IS A BRAND’S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO DISSEMINATE INFORMATION DURING A CRISIS AS CREDIBLE AS USING TRADITIONAL MEDIA SOURCES?

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty in Communication and Leadership Studies

School of Professional Studies

Gonzaga University

Under the Supervision of Dr. Michael Hazel

Under the Mentorship of Cher Desautel and Sara Johnston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership Studies

By

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December 7, 2012
ABSTRACT

A strong organizational reputation can take years to develop, yet can easily be damaged or destroyed with a single crisis event. The purpose of this thesis is to determine the role social media plays in crisis management as well as stakeholder perceptions of the credibility of different response strategies. The study is rooted in the socio-psychological tradition to aid in predicting when a communication behavior will succeed and when it will fail. An online survey was administered to 300 responders to gauge their belief as to which medium was most credible: Television news, print news, online news, or an organization’s website, Facebook page, or Twitter feed. Traditional media sources were rated as most credible, while the organization-generated content was rated least credible, even though the content may be the same. Nevertheless, it is imperative for an organization to have an online presence in order to start a dialogue with stakeholders to create trust, the ultimate protection during a crisis.
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Importance of the Study

An organization’s reputation is one of its most valuable assets. A strong reputation can take years to develop and requires care and commitment to maintain, yet can easily be damaged or destroyed with a single crisis event. Traditionally, people have learned about organizational crises through the media: The media frames the crisis, and stakeholders will typically adopt that frame (Coombs, 2007). Today, however, the public often gets information about a crisis from online sources, and the people posting the information online are the ones framing the situation. How, then, can an organization best maintain control of its message during a crisis situation with the presence of not only the traditional mainstream media, but also of online and social media sources in which content is often user-generated?

Statement of Purpose

With the widespread use of social media and cell phones, witnesses can often be the first to report the crisis. If this happens and there is not an immediate response from the organization, the organization will then be forced to manage the crisis within the frame the public has accepted (Coombs, 2007; Seeger, 2006). Huang (2008) determined that a timely response was a more important factor in stakeholder trust and relational commitment than the crisis communication strategy, and Hale, Dulek, & Hale (2005) found that crisis management tends to be more successful when information is “disseminated quickly, accurately, directly, and candidly to critical stakeholders, including the media” (p. 116). Coombs (2006) advocated an initial response of “instructing information” (p. 246), that is, the basic information about the crisis, how the
stakeholder can protect himself/herself from harm, and the steps being taken to correct
the situation and ensure that it won’t happen again. Organizations can use social media
platforms as a method of rapid information dissemination as well as providing a way for
the stakeholders and the public to ask questions and engage with the organization,
thereby relieving some of the uncertainty the crisis can cause (Veil, Buehner &
Palenchar, 2011).

As of August 2011, Pew Internet Research found that among adult Internet users,
65% reported using some form of social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, or
LinkedIn, up from 61% in 2010 (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011). That number has increased
from 8% of Internet users in February of 2005. Additionally, in February 2012, 15% of
adult Internet users said they use Twitter, up from 8% in November 2010 (Smith &
Brenner, 2012). A 2007 BIGresearch study found that 5.8% of 3,978 respondents
believed bloggers to be more credible than the media (4.4%), yet in 2012, only 139 (28%)
of the Fortune 500 companies had their own public-facing corporate blogs (Ganim
Barnes, Lescault, & Andonian, 2012).

While existing literature recommends using both traditional and new media networks
to disseminate information in a crisis, what is lacking is knowledge of how the general
public and interested stakeholders perceive the channels used to distribute the message.
This thesis examines current recommendations an organization can use to poise itself to
credibly handle a crisis situation while mitigating damage to its reputation and
maintaining the trust of its stakeholders. It also seeks to determine the role social media
plays in crisis management as well as stakeholder perception of the credibility of
different response strategies.
Definition of Terms Used

**Reputation** is a combination of the way an organization presents itself (its image), the way it is presented by the media, advertising, and word of mouth, and the perceptions stakeholders and the public have of the organization (Coombs, 2007; Gilpin, 2010; Lyon & Cameron, 2004).

A **crisis** is a sudden, unexpected threat to the organization and its distinctive brand qualities that can potentially do financial and reputational damage (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Greyser, 2009). Jim Lukaszewski, an expert in crisis management, defines a crisis differently: “Crises are show-stopping, people-stopping, product-stopping, reputation-defining situations that create victims and/or explosive visibility” (personal communication, November 14, 2012), the difference in the definitions being the creation of victims. Lukaszewski also says, “Crises are caused by human beings through commission, omission, accident, negligence, or ignorance.”

**Stakeholders**, for the purpose of this thesis, are individuals or organization that have an interest in the success or failure of another organization (Caywood, 1997). Stakeholders can include investors, employees, customers, governmental regulatory agencies, and communities in which an organization does business.

