conditions to ensure product safety before the Belgian government would lift its ban on Coke products.

In summary, I believe Coca-Cola used excuse, a distance strategy, and all three mortification strategies in an attempt to repair its image after the European contamination scare.

Coombs's Guidelines

According to Coombs, veracity of evidence, damage and performance history influence the way publics judge an organization during a crisis. Therefore, these factors should be taken into consideration before the organization chooses a crisis response strategy. For Coca-Cola, the evidence was true; scores of consumers were reported ill after drinking Coke products produced in the company's Antwerp, Dunkirk and Ghent bottling plants. I would consider the amount of damage to be major, especially since the Coca-Cola crisis came at a time when any health scare

was of particular concern in Belgium, where the government had recently been defeated in national elections because of hysteria caused by dioxin-contaminated meat, poultry and dairy products. The victims of this crisis would be those consumers who fell ill after drinking Coke products. Government authorities, the media, and consumers who had not gotten sick would be considered non-victims, because Coke had to reassure them that its products were safe. Finally, outside of previous product recalls "in a market or two," Coke never experienced a recall of both bottled and canned products from an entire country (Swardson, 1999).

For the purpose of Coombs's guidelines, I would consider the evidence true, the damage major, with victims and non-victims, and Coke's performance history positive. According to Coombs's guidelines, Coca-Cola should have used mortification and ingratiation strategies for victims and excuse and ingratiation strategies for non-victims.

CHAPTER V

CASE STUDY: ODWALLA

In 1980, three Santa Cruz musicians founded Odwalla, a natural juice company with a vision to "make great juice, do good things for the community, and build a business with heart, nurturing relationships with humans and the environment" (Evans, 1999). In order to make great juice, the company did not pasteurize its products during production so that the flavor and vital nutrients would be preserved. Instead, Odwalla relied on cold processing, which could maintain the naturalness of the juices but, as Odwalla found out, could not protect the company's products from the dangers of E. coli. On October 30, 1996, Odwalla was alerted to an epidemiological link between its fresh apple juice and several cases of E. coli poisoning. The desire to provide a natural, health conscious product would result in the death of a 16-month-old girl and over 60 reported cases of E. coli poisoning.

Situation Analysis

On October 30, officials at Washington State's Environmental Health Services notified Odwalla that as many

as 13 cases of E. coli poisoning had been traced to the company's apple juice products (Hoover, 1996). Odwalla immediately enacted a voluntary recall of its apple juice and apple juice-based products and hired Edelman Public Relations to handle the company's crisis communications (Howe, 1996a). Odwalla Co-CEO Stephan Williamson expressed concern for those consumers that were ill and said that the company was trying to do the right thing and figure out what had happened with its products (Hoover, 1996). On November 1, Odwalla recalled carrot and vegetable juices that were processed on the same line as the apple juice products after additional cases of E. coli poisonings were reported in Colorado and California. At a news conference, Co-CEO Greg Steltenpohl again expressed concern for the health of Odwalla customers that were ill (King, 1996a).

Odwalla completed its product recall November 2 and continued to examine its juices for traces of E. coli, which the company and the FDA had yet to find. Odwalla officials offered to pay the medical expenses of anyone that became ill after drinking Odwalla juices, but continued to support their non-pasteurization production process, stating that pasteurizing would hurt the taste and nutrients of their drinks (Juice Maker Completes Recall, 1996). An Odwalla spokesman explained that the company had

"sophisticated sanitary and processing codes to deal with contaminants" and was therefore looking into the origin of the apples (Questions of Pasteurization Raised, 1996).

On November 4, at a joint press conference with the FDA, the Washington State Department of Health, and the Seattle-King County Department of Public Health, Odwalla announced that juice samples from its Tukwila, Washington, distribution center had tested positive for the E. coli 0157:H7 bacteria. Williamson emphasized that Odwalla was working closely with health officials to find out the cause of the contamination, and ultimately, a manufacturing solution (Thomsen, 1998). Odwalla also announced the launch of a web site that would answer questions about the company's product recall and its response to the crisis (Howe, 1996b).

