

The impact of emotional crisis communication on stakeholders' empathy with an organization in crisis and post-crisis reputation

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Literature

Social psychological literature on interpersonal relationships stresses that people are more likely to forgive wrongdoers when they experience empathy for them (Riek & Mania, 2012). We propose that stakeholders' empathy with an organization in crisis might similarly reduce reputational damage and that stakeholders' empathy could be induced through emotional crisis communication. Social psychological research indicates that empathy can be aroused relatively automatically when observing another's emotions, as expressed verbally or nonverbally (Blair, 2005). Therefore, this study examines if stakeholders' empathic concern is aroused when the organizational spokesperson expresses his or her underlying emotions over the crisis events instead of communicating in a rational manner. Crisis communication research recently started to examine the impact of expressing emotions in organizational crisis messages and illustrates that reputational damage is indeed minimized when spokespersons communicate emotions such as, for instance, regret, shame and sadness (e.g., Claeys, Cauberghe, & Leyssen, 2013). This study aims to explain this positive impact of emotions in crisis communication through an intermediate effect on empathy.

Methodology

A single factor (message framing: sadness vs. rational) between subjects experiment was conducted to causally examine the hypothesis that stakeholders' empathy is aroused when the spokesperson verbally expresses sadness over the events compared to when the spokesperson appears rational, and that empathy subsequently minimizes reputational damage. Message framing was manipulated by means of two fictitious corporate messages in response to a fictitious crisis. The message was the same in terms of content for each scenario. Yet, the emotional message included subjective, evaluative properties and emotional loaded adjectives (e.g., "With sadness we wish to inform you of these unfortunate events). The rational message was

more direct and presented the same information in a straightforward, objective manner (e.g., "We would like to inform you of the facts")(Claeys et al., 2013). A convenience sample of 129 adults participated in the online study.

Results and conclusions

A mediation analysis by means of the PROCESS procedure in SPSS was conducted to address the hypothesis.

The total effect model indicated that message framing did not affect post-crisis reputation, $B = -.09$, $SE = .09$, $t(127) = -1.08$, $p = .28$, $99\%CI = [-.33, .14]$. Hence, post-crisis reputation was not evaluated differently when the spokesperson communicated sadness compared to when a rational frame was employed. However, an indirect effect of message framing on post-crisis reputation through empathy was established, $B = .15$, $SE = .06$, $99\%CI = [.03, .32]$. Emotional crisis communication induced more empathy than rational crisis communication. Empathy, in turn, minimized reputational damage.

A possible explanation for the non-significant overall effect of message framing on post-crisis reputation might be that spokespersons who communicate rationally are also perceived as more competent (Hareli, 2013). Competence and empathy are likely to be more or less important for reputation repair depending on the crisis stage. During the crisis stage, when the trigger event occurs and the public feels uncertain and needs to be reassured, it is highly important for reputation repair that the organization comes across as competent in handling the problem (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). As the stimuli of the current study described a situation that was still ongoing, an additional mediation analysis included both empathy and perceptions of competence as mediators in the path from message framing to post-crisis reputation.



On the one hand, the analysis indicated a positive pathway from message framing to reputation via empathy, $B = .09$, $SE = .04$, $99\%CI = [.02, .20]$. Expressing sadness instead of communicating rationally increased empathy, which reduced reputational damage. On the other hand, a negative indirect effect of message framing on reputation through perceived competence was established, $B = -.11$, $SE = .05$, $99\%CI = [-.21, -.01]$. Emotional framing resulted in lowered perceptions of competence, which translated into increased reputation damage. Further research could therefore verify if communicating emotions and the mediating role of empathy are more beneficial during the aftermath of a crisis, when stakeholders attach less importance to the organizations' competence in controlling the crisis and rather evaluate the organization itself (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014).

Implications

Organizations should not shy away from expressing emotions when responding to an organizational crisis, as emotional crisis communication arouses empathy with the organization amongst consumers. Empathy, in turn, overcomes negative organizational perceptions. However, the beneficial effect of empathy might, under certain circumstances, be overturned by other factors at play in processes of reputation repair. Nonetheless, the results suggest that crisis communication research should further elaborate on the importance of empathy for facilitating reputation repair.

Keywords

Organizational crisis communication; expressing emotions; empathy; competence; reputation