**Social media** is defined as “media that users can easily participate in, share and create content for, including blogs, social networks, wikis, forums and virtual worlds (Mayfield, 2006, p. 35). Amber Gold of Amber Gold Marketing stresses to clients that social media is not actually a media but a communication gateway that can be used to dialogue with others (personal communication, November 10, 2012).
Organization of Remaining Chapters

This chapter has introduced the reasoning behind the study as well as how it may be helpful to crisis management practitioners. Chapter 2 discusses the philosophical traditions and theories on which this thesis is based. An exemplary examination of existing research to determine current recommendations an organization can use to poise itself to credibly handle a crisis situation while mitigating damage to its reputation and maintaining the trust of its stakeholders follows. Chapter 3 explains the scope and methodology used to complete the quantitative survey, while Chapter 4 is an analysis of the data received from the survey. Finally, Chapter 5 applies the conclusions of the research and how they may be applied to crisis communication, explains the limitations of the study, and suggests areas for future research.
Chapter 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Philosophical Assumptions and Theoretical Basis

The philosophical basis for this study is rooted in the socio-psychological tradition, in which scholars look for “cause-and-effect relationships that will predict when a communication behavior will succeed and when it will fail” (Griffin, 2008, p. 42). Carl Hovland, a researcher at Yale University, was one of the pioneers of the study of the effects of communication. In 1951, Hovland and his associates found that test subjects were more likely to discount material they heard from what they considered to be “untrustworthy” sources and to place more value on statements attributed to “prestige” sources. Over time, however, they discovered that subjects remembered the message but forgot the source, thereby leading to an acceptance of the message regardless of the source.

In the event of a crisis, an organization should ideally be driving the message put forth to stakeholders to mitigate damage to the brand’s reputation and maintain the brand image. Mass media outlets (newspapers, radio, and television), however, tend to be the main source of information for stakeholders and the general public (Coombs, 2007; Jin & Liu, 2010). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media theory developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) discussed the ability of the mass media to tell an audience not only what issues to think about in a political situation, but also how much importance to put on those issues. If the media reports a situation more quickly than does an organization involved in the crisis, the manager will be forced to manage the crisis in the frame set by the media (Coombs, 2007). Additionally, reports generated by witnesses on social media networks can disrupt the message the corporation is trying to
disseminate. It is important for the organization to act quickly to set the agenda for how stakeholders and the public will perceive the crisis, and therefore, to determine its own future success once the crisis has passed.

Crises always involve uncertainty, which can arise from stakeholder and public perception of the crisis, the response of the organization, and the perceived cause of the crisis (Stephens & Malone, 2009). The Uncertainty Reduction Theory posited by Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese (1975) offers clues to how an organization can both develop strong relationships with stakeholders before a crisis as well as how to minimize uncertainty during the crisis. The theory proposes that in communication situations, both parties will actively seek to eliminate uncertainty and predict the other’s behaviors to determine if the relationship is worth continuing. The more similarities the parties perceive between themselves, the more predictable the interaction, which allows for future communication and a reduction in uncertainty. The same is true of organizations and their stakeholders: An organization can reach out to interact with customers and stakeholders through websites, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media networks, thereby developing relationships and trust. Recent research has found that organizations fare better during a crisis if they have built “reputational capital” and are trusted by their stakeholders (Coombs, 2006; Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Gilpin, 2010; Greyser, 2007; Huang, 2008; Lyon & Cameron, 2004; Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). The use of social media platforms allows an organization in crisis to provide timely, accurate information to stakeholders, which can relieve uncertainty and maintain the relationships until the crisis has passed. As a result, the organization can better preserve its image and reputation, leading to continuing success in the future.
Literature Review

Protecting Reputations During Crisis Situations

Because the question being investigated revolves around the credibility of the channel of distribution for a crisis response strategy, it is important to define some of the key topics. *Reputation* is a combination of the way an organization presents itself (its image), the way it is presented by the media, advertising, and word of mouth, and the perceptions stakeholders and the public have of the organization (Coombs, 2007; Gilpin, 2010; Lyon & Cameron, 2004). Reputation is important because it can determine favorable outcomes for organizations, including generating customers, sales and investments, recruiting talent, and creating a competitive advantage based on the unique characteristics of the brand (Chis & Talpos, 2011; Coombs, 2007; Coombs, 2006). The organization’s reputation is what is being protected during a crisis.

A *crisis* is a sudden, unexpected threat to the organization and its distinctive brand qualities that can potentially do financial and reputational damage (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Greyser, 2009). The way an organization responds to a crisis situation can determine whether it can recover and succeed once the crisis has passed. Because a crisis is an unforeseen event, an organization must prepare for a crisis situation, plan an appropriate response, and choose the proper channels of information dissemination to protect its stakeholders and its reputation. A search of the literature almost universally recommends having a crisis management plan and crisis response team in place in the event of a crisis, with many similar suggestions for best (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Seeger, 2006; Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). Newer research (Gainey, 2010; Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Greyser, 2007; Huang, 2008;
Stephens & Malone, 2008) is also advocating the integration of social media tools, as well, both before a crisis to build relationships, during a crisis to disseminate information, and after a crisis to monitor public opinion of the organization.