On November 8, Odwalla was informed that 16-month-old Anna Gimmetstad, who had been admitted to Children's Hospital in Denver after becoming ill from drinking a smoothie made with Odwalla apple juice, had died from hemolytic uremic syndrome, a complication of E. coli 0157:H7. The company also learned that the FDA had found no E. coli 0157:H7 at Odwalla's production plant in Dinuba, California, and was going to focus its investigation on Odwalla's apple supplier in the Central San Joaquin Valley

(King, 1996c). An Odwalla spokesman said that the company was happy that no bacteria was found, but would consider using heat pasteurization in the production of apple juice and apple juice-based products (King, 1996c). According to Thomsen (1998), the FDA's finding prompted the media to begin scrutinizing the entire fresh juice industry and spend less time investigating Odwalla. Odwalla supported this shift by issuing a press release on November 18 announcing its pledge to lead the industry in solving the E. coli issue by forming a Nourishment and Safety Council (Thomsen, 1998).

However, on the following day, the Seattle Times reported the results of an FDA report that suggested the apples used at the Odwalla plant might have been picked up off the ground, which meant they could have been exposed to contaminants. The report also found other deficiencies in the way the apples were handled and sanitized during the time that the contaminated apple juice was produced (King, 1996d). Steltenpohl noted that "this is clearly a turning point for the fresh apple juice industry. The industry must change...its testing and practices" (King, 1996d). On December 5, Odwalla announced that it would flash pasteurize its apple juice (Groves, 1996). In its press release, the company stated it would "pioneer the flash

pasteurization process" in a way that "kept Odwalla's apple juice as close to its natural state as possible, while building in a substantial margin of safety" (Thomsen, 1998).

Odwalla's Response

After learning of the link between its products and several E. coli poisonings, Odwalla used mortification, ingratiation, and distance strategies to repair its image. According to Coombs (1995), organizations use mortification strategies to win forgiveness after a crisis. Odwalla used two mortification tactics, rectification, which involves the company taking corrective action, and remediation, which offers compensation to the victims (Coombs, 1995). Odwalla took immediate corrective action by voluntarily recalling its apple juice and apple juice-based products, and cooperated fully with state and federal health officials to find the source of contamination. In addition, Odwalla acted to prevent future crises by implementing the flash heat pasteurization process. Odwalla offered compensation to the victims by offering to pay the medical expenses of anyone who became ill after drinking Odwalla products. Although Odwalla did not claim full responsibility for the E. coli poisonings, the company's

rectification and remediation efforts illustrated Odwalla's regret and desire to correct the problem.

In addition to mortification, Odwalla employed ingratiation and distancing strategies in its image repair effort. Ingratiation strategies are used by organizations to gain public approval. Bolstering is an ingratiation strategy that "reminds publics of the existing positive aspects of the organization" (Coombs 1995). In press releases and press conferences, Odwalla executives played up or bolstered the company's image as a caring corporation that put its customers' health ahead of company profits.

Odwalla also used two excuse tactics, denial of intention and denial of volition, to minimize the company's responsibility for the E. coli poisonings. Denial of intention is used by organizations to suggest a lack of information caused the crisis. Odwalla executives insisted that they believed their process was safe and therefore did not test for E. coli because industry experts had assured them that the high levels of acid in apple juice would kill the bacteria (King, 1996b). In addition, Odwalla used denial of volition, an excuse tactic that shifts the blame onto a scapegoat, to suggest that its apple suppliers might be the source of the E. coli bacteria.

