

Optimization of spokespersons' use of voice in organizational crisis communication

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Literature

Research on crisis communication has mainly focused on the content of crisis communication, such as the impact of crisis response strategies (e.g., apologies). However, people frequently receive news about crises via audiovisual media, such as television or video messages on the Internet. Such audiovisual crisis communication not only conveys the content of a message, but also nonverbal cues (Coombs & Holladay, 2009). These nonverbal cues can comprise of visual cues (e.g., hand gestures, eye contact) and/or vocal cues (e.g., voice pitch, speech errors). Although several authors have recognized the importance of nonverbal communication in times of crisis, it remains relatively unexplored in research. There has been some research on visual cues (e.g., Arpan, 2002), but research on vocal cues is very limited (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). Therefore, a doctoral dissertation by the first author of this abstract, which will be finalized in June 2018, examined the impact of an organizational spokesperson's voice in times of crisis.

Methodology and results

In order to examine this, we used a mixed methods approach.

First, we examined the impact of specific vocal cues. We conducted a between-subject experiment (N = 227) in which voice pitch (high vs. low), speech rate (fast vs. slow), and crisis response strategy (deny vs. apology) were manipulated. The results show that a CEO's voice pitch and speech rate have an impact on post-crisis reputation, but only when using an apology. The most effective combinations of vocal cues are high pitch + fast speech rate and low pitch + slow speech rate.

Second, we examined the impact of emotions in a spokesperson's voice. In a between-subjects experiment (N = 157), we manipulated emotions in the voice of a spokesperson in times of crisis (sad vs. neutral) and the crisis stage (during vs. in the aftermath of the crisis). On the one hand, an emotional voice

leads to better attitudes towards the organization because it increases the public's empathy with the spokesperson. On the other hand, an emotional voice has a negative impact on the attitudes towards the organization because it decreases the perception of the spokesperson's dominance. However, the negative effect of an emotional voice through a lower perceived dominance only occurs during the crisis, while the positive effect of an emotional voice through increased empathy occurs both during and in the aftermath of the crisis.

Third, we examined the interplay between a spokesperson's vocal and visual cues. In two between-subjects experiments (study 1: N = 125 / study 2: N = 126), we manipulated vocal cues of deception (study 1: speech disturbances / study 2: voice pitch) and visual cues of deception (gaze aversion, hand adaptors, posture shifts). Deceptive visual cues have a negative impact on attitudes towards the organization and the public's purchase intentions because they lower the spokesperson's credibility. Vocal cues of deception also have a negative impact on attitudes and purchase intentions, but only in combination with visual cues of deception.

Finally, we studied how nonverbal cues are used in crisis communication practice. A quantitative content analysis of 160 crisis communication videos examined the use of nonverbal cues of deception in audiovisual crisis communication. Nonverbal cues of deception are mainly displayed in preventable crises (in contrast with victim crises) and mainly by individuals in crisis (in contrast with organizations). Moreover, corporate videos allow most control over nonverbal cues of deception, and especially speech errors appear hard to control. In a final study, 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews with media trainers show that media trainers generally consider nonverbal communication more important than verbal, but devote more attention to verbal aspects in their media training, because they think nonverbal cues are difficult to teach.



Implications

These studies first clearly show the importance of nonverbal cues in times of crisis, and more specifically, the importance of vocal cues, which are understudied. They show that voice pitch, speech rate, speech disturbances, and emotions in the voice all affect crisis outcomes. Moreover, vocal cues affect not only a spokesperson's credibility and dominance, and empathy towards him/her, but also the reputation, attitudes and behavior towards the organization as a whole. Second, the studies show that vocal cues can influence the effectiveness of crisis response strategies. This is an important insight for incorporating nonverbal communication in existing crisis communication

models about crisis response strategies. Third, the findings show that visual cues of deception determine whether or not vocal cues have an impact, which gives insight into the relative importance of visual and vocal cues in times of crisis. Fourth, the results show how nonverbal cues are used in practice, which bridges the gap between research and practice. Finally, these studies offer a number of practical guidelines regarding appropriate nonverbal communication in times of crisis.

Keywords

crisis communication; nonverbal communication; voice