The first stage of any crisis management plan is prevention: Preventing a crisis is the most desirable option for any organization (Gainey, 2010; Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith 2008; Hale, Dulek & Hale, 2005; Smaiziene & Orzekauskas, 2009; Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). While it is impossible to prevent all crises, an organization can put in place a system of monitoring emerging issues as they happen in order to be proactive about a situation rather than wait until the crisis hits (Gainey, 2010; Smaiziene & Orzekauskas, 2009; Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). Recent literature suggests that social media websites and blogs are well suited for organizations to track what is being said about them in real time (Khang, Ki, & Ye, 2012; Seeger, 2006; Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011).

Additionally, research has shown that organizations that have “reputational capital” (Coombs, 2007, p. 165) tend to do better during a crisis and will emerge with less damage than an organization with a poor pre-crisis reputation. The internet has provided many platforms for organizations to engage with customers, stakeholders, and even the media to develop interactive relationships, build trust, and enhance reputation (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). Internet users seem to prefer communication from organizations that is “customer pull” (Gorry & Westbrook, 2009, p. 196) rather than company-driven, and companies who are embracing new media technologies appear to be better situated to manage their own messages and maintain their reputations in the event of a crisis.
Choosing a Response Strategy in a Crisis Situation

If prevention fails and a crisis occurs, there can be several ways for an organization to respond. The response, however, will define the way stakeholders perceive the crisis and the organization involved (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). An organization’s first priority in a crisis situation is to protect its stakeholders, physically or psychologically (Coombs, 2007; Seeger, 2006). Once the safety of the stakeholders is assured, then the organization must work to protect its reputation and ensure the crisis does not occur again.

In the past, organizations had a time frame of 45 minutes to up to 12 hours to issue a statement after a crisis (Gainey, 2010). With the widespread use of social media and cell phones, witnesses can often be the first to report the crisis. If this happens and there is not an immediate response from the organization, the organization will then be forced to manage the crisis within the frame the public has accepted (Coombs, 2007; Seeger, 2006). Huang (2008) determined that a timely response was a more important factor in stakeholder trust and relational commitment than the crisis communication strategy, and Hale, Dulek, & Hale (2005) found that crisis management tends to be more successful when information is “disseminated quickly, accurately, directly, and candidly to critical stakeholders, including the media” (p. 116). Coombs (2006) advocated an initial response of “instructing information” (p. 246): the basic information about the crisis, how the stakeholder can protect himself/herself from harm, and the steps being taken to correct the situation and ensure that it won’t happen again. Stephens and Malone (2008) found that blogs can change the public’s perception of the crisis and that, as communication from the organization increased, the crisis was perceived to be less
serious. Organizations can use social media platforms as a method of rapid information dissemination as well as providing a way for the stakeholders and the public to ask questions and engage with the organization, thereby relieving some of the uncertainty the crisis can cause (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011).

As Coombs (2007) and Jin & Liu (2010) found, the general public gets most of its information regarding a crisis from the mass media. There has, however, been an interesting change in the traditional relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists as a result of social media. Although journalists have long held that the information provided by public relations practitioners lack news content and are motivated solely by the organization’s self-interest, they reported that, over a 13 year period, an estimated 44% of news content in the United States came from public relations practitioners (Avery, Lariscy, & Sweetser, 2010). With the use of social media, however, practitioners can bypass the middleman, i.e. journalists, and get their messages directly to consumers. Journalists now scour the internet for trending stories to report (Sweetser, Porter, Chung, & Kim, 2008), yet crisis managers can miss out on the valuable channels the mass media can provide if they fail to develop and maintain relationships with journalists. The media can become an essential partner in the crisis response (Veil & Ojeda, 2010).

Because crises are fluid, time-sensitive situations, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to a crisis. Coombs (2007) suggested that people will react emotionally and assign responsibility for a crisis, and the way an organization manages the crisis should correlate to the attribution of crisis responsibility. His Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (2007) identifies three crisis responsibility types: victim, accident, and
intentional. By identifying the responsibility type the public will attach to the crisis, a crisis manager can then choose from a pre-determined list of response strategies, which include denial, diminish, and rebuild. Denial is used when an organization is not responsible for the crisis and has evidence to prove it. Diminish strategies can be used in situations of low attribution, i.e. a victim or accident crisis. Rebuild strategies should be used in instances of strong attribution when the organization must take responsibility and reconstruct trust among stakeholders. Rebuild can also be used in the case of an accidental crisis when the organization’s reputation has been damaged and needs to be bolstered (Coombs, 2007).

Hale, Dulek & Hale (2005) argued that, instead of being a linear model as suggested by Coombs, crisis response is actually a spiral model whereby crisis managers need to observe, interpret, choose, and disseminate, repeating the process throughout the crisis. This enhances the understanding of the crisis in progress and allows for dissemination of timely, updated information. Recent evidence supports using social media to honestly and openly distribute information during a crisis because the organization will be directly feeding information into stakeholders who are interested and actively seeking updated information (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). The traits of communication, participation, and connectedness inherent in social media platforms make it a very useful tool in an effective crisis communication plan by allowing users to be participants in the crisis management efforts.