When no E. coli bacteria was found at Odwalla's processing plant, and the FDA announced it would refocus its investigation on the company's apple suppliers, Odwalla began using transcendence, another ingratiation strategy, to redefine the crisis as an industry-wide threat. Benoit (1995) defines transcendence as changing the audience's context for viewing the problem or issue. Thomsen (1998) suggested Odwalla used transcendence to frame its crisis as "a call for the industry to change its practices." To support this strategy, the company issued a press release announcing its pledge to lead the industry in solving the E. coli issue, created the Nourishment and Food Safety Advisory Council, and ultimately changed its production process. When the results of the FDA report appeared in the Seattle Times, Odwalla could no longer claim it had acted in good faith to produce a natural product. Fortunately for the company, its transcendence strategy was working and the media's focus had already shifted away from Odwalla and onto the fresh juice industry as a whole.

In summary, I believe Odwalla executives used two mortification strategies, remediation and rectification, two ingratiation strategies, bolstering and transcendence, and excuse, a distancing strategy, when faced with the E. coli crisis.

Coombs's Guidelines

According to Coombs, veracity of evidence, damage and performance history influence the way publics judge an organization during a crisis. Therefore, these factors should be taken into consideration before the organization chooses a crisis response strategy. The evidence against Odwalla was true; on November 4, the company reported that its juice samples had tested positive for the E. coli 0157:H7 bacteria. I would consider the amount of damage to be major. Although health experts viewed the outbreak as relatively small (Questions of Pasteurization Raised, 1996), the death of Anna Gimmetstad and the more than 60 reported illnesses resulted in intense scrutiny of the fresh juice industry and prompted Odwalla to alter its production process, which had given the company its identity. Odwalla had to respond to the victims that suffered from drinking the company's juice products, and to the nonvictims, in this case the FDA and the state health agencies, and Odwalla's customers who had not gotten sick. The final factor, performance history, was positive.

For the purposes of Coombs's guidelines, I would consider the evidence true, the damage major, with victims and nonvictims, and Odwalla's performance history positive. According to Coombs's guidelines, Odwalla should have used

mortification and ingratiation strategies for victims and
excuse and ingratiation strategies for nonvictims.

CHAPTER VI

CASE STUDY: SCHWAN'S

Schwan's Sales Enterprises, Inc., founded in 1952, has grown from a door-to-door ice cream delivery service for southwestern Minnesota farmers to a \$1.8 billion firm. The company still delivers its ice cream door-to-door, along with other food products. In October 1994, the company found out its ice cream was linked to a salmonella outbreak that spread rapidly from Minnesota to 35 states. The outbreak was the biggest documented case of food poisoning at that time (Sellnow, 1998).

Situation Analysis

On October 7, 1994, an epidemiologist from Minnesota's Department of Health alerted Schwan's officials to a large statistical relationship between its ice cream and a widespread salmonella outbreak (Sellnow, 1998). The company immediately agreed to stop manufacturing, distributing and selling ice cream from its Marshall plant until the contamination source was found, and ordered an investigation of the plant (Slovut, 1994a). On October 8, state and federal officials collected samples of Schwan's

ice cream to test for salmonella bacteria. Instead of waiting for the results of these tests, which were due October 10, Schwan's executives held a press conference to discuss the crisis. Alfred Schwan, the company's president, announced that "the well-being of our customers is our very first priority at Schwan's, which is why we are willingly withdrawing our ice cream products from distribution and cooperating fully with government agencies" (Sellnow, 1998).

Schwan's offered to refund consumers concerned about the company's ice cream products (Salmonella Cases, 1994) and set up a toll-free hotline to answer questions from customers (Sellnow, 1998). Schwan's also sent its delivery drivers to pick up the company's ice cream products from customers, who were offered a credit or the right to exchange the ice cream for another product (Slovut, 1994b). By October 12, Wisconsin and South Dakota were reporting growing numbers of lab-confirmed salmonella cases, also linked to Schwan's ice cream (Slovut, 1994c). On October 14, federal health officials stated that the salmonella outbreak had reached as many as 35 states (Slovut, 1994d).

Schwan's began a direct mail campaign to customers encouraging them to get tested for salmonella poisoning at the company's expense (Sellnow, 1998) and announced it

would shift its ice cream production to an Iowa plant pending completion of the investigation into its Marshall plant (Kennedy, 1994a). The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reported that Schwan's also "agreed to recondition and repasteurize all existing inventories of ice cream mix; make thorough, multiple cleanings of its plant and equipment; and establish procedures to ensure that tankers used to transport its ice cream products are used solely for that purpose; and institute rigorous sampling and testing procedures" (Slovut, 1994e).

On October 21, the FDA announced that it believed the contamination of Schwan's ice cream products occurred in a contractor's tanker truck that delivered ice cream mix to the company's Marshall plant. The FDA found that one of the trucks used to carry Schwan's mix had hauled raw, unpasteurized, cracked eggs before it transported the company's ice cream mix, which was pasteurized before being shipped, but not after it arrived at the Marshall plant. However, the FDA had not confirmed the connection.

Schwan's president, Alfred Schwan, issued a statement saying the company would immediately implement "a number of voluntary measures that should provide every possible safeguard to ensure the safety of those ingredients that are delivered into our plant" (Slovut, 1994f). These

measures included using a dedicated fleet of sealed trucks that would carry ingredients for Schwan's products only, repasteurizing every shipment of ingredients, and testing all ice cream mix and finished ice cream products for salmonella (Slovut, 1994f).

Because of these concessions, and the confirmation that the source of the salmonella outbreak was the cross-contamination from unpasteurized eggs, the FDA and state health officials announced on November 8 that Schwan's Marshall plant could reopen immediately (Slovut, 1994g). The company continued to make cash payments to customers who became ill after eating the contaminated ice cream, in return for agreeing not to sue for illnesses (Kennedy, 1994b).

Schwan's Response

My analysis of Schwan's statements and actions after the company learned of the connection between its products and the widespread salmonella outbreak indicates that Schwan's used mortification and ingratiation strategies in its initial attempt at image repair. Schwan's used remediation and rectification, both mortification tactics, to show sympathy for the victims and to prove the company's desire to correct the problem and prevent future occurrences. As soon as Schwan's was notified of the

contamination, the company immediately expressed concern for those who were ill, instituted a voluntary recall, and emphasized the company's willingness to work with federal and state health officials in determining the source of the contamination. According to Sellnow (1998), although Schwan's did not admit to causing the outbreak, the company's efforts to provide refunds to its customers and pay the medical expenses of those who were ill illustrated Schwan's regret and desire to correct the problem. In addition, Schwan's used bolstering, an ingratiation strategy, to remind its publics of the positive aspects of the company (Coombs, 1995). By implementing a number of voluntary safety measures, Schwan's was able to bolster its image as a company that put the well-being of its customers first.

The excuse tactic denial of volition is a form of distancing, where the organization tries to minimize its responsibility for the crisis. Scapegoating, or shifting the blame, is a form of denial of volition. Once the FDA announced that the source of the salmonella bacteria was the contracted tanker trucks used to transport Schwan's ice cream mix, the company was able to use distance strategies to shift the blame onto Cliff Viessman, Inc., the operator of the tanker trucks. Sellnow (1998) suggested that this

strategy was most strongly pronounced when Schwan's announced that it would no longer contract out for the delivery of its products, but instead use a dedicated fleet of sealed trucks that would only carry Schwan's products.

In summary, I believe Schwan's relied on remediation and rectification, two mortification strategies, to repair its image, while also using bolstering, an ingratiation strategy and excuse, a distancing strategy, during the salmonella outbreak.