Stakeholder Perceptions of Response Strategies

In order to best protect its reputation during a crisis, an organization’s crisis response strategy must accept greater responsibility and provide more assistance to victims as
stakeholders and the public place more blame on the company. An apologetic response can reinforce an organization’s image as a “good corporate citizen” (Lyon & Cameron, 2004, p. 231) and bring the company back into a more favorable light with stakeholders. Coombs (2007) found that organizations with reputational capital fare better during a crisis, and Huang (2008) associated trust to relational commitment, or the intent of the customer to repurchase after the crisis based on the highly valued relationship the two had before the crisis. He noted that organizations can minimize the potential reputational damage with timely, consistent, and active dissemination of information, ultimately resulting in greater trust by stakeholders and the public.

The Inevitability of Social Media

Because of the importance of rapid crisis response, it is essential to disseminate information through as many avenues as possible. Social media, then, can be a useful tool in addition to traditional media sources in crisis management and can actually help an organization maintain control of its message. Social media platforms allow an organization to open an authentic, honest dialogue with interested stakeholders and the public, and online users tend to prefer the more human, connected, and interactive communication these platforms provide (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011).

With the good, however, comes the bad, and there are still some disadvantages that come with organizational use of social media. There are security issues such as phishing or cyber attacks, and an organization opens itself up to public criticism and disgruntled customers for the entire online world to see (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Chis & Talpos, 2011). Overall, though, social media provides convenient and effective methods
to build relationships with stakeholders, the public, and media, to follow public
perception and mitigate problems before they become crises, to disseminate information
during a crisis, and to track public opinion post-crisis. It is, for better or for worse, part
of our culture, and crisis managers must embrace it and use it to their advantage.

Summary

Recent literature has demonstrated the effective use of crisis response strategies to
mitigate damage to organizational reputations during a crisis. Crisis types have been
identified, and recommendations are in place to match the appropriate response to the
crisis type for maximum protection of organizational reputation. Open, authentic, timely,
and honest communication has always been an integral part of crisis management and is
essential to maintain the trust of the public. The evolution of the internet and social
media, however, have opened up a new avenue for crisis managers to reach out to their
stakeholders and the public. While traditional media has been the primary way most
people get information during a crisis, more people are turning to online resources, and
online users expect a more connected, interactive, and even human experience on social
media platforms. An organization that embraces emerging new technology potentially
increases stakeholder trust and provides itself greater reputational protection in the event
of a crisis.

It is essential that an organization disseminate information as broadly as possible
during a crisis, incorporating traditional and new media sources to reach the consumers of
both. While there is discussion of the channels of information dissemination in the
literature, the research focused primarily on the message to be distributed. As a result,
there exists a further need to study what channels of distribution are the most credible and
if perceptions of credibility are age or generation related. Therefore, the intent of this study is to help establish best practices for using social media as a source of information dissemination during a crisis using the following research questions:

RQ1: Will stakeholders and the general public seek out information about a crisis situation from traditional media outlets or online via social media?

RQ2: Are regular users of online social media platforms more likely to seek out information about a crisis on social media networks?

RQ3: How believable are corporate social media websites compared to traditional media sources?
Chapter 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Study

While existing literature recommends using both traditional and new media networks to disseminate information in a crisis, what is lacking is knowledge of how the general public and interested stakeholders perceive the channels used to distribute the message. This study sought to compare how interested parties view new media platforms as a source of information as opposed to traditional news outlets in obtaining relevant and timely crisis updates. This research may be useful to organizations in crisis planning situations to determine the best way to distribute their message to protect their reputations and sustain stakeholder trust during – and after – a crisis.

It was necessary to get a sample of the general public in order to broadly determine how an organization’s message and the channels of distribution for that message would be perceived. Because a crisis is typically an unexpected situation, an organization would need a sample of the population that reflects the demographics of the American populace in order to generically apply the research findings to its crisis management plan. Survey research is designed to investigate the “current attitudes, opinions, thoughts… surrounding an issue or event” (Rubin, Rubin, & Piele, 2005, p. 226). This study required quantitative data to answer the research questions, and the most effective way to achieve this was with a survey.

Because the data obtained from this study may be beneficial to crisis managers, it was important to determine industry perceptions and usage of social media platforms as tools to aid in managing a crisis. Therefore, interviews were conducted with public relations professionals to explore their current usage of social media platforms, their
perceptions of the effectiveness of social media use during a crisis, and their beliefs about public perception of social media use to disseminate information during a crisis.