Coombs's Guidelines

According to Coombs, veracity of evidence, damage and performance history influence the way publics judge an organization during a crisis. Therefore, these factors should be taken into consideration before the organization chooses a crisis response strategy. For Schwan's, the evidence was true; several states had lab-confirmed cases of salmonella, all linked to the company's ice cream. The amount of damage was major; more than 224,000 people, citizens in 35 states, got sick from eating the company's contaminated ice cream (Sellnow, 1998). Those who were ill from salmonella poisoning would be considered victims, and Schwan's other customers and federal and state health officials would be considered nonvictims. Finally, Schwan's performance history was positive. According to Bill

Coleman, director of Minnesota's Agriculture Department's livestock and dairy division, Schwan's plant was "a very good plant, a very clean plant, and a very well-maintained facility" (Walsh, 1994).

For the purposes of Coombs's guidelines, I would consider the evidence true, the damage major, with victims and nonvictims, and Schwan's performance history positive. According to Coombs's guidelines, Schwan's should have used mortification and ingratiation strategies for victims, and excuse and ingratiation strategies for nonvictims.

CHAPTER VII

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

This multi-case comparison examined Coombs's guidelines for choosing appropriate crisis response strategies. My analysis of three product recall cases, all considered accidents as defined by Coombs, was designed to answer the research question: do crisis managers use the strategies predicted by Coombs's guidelines? If it was found that crisis managers did not use the strategies predicted by Coombs's guidelines, then the results should provide insight into the second research question: do patterns exist within the case studies to recommend specific strategies that can be used by organizations involved in similar crises?

For each case, I provided an overview of the crisis situation and analyzed the crisis response strategies used by each organization. I also identified the crisis factors within each situation that Coombs suggested should influence crisis response strategy selection. Finally, I followed the crisis factors through the flowchart to

determine the appropriate crisis response suggested by Coombs. An analysis of the strategies chosen by each organization versus the response suggested by Coombs follows.

I chose three case studies based on Coombs's definition of accidents. Each crisis I studied was a product recall. As it turned out, each organization faced the same crisis factors as defined by Coombs. In each case, the evidence was true, the damage was major, the organization had to respond to victims and nonvictims, and performance history was positive. Therefore, according to Coombs's guidelines, each organization should have used the same crisis response strategies: mortification and ingratiation strategies for victims, and excuse and ingratiation strategies for non-victims (see Table 3).

Table 3: Coombs's Recommendations vs. Actual Response

	Coombs	Coke	Odwalla	Schwan's
Victims	Mortification	Mortification	Mortification	Mortification
	Ingratiation	Excuse	Ingratiation	Ingratiation
Nonvictims	Excuse	Excuse	Excuse	Excuse
	Ingratiation	Mortification	Ingratiation	Ingratiation

The rationale behind these selections is that mortification and ingratiation strategies "attempt to offset negative crisis attributions with positive impressions of the organization" (Coombs, 1995). Excuse and ingratiation strategies attempt to offset the negative crisis attributions by highlighting the unintentional factors that contributed to the crisis, thus reducing organizational responsibility (Coombs, 1995).

Case Study: Coca-Cola

I believe Coca-Cola used the excuse crisis response strategy for both victims and nonvictims in its initial attempt at image repair. According to Benoit (1995), organizations that use the excuse strategy attempt "to provide information that may reduce apparent responsibility for the offensive act." Coca-Cola did this by denying that its products were unsafe and by offering two possible explanations for the deviation in taste and color that might have caused some to feel ill. When this strategy seemed to fail, my analysis suggests that Coca-Cola made use of three mortification strategies, remediation, repentance, and rectification, to resolve the crisis. Coca-Cola did this by offering to pay the medical expenses of those who were sick, apologizing to consumers in

advertisements, and agreeing to several conditions required by the Belgian government to ensure product safety.

Coke used a combination of excuse and mortification strategies for both victims and nonvictims. I believe that Coca-Cola would have fared better if the company had followed Coombs's suggestions. Coombs (1995) explained that organizations with a positive performance history have credibility when trying to bolster their image. This same credibility, according to Coombs (1995), should make nonvictims receptive to claims of limited responsibility on the part of the accused. I believe Coca-Cola should have relied more on ingratiation strategies for victims and nonvictims and focused its mortification strategies on victims, and its excuse strategy on nonvictims.

Coca-Cola is the world's most recognized brand and therefore its reputation is its lifeblood (Unger, 1999d). Since the company had never experienced problems of this magnitude, it could have easily used the media to bolster its image and reach out to victims and nonvictims as a company with a long history of providing excellent products for its loyal consumers. I believe bolstering, coupled with using the mortification strategies sooner, would have had a positive effect on Coca-Cola's victims. These two strategies would have reminded consumers of Coca-Cola's

positive image and reinforced the company's desire to apologize and prevent any future problems.

I believe Coca-Cola would have fared better with government authorities, which were considered nonvictims, had the company combined its excuse strategy with bolstering. The cause of the illnesses was questionable; no one became seriously ill, and Coca-Cola did provide two possible explanations for the deviation in taste and color that might have caused some to feel sick. Instead of simply claiming that its products were safe, I believe Coca-Cola's claims of limited responsibility might have been more accepted by government authorities had Coke used a strong bolstering message and emphasized its willingness to correct the problem.

Case Study: Odwalla

After learning of the link between its products and several E. coli poisonings, I believe Odwalla used mortification, ingratiation, and distance strategies to repair its image. When initially faced with the E. coli crisis, Odwalla used mortification and ingratiation strategies to reinforce the company's concern for its customers and its desire to find the source of contamination. The company's swift corrective action to voluntarily recall the products in question and public

expressions of concern for those who were sick helped bolster Odwalla's image. Odwalla executives also tried to minimize the company's responsibility for the outbreak with the excuse that the company did not know that the acid levels in apples might not kill E. coli bacteria. When no E. coli was found at Odwalla's processing plant, and the FDA announced it would refocus its investigation on the company's apple suppliers, Odwalla began to use the transcendence strategy to define the crisis as an industry-wide threat.

Coombs's guidelines suggested that an organization in Odwalla's position use mortification and ingratiation strategies for victims and excuse and ingratiation strategies for non-victims. I believe Odwalla used these strategies in its image repair effort. Throughout the crisis, Odwalla bolstered its image as an eco-friendly company whose main concern was the health of its customers. Odwalla coupled this ingratiation strategy with two mortification strategies, remediation and rectification. The company offered compensation to its victims and took all necessary steps to prevent future occurrences, even changing the production process that was the foundation of Odwalla's "people to planet" philosophy.

For nonvictims, mainly state and federal officials, the company continued to use bolstering, but combined with denial of intention and denial of volition, two excuse tactics. Using denial of intention allowed Odwalla to position itself as a responsible company that had acted in good faith on advice from experts, but just did not know about "new" information that suggested E. coli bacteria could survive in the high acidic level of apple juice (Thomsen, 1998). Odwalla used denial of volition, or scapegoating, to suggest that the company's apple suppliers were the source of the contamination.

Finally, when Odwalla learned that the FDA had not found any E. coli bacteria at its processing plant, the company successfully used transcendence, another ingratiation strategy, to encourage the media and government health officials to shift their focus from Odwalla and onto the fresh juice industry as a whole.

Case Study: Schwan's

My analysis of Schwan's statements and actions after the company learned of the connection between its products and a widespread salmonella outbreak indicates that Schwan's used mortification and ingratiation strategies in its initial attempt at image repair. Schwan's used remediation and rectification, both mortification tactics,

to show sympathy for the victims and to prove the company's desire to correct the problem and prevent future occurrences. Once Schwan's learned that the source of the salmonella bacteria was the contracted tanker trucks used to transport Schwan's ice cream mix, the company was able to use excuse, a distance strategy, to shift the blame onto the operator of the tanker trucks.