**Research Design**

In order to obtain a sample reflective of the American public, this study used a stratified random sample of American adults over the age of 18. The population was divided into categories based on data from the 2010 United States Census as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2010 U.S. Population</th>
<th>308,745,538</th>
<th>100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>50.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>72.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African-American</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Native Alaskan</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino Native Pacific Islander</td>
<td>16.3% 0.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

U.S. Census Bureau Data, 2010

This demographic data was then used to screen potential respondents to the survey and randomly selected respondents from each group. In order to get a representative sample with an accuracy of +/- 5%, 400 people would need to be surveyed. For a confidence interval of +/-10%, 100 people would need to be surveyed. Assuming a response rate of 25% (Hazel, 2011), the survey was sent to enough potential respondents to get a total of 300 responses.

Public relations professionals were interviewed using a non-probability sample, meaning the interviews did not allow for generalizations to “other groups or situations, but [are] valuable for studying particular groups of people” (Rubin et al., 2005, p. 210).
In this instance, the group of people studied was a convenience sample based on “participants who happen to be available” (Rubin et al., 2005, p. 210) and was drawn from the members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) who classify themselves as specialists in Crisis Management.

The Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was an online survey created at SurveyMonkey.com. The survey can be seen in Appendix A of this paper and consisted of three sections: (1) demographic information, (2) current use of social media, and (3) evaluation of a hypothetical crisis situation. The survey was designed using both closed-ended questions and Likert scale questions to determine current perceptions of social media as well as the methods of information dissemination that are most credible during a crisis.

This survey was administered using Survey Monkey Audience, a panel of over 30 million members in the United States who take Survey Monkey surveys every month (Survey Monkey, 2012). The panel closely mirrors the U.S. population, so Survey Monkey was able to target members based on the screening criteria, email the survey instrument, and users will then self-select based on their responses to the demographic questions. If, for example, 50.8% of the respondents have been women, the survey will thank any other women who attempt to take the survey for their time and politely inform them that there have been enough responses in their particular group.

Survey Monkey sent reminder emails to targeted potential respondents to encourage response, and they also offered as incentive a $0.50 donation to the charity of the respondent’s choice along with a monthly chance to win a gift card (Survey Monkey, 2012). Additionally, Survey Monkey provided for easy data collection and analysis tools
such as filtering, cross-tabs, and chart and graph capability (Survey Monkey, 2012).

*The Interviews*

The data collected from public relations professionals specializing in crisis management drew from telephone interviews with a convenience sample of members of the Public Relations Society of America who self-identified as crisis management specialists, of which there are currently 22 (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.). The goal to attain a minimum 25% response rate, or six or more responders, was achieved, and the interview questions are attached as Appendix B.

**Strengths of this Research Design**

According to Neuman (2006), the initial goal of sampling is to “get a representative sample” (p. 219). Survey Monkey Audience allows for a sample that closely reflects the American public. Probability sampling is an effective use of time and cost in that only a small number of people need to be studied to get information representative of the entire population. Additionally, distributing a survey online is a very effective use of time and cost, as well, and provides for easy follow up emails to increase response. Electronic surveys are more anonymous and confidential than a face-to-face or phone interviews, which may result in more honest responses. Finally, an online survey allows for easier data collection and analysis than face-to-face, phone, or mail surveys, which need to be coded, entered into a computer, and analyzed (Neuman, 2006).

Telephone interviews are an efficient way to gain insight from crisis managers across the nation for a fraction of the cost as face-to-face interviews (Neuman, 2006), with many of the same benefits. Telephone interviews allow for complex questions to be asked of the responders, and follow-up questions can aid in deeper probing for beliefs and
attitudes (Rubin et al., 2005).

Ethical Considerations

One of the primary concerns for individuals using the internet is privacy, so it is essential to protect the identity and responses of survey respondents. The survey used for this study explicitly stated that it is anonymous and confidential, and that it is a voluntary study that the user can exit at any time. There is no way to know who the respondents are, and the data collected with this survey will be used for this research project only. The population sample in this survey is adults over the age of 18 and does not ask any potentially intrusive questions, therefore, and IRB review will not be necessary.
Chapter 4: THE STUDY

Data Analysis

The research in this study was designed to determine the perception of channels of dissemination of information in a crisis event by the general public and other interested stakeholders. As a stratified random sample of American adults over the age of 18, the survey was designed to get a population reflective of the American population. Of the 300 respondents to the survey, the demographic breakdown was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Population</th>
<th>300</th>
<th>100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>50.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African – American</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Native Alaskan</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino Native Pacific Islander</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the respondents, 83.5% (250) report using some form of social media, while 16.5% (50) do not use social media at all. The primary social media platform used was Facebook at 98.8% (247), followed by LinkedIn at 44.9% (112). 32% (80) use Twitter, 28.3% (71) use Google +, 5.7% (14) use MySpace, 13.4% (34) write a blog, and 21.5% (54) read blogs written by others (Figure 1). 72% (180) of social media users spend less than 5 hours a week using social media sites, 17.8% (45) use these sites between 6 – 10 hours per week, and 10.1% (25) spend over 10 hours a week visiting social media platforms.
When respondents were asked where they would prefer to get information during a crisis situation, 35.6% (107) responded that an online news source (Yahoo, MSN, AOL, etc.) would be their first choice. 21.4% (64) reported they would turn to the website of the company in crisis, yet the company blog was rated as first choice of only 1.7% (5) of survey takers. When asked to rank the credibility of various sources of information on the crisis, respondents reported that national news channels were the most believable, followed by national newspapers, local news channels, local newspapers, online news sites (Yahoo, MSN, AOL), company website, company blog, company Facebook page, and company Twitter feed (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Use of social networks reported by study respondents.
Figure 2. Respondents’ opinions of credibility of information sources.

When asked to rank the various outlets in terms of believability, the responses were similar to the credibility responses: National news channels were perceived as the most credible, followed by national newspapers, local news channels, local newspapers, online news sources, company website, company blog, company Facebook page, and company Twitter feed (Figure 3).

Finally, when polled about whether they would follow a company’s social media pages to get timely information about a crisis, 28.7% (86) said they would make efforts to follow a company’s Facebook page, 21.4% (64) would read a company’s blog, and 14.5% (44) said they would subscribe to a company’s Twitter feed (Figure 4).
Figure 3. Ranking of believability of new sources during a crisis.

Figure 4. Respondents’ willingness to follow corporate social media networks to get updates during a crisis.
The study was effectively able to answer all of the research questions posited earlier in this paper:

RQ1: Will stakeholders and the general public seek out information about a crisis situation from traditional media outlets or online via social media?

Responders indicated their preference for seeking out information regarding a crisis was to first go to an online news source (i.e. Yahoo or MSN); if they did not find the information they were seeking, they would then go to the website of the company in crisis. National and local news channels followed, then local and national newspapers, the company Facebook page, the company blog, and, finally, the company twitter feed.
RQ2: Are regular users of online social media platforms more likely to seek out information about a crisis on social media networks?

The study found that social media users were significantly more likely to use an online news source as their first resource and the company website as their second resource than the respondents who do not use social media networks. Their use of a Facebook page was also slightly higher, but their blog and Twitter use was less than those who classified themselves as non-social network users.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Source</th>
<th>Social Media Users</th>
<th>Non-Social Media Users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local News Channel</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National News Channel</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Newspaper</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Newspaper</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online News Source (Yahoo, MSN, AOL, etc.)</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Website</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Blog</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Facebook Page</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Twitter Feed</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ3: How believable are corporate social media websites compared to traditional media sources?

Company-published data ranked the least credible among information sources during a crisis (Figure 5), even among self-identified social media users (Figure 6). All respondents found the national news channels to be the most believable, followed by local news channels, national newspapers, local newspapers, and online news sources. Social media users believed local news channels most frequently, followed by national news channels, while online news sources and
national newspapers ranked equally, just ahead of local newspapers.

Figure 5. Credibility of information sources among all respondents.

Figure 6. Credibility of information sources among self-described social media users.
Discussion

Based on information gathered from interviews with crisis management professionals, it is very common to have a presence on social media platforms. In addition to having a website, most companies are now on Facebook and Twitter, and many have blogs, as well. This is a result of “permission marketing” (J. Hunt, Moore Communications, personal interview, October 27, 2012), in which a customer seeks out information about a brand rather than accepts unsolicited, direct marketing from that brand. Customers expect brands to listen to them and engage with them using social media platforms such as blogs, Facebook, and Twitter to develop relationships (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Gorry & Westbrook, 2009). By building an honest, transparent relationship with customers, a brand sets itself up to better weather a crisis should one happen (Coombs, 2006; Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Gilpin, 2010; Gorry & Westbrook, 2009; Greyser, 2007; Huang, 2008; Lyon & Cameron, 2004; Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011).

In the event of a crisis, the first two places people go for information are online news sources, followed by the company website, perhaps because of the convenience and expedience of an online search. For as much as social media sites have grown, however, this study has shown that traditional media outlets (news channels and newspapers) are still considered by the general public to be more credible than online sources when seeking out news regarding a crisis. For this reason, it is essential that public relations professionals maintain good relationships with traditional media outlets. Traditional media outlets also provide access to audiences who may not use the internet and allow for the widest reach possible.
In order to best protect a hard-won reputation, it is important for a brand to control the message during a crisis. By following McComb’s and Shaw’s Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media theory (1972), a brand can set the frame for managing the crisis by providing timely, honest, and accurate information, both to the media and directly to customers via social media. Because there is always uncertainty in a crisis, a brand will want to try to minimize the uncertainty. As Berger and Calabrese suggested in their Uncertainty Reduction Theory (1975), an organization can both develop strong relationships with stakeholders before a crisis as well as minimize uncertainty during the crisis. By developing a relationship prior to the crisis, the consumer will perceive more similarities between themselves and the brand, allowing for more predictable interaction and a reduction in uncertainty.