Coombs's guidelines suggested that an organization in Schwan's position use mortification and ingratiation strategies for victims and excuse and ingratiation strategies for non-victims. I believe Schwan's used these strategies in its image repair effort. As soon as the crisis began, Schwan's used remediation and rectification, two mortification strategies. The company enacted a voluntary recall of its products, offered refunds to its customers, and offered to pay for diagnostic testing for consumers who had eaten Schwan's ice cream during the salmonella outbreak. In addition, the company implemented several voluntary safety measures designed to prevent future problems. By taking immediate corrective action, Schwan's was able to bolster its image with victims and nonvictims as an upstanding company whose customers were its first priority.

Like Odwalla, Schwan's coupled the ingratiation strategy with the excuse strategy as a response to nonvictims. As soon as the company learned the source of contamination was not its plant, but the tanker trucks that the company contracted with to deliver ingredients, Schwan's tried to shift responsibility for the outbreak away from itself and onto the owner of the tanker trucks. As Sellnow (1998) noted, this was done by announcing that the company would purchase its own dedicated fleet of trucks, instead of contracting out for the delivery of Schwan's products.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

I believe these three case studies illustrate the validity of Coombs's guidelines for choosing appropriate crisis response strategies for the accident crisis type. Two of the three organizations represented in the case studies used the crisis response strategies suggested by Coombs. Only one organization did not strictly follow Coombs's guidelines, but did use two of the three suggested strategies. However, my analysis indicates that the company might have been more successful in the early stages of the crisis had it utilized the third strategy offered by Coombs.

The multi-case study approach I took to examine Coombs's guidelines revealed a few limitations about his predictions, some of which Coombs addresses in his research. Coombs (1995) suggested that his repertoire of crisis response strategies might need revising if the proposed strategies did not fit actual crisis messages. I found this to be true. For example, in the Schwan's case study, I wrote that the company used denial of volition, an

excuse tactic, to shift blame away from the organization onto the owner of the tanker trucks. Coombs considered this scapegoating, and placed it under the excuse strategy, whereas Benoit suggested that scapegoating is a form of victimage, which he considers a denial strategy. In Coombs's repertoire, denial exists as a nonexistence strategy. If Coombs was incorporating Benoit's typology, why did he define scapegoating as an excuse tactic and not a denial tactic? Perhaps a revision of Coombs's repertoire is not necessary, but rather a more detailed explanation of his categorization system. It should also be noted that an ethical dimension exists within Coombs's typology. For example, Coombs does not address the ethical questions surrounding the use of denial and excuse tactics when the accused organization is guilty.

In addition, I believe that Coombs's crisis factors need further definition, particularly the damage factor. It was not difficult to identify the evidence and performance history factors for each case. However, based on Coombs's definition of damage, it was difficult to assume whether the crises I studied would be considered to have major or minor damage. According to Coombs (1995), severe damage involves serious injury, death or massive property damage. The only case that fit this description was Odwalla, with

the death of a 16-month-old baby as a result of drinking contaminated juice. The other cases involved reports of illness, but none were considered serious. Yet, I considered the damage major in both the Coca-Cola and Schwan's cases because scores of people were ill from consuming their products, thus threatening the image and lifeblood of two reputable organizations. Coombs (1995) suggested that severity of damage is a matter of interpretation, but he failed to give parameters with which to judge the amount of damage involved.

Finally, I agree with Coombs's (1995) assertion that more than four crisis types may exist. While this did not affect my study because I chose my cases based on his definition of accident crises, in practice I believe there might be situations that do not fit into the crisis type model. I believe this to be true about Coombs's guidelines in general. For example, with the Schwan's case, what might have happened if the contamination source had been Schwan's plant and not the trucking company? Schwan's would not have been able to use the excuse strategy to shift the responsibility for the salmonella outbreak to a third party. Would mortification then be the appropriate choice, in combination with ingratiation, for nonvictims as well?