As discussed earlier in this paper, in 1951, Hovland and Weiss studied the influence of source credibility on communication effectiveness. Their test subjects were more likely to discount material they heard from what they considered to be “untrustworthy” sources and to place more value on statements attributed to “prestige” sources. Over time, however, they discovered that subjects remembered the message but forgot the source, thereby leading to an acceptance of the message regardless of the source. While this study did not include a follow-up survey, an interesting point for future investigation would be to do a follow-up on the crisis situation to see if responders remembered where they heard the story, if the source was credible, and whether their perception of traditional media and social media had changed.
Chapter 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of this study is that the survey was administered online, and therefore is reflective of the population who has access to a computer and the internet. Internet users tend to be younger, more educated, and higher-income than those who do not use the internet (Neuman, 2006), and, as a result, the sample may not be representative of the entire population. Additionally, due to time constraints, the survey only consisted of 300 respondents. The ideal number to achieve a confidence interval of +/- 5% would be 400 responders, but the survey group is adequate to achieve a representation of the American population.

Limitations of telephone interviews include the lack of responder anonymity introducing the possibility of interviewer bias (Neuman, 2006). The interviewer may also miss non-verbal cues due to the lack of face-to-face interaction, causing the responses to be misunderstood. A significant limitation of the interviews is the method for selecting public relations professionals to interview: Although a convenience sample is an acceptable way to gather data regarding a specific group of people, it will not be representative of an entire population of crisis management professionals.

Recommendations for Further Study

The goal of this thesis was to determine which method(s) of information dissemination during a crisis is/are the most credible, traditional media or social media. While studies show the credibility of mainstream media sources (network television news and local and national newspapers) have decreased, respondents to the thesis survey said they believed those sources to be the most believable. Survey respondents also said their
first source for finding information about a crisis would be an online search, which typically leads to a story on a mainstream news site or the company’s site itself. It would be interesting to further determine if the public is aware that most information the mainstream media publishes related to a crisis is the result of public relations efforts by the organization, and that most of the information available in the media and from the company is essentially the same. Additionally, studies could be done to establish if search engine optimization (SEO) efforts on behalf of the company are useful in driving the information sources used and the message that gets out to the public.

Finally, the 1951 Hovland & Weiss study regarding source credibility and the effectiveness of the message found that people were more likely to believe a message from a credible source, but, over time, if they remembered the message, the source no longer mattered. I would like to see a follow-up to the respondents of this survey to get their impressions about the message itself, their recall of where the message was read, and if the source affected the credibility of the message.

Conclusions

The intent of this study was to help establish best practices for using social media as a source of information dissemination during a crisis. Using a quantitative survey, this study found that stakeholders and the general public seek out information about a crisis situation first from online searches, but they find traditional media outlets (television news and newspapers) more credible. Regular users of online social media platforms were more likely to seek out information about a crisis on social media networks, but still tended to find local and national television news to be the most credible. All respondents, including regular users of social media, thought traditional media sources
were more credible than corporate social media platforms.

Based on information collected in telephone interviews with crisis communication professionals, it is widely recognized that in crisis communications, both traditional media and social media sources are essential tools for an organization to effectively, quickly, and honestly get its message to its stakeholders and the general public. By using social media, organizations can dialogue with consumers and stakeholders, thereby developing relationships that can help them weather crisis situations. There is always some level of uncertainty in crisis situations, but if the organization can get its message out quickly and through a variety of sources, it will be able to manage the crisis with a consistent message across all platforms. Social media is a valuable tool that organizations should use now to create trust among its stakeholders. If a crisis does occur, the organization will be prepared to provide timely information to established customers to mitigate damage to its reputation.
References


Hazel, M. (2011). *Organizational Leadership 501: Survey research part II*. Retrieved November 28, 2011, from https://learn.gonzaga.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tabGroup=courses&url=%2Fwebapps%2Fblackboard%2Fcontent%2FcontentWrapper.jsp%3Fcontent_id%3D_749325_1%26displayName%3DLinked%26course_id%3D_40353_1%26navItem%3Dcontent%26attachment%3Dtrue%26href%3Dhttps%3A%252F%252Fmedia2teach.org%25252F Gonzaga%25252FORGL501%25252FHazel_Lecture_2%25252Fplayer.html


Appendix A

### Demographics

This page is designed to ensure that we receive a diverse population of responders.

1. The following survey is designed to better understand the credibility of social media versus traditional media. It is completely anonymous and should take no more than 10 minutes to complete. All information provided is confidential and will only be used to gather data for this particular project. Your answers are voluntary, and you may exit the survey at any time. By clicking "Yes" below, you agree that you understand and agree to thoughtfully read and answer all the questions.

- Yes
- No

2. Are you:

- Male
- Female

3. Which category below includes your age?

- 18-20
- 21-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-69
- 60 or older

4. Are you currently:

- Married
- Divorced
- Separated
- Widowed
- Never Married

5. What was your total household income in 2011?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Range</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$0 - 24,999</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25,000 - 34,999</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$35,000 - 49,999</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 - 74,999</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75,000 - 99,999</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000 - 149,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over $150,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Are you Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Cuban-American, or some other Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino group?