In research published after his 1995 study, Coombs (1998) suggested that crisis response strategies be put on an accommodative-defensive continuum. He reversed his initial opinion regarding the crisis type matrix he identified in 1995 and indicated that crisis types were better defined on a continuum of low-high personal control. According to Coombs (1998), both continuums were related to attributions of crisis responsibility, thus defensive strategies should be used when there are weak perceptions of crisis responsibility, whereas accommodative strategies should be used when there are strong perceptions of crisis responsibility. Coombs concluded that using a continuum would give crisis managers an idea of the range of strategies available based on crisis responsibility, as opposed to providing strict guidelines for narrowly defined crisis situations based on a limited number of crisis factors. This may be a more practical tool for crisis managers; however, the merit of Coombs's guidelines cannot be overlooked.

While Coombs's decision process may be rigid, it does encourage the crisis manager to take several crisis factors into consideration before choosing a response strategy. I believe the identification of the attributes publics make when judging a crisis are useful in and of themselves. His

process is also an attempt to explain how crisis factors should influence the selection of crisis response strategies, and how multiple strategies can be used together to alter perceptions during a crisis.

Limitations

Crisis management is often thought of as a public relations function. It should be noted that this is not often the case - some chief executive officers take over management of a crisis and may bypass the public relations function entirely. This issue was beyond the scope of this study. In addition, there are limitations inherent in case study research. Conducting a multi-case comparison of a specific crisis type is not perfect. While my results suggest that crisis managers used the strategies predicted by Coombs's guidelines, these results are based on my interpretation of three case studies. I chose to follow the research method of previous image restoration case studies and used only newspaper accounts, which do not represent the universe of mediums available to crisis managers, for the analysis of each organization's crisis response.

Because of the nature of a case study, the only strategies examined were those used by the organization in crisis. Perhaps other strategies would have had the same effect on the publics affected by the crisis. As Coombs and

Schmidt (1999) noted, image restoration case studies are descriptive tools for identifying crisis strategies used in particular situations. Researchers should be careful when making assumptions about the use of strategies based on their success or failure in a given situation.

Implications

In conclusion, my results suggest that crisis managers use the strategies predicted by Coombs's guidelines. However, my research was limited to three product recall cases that fit Coombs's definition of an accident crisis type. Two organizations used each crisis response strategy he suggested, while one used two of three suggested strategies. Patterns existed within these case studies that offer suggestions for crisis communication research. My results indicate it is wise for organizations that experience any type of contamination crisis to immediately express concern for victims and voluntarily recall products. As Benoit (1995) found, it is desirable for an organization at fault to take corrective action immediately, by either rectifying the problem (through monetary compensation or medical reimbursement, for example) or taking steps to prevent the problem from recurring in the future. Benoit (1995) also suggested it was possible for organizations to successfully shift the

blame, but only if the scapegoat was plausibly responsible for the crisis. Executives at Odwalla and Schwan's both shifted responsibility onto convincing scapegoats; for Odwalla, it was apple suppliers and for Schwan's, it was the owner of the tanker trucks.

According to Coombs's, "one of the primary objectives of crisis management is to maintain an organization's image" (Coombs, 1995). I believe Coombs's guidelines offer a set of decision rules that can help crisis managers maintain an organization's image during difficult times. While his guidelines may not cover every possible crisis type and crisis response strategy, Coombs does begin a dialogue about the factors involved in choosing the appropriate strategy. My multi-case comparison supports his decision process for accidents; however, my research covered only product recalls. Further research into other types of accidents would be needed in order to validate his guidelines. This goes for all four crisis types defined by Coombs. Additional research would also help revise, if necessary, Coombs's repertoire of crisis response strategies. Coombs (1995) offered these guidelines as "a set of reasoned, attribution-based, decisional criteria" to begin exploring the "symbolic approach to crisis

management," and I believe my results provide support for this line of research.

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