- I am not Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino
- Mexican
- Mexican-American
- Chicano
- Puerto Rican
- Cuban
- Cuban-American
- Some other Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino group
- From multiple Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino groups

7. What is your ethnicity?

- White
- Black or African-American
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- From multiple races
The next pages are designed to determine if and how respondents use social media (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc.).

8. Please indicate how you feel about social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, etc.:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Neutral/No Opinion</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social media websites are fun to use.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media websites are a waste of time.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media websites are for someone like me.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media websites are a passing fad.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media websites are growing in popularity.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. Do you have an account on any social networking website (like Facebook or MySpace)?

☐ Yes
☐ No
10. Which social networks do you use?
- Facebook
- Twitter
- MySpace
- LinkedIn
- Google+
- I have my own blog.
- I read other blogs.

Other (please specify)

11. In a typical week, about how much time do you spend using social networking websites?
- Less than 1 hour
- 1 - 5 hours
- 6 - 10 hours
- More than 10 hours

12. Is your time on social media websites primarily spent:
- Posting personal information or comments
- Reading content posted by others

Other (please specify)
Hypothetical Situation

Imagine you are a daily consumer of a popular soft drink. Suddenly, several other consumers across the country become ill after consuming the beverage. There is a massive product recall, which becomes headline news. The manufacturer holds televised press conferences, publishes press releases in local and national newspapers, starts its own blog to update the public in real-time, and publishes real-time updates on its Facebook page and Twitter feed.

13. As a concerned consumer of this product, where would you go first for information about the recall and situation in general?

- Local news channel
- National news channel
- Local newspaper
- National newspaper
- Online news source (Yahoo, MSN, AOL, etc.)
- Company website
- Company blog
- Company Facebook page
- Company Twitter feed

Other (please specify) [ ]

14. If you did not find the information you were seeking, where would you go next?

- Local news channel
- National news channel
- Local newspaper
- National newspaper
- Online news source (Yahoo, MSN, AOL, etc.)
- Company website
- Company blog
- Company Facebook page
- Company Twitter feed

Other (please specify) [ ]
### Social Media Credibility

15. Now please choose the circle which best represents your view on the credibility of each of the following in providing information about this situation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Extremely believable</th>
<th>Very believable</th>
<th>Somewhat believable</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Not very believable</th>
<th>Not at all believable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local news channel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National news channel</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Local newspaper</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>National newspaper</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online news source (Yahoo, MSN, AOL, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company website</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Company blog</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Facebook page</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Twitter feed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16. Please rank the following in order of believability in providing information about the situation (please select one response per line):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Most Believable</th>
<th>Least Believable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local news channel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National news channel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local newspaper</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National newspaper</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online news source (Yahoo, MSN, AOL, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company website</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company blog</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Facebook page</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Twitter feed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17. Finally, regardless of if you currently use social media websites, would you set up social media accounts to follow the soft drink manufacturer's social media accounts in the event of this crisis to get information?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Company Blog</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Page</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter Feed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thank you!

Thank you for taking time to answer our questions today. Please click "Done" to submit your answers.
Appendix B

Crisis Manager Interview Questions

These questions are designed to determine respondents’ current usage of social media platforms, their perceptions of the effectiveness of social media use during a crisis, and their beliefs about public perception of social media use to disseminate information during a crisis.

1. As a public relations professional, how do you currently recommend the use of social media platforms to brands you represent?
2. Do the brands you represent have blogs? How do they use them?
3. What do you perceive to be benefits to a brand using social media?
4. What do you perceive are disadvantages of using social media?
5. When developing a crisis management plan for a brand, do you recommend social media platforms as a channel for distributing information in the event of a crisis? If so, which ones? If not, why not?
6. How effective do you believe social media is in disseminating information in the event of a crisis? What channels are your preferred channels?
7. In your opinion, how believable does the general public find traditional media sources? Social media channels?
Appendix C

Mentor Agreement

MENTOR AGREEMENT (To be submitted with Thesis Proposal)

You have been asked to serve as a Mentor for Kimberly Coudreau, who is completing the requirements for her/his Masters Degree in Communication and Leadership Studies. As a mentor you are asked to share ideas with this student and read the next to final draft of their thesis. You are not expected to directly supervise this student's work but rather meet with them as a "young colleague." If you are willing to serve as a Mentor for him/her, please sign this agreement.

I am willing to serve as a Mentor for Kimberly Coudreau as she/he completes her/his thesis. I realize I do not need to supervise their work in any direct fashion and will only serve as a more experienced colleague with a younger colleague. I will provide help in the way of suggestions, ideas and resources and am willing to review drafts of their written work. I also agree to read the next to last draft of the student's thesis and will sign my name on the title page of their final draft. My signature on the thesis only indicates that I have read it and is no indication of the quality of the work. I will not be asked to assign a grade or make any evaluative comments to the course convener.

Signature

Title

Email and telephone number

Date