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Communication in times of crisis: hazardous tool or effective strategy?



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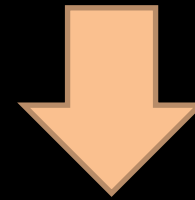
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Is communication in times of crisis important?

- **Companies must be able to respond to the emergency.**
- **Companies use various means and techniques to prepare for a potential crisis.**
- **Crisis management is 80 % communication (Libaert, 2009)**
- **Crisis communication is recognized as a corporate communications branch.**

Communication for an organization facing a crisis is a clearly defined concept whose practices are well established.

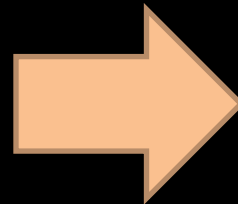


Is that really the case?

Is communication in times of crisis important?

➤ Many companies adopt crisis management strategies that end up tarnishing their image and their credibility :

- Total silence
- Evasion
- Systematic denial
- Lack of humility
- Looking for scapegoats
- Failure to provide information



Why are these strategies still being used?

About this study...

- A **qualitative exploratory** study (inductive approach).
- To analyze how corporate managers perceive **the role that communication plays or should play**, during a crisis.
- To understand how the importance (or lack of importance) placed on communication in a crisis management situation leads (or fails to lead) to **the adoption of different communications strategies**.
- To date, **16 interviews of presidents and vice-presidents** of large private Quebec (Canada) companies that had undergone a crisis involving extensive media coverage were conducted.

Conceptual framework

What is a crisis?

- The term can be defined from various standpoints (legal, medical, administrative, economic...).
- From an **organizational and communication standpoint:**
 - A disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumptions, its subjective sense of self, its **existential core** (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992).
 - It is a moment, a period, during which an organization can no longer adapt to its environment and achieve its objectives by relying on routines (Combalbert & Delbecque, 2012).

Conceptual framework

What is a crisis?

- A situation in which multiple organizations dealing with **critical issues, intense external pressures and severe internal tensions** find themselves catapulted into the spotlight in the long term, and brutally confronting one another **within a context of “live” mass communication**, where they are guaranteed to make the headlines on radio and television and in the print media over an extended period of time (Lagadec, 1994).
- Within the framework of this research, a crisis is, at the very least:
 - An unexpected public event that can have negative, often disastrous consequences for the organization and its stakeholders.

Conceptual framework

A process-based approach to crisis management

- A crisis can be stopped before it occurs.
- Companies should react more positively to a crisis if they are able to anticipate this type of event.

A focus on the communication aspect of crisis management

- Most common crisis management issue pertaining to information and media coverage:
 - The importance of planning crisis management
 - Transparency
 - Media relation
 - The speed at which information spreads
 - The concept of urgency
 - The creation of a crisis unit

Main results

Communication: A strategic tool for crisis management, but not a priority.

- Communication is considered important and viewed as something that must be planned... But not as important as aspects related to logistics or economics.

“It’s important to communicate, but let’s be honest. Sometimes, other things come first. For example, if you’re dealing with a hazardous situation where the factory boiler is about to explode, you have to set up a security perimeter before you can even think about communicating”.

Developing a communication policy and related strategies is important. But implementing good communication practices once the crisis erupts is not easy.

Main results

The paradox of transparency

- If the public and the media sense that the information they receive from the company's official spokespeople isn't credible, they'll look for the information they need elsewhere.
- Honesty is not always the best policy. Although seen as commendable, transparency is not always possible or recommended.

“Sometimes, we tell the whole truth, but not necessarily to the whole world. We tell journalists and then explain why they can't disclose everything to the public.”

Main results

Media management: challenges and issues

Traditional media

- Respondents are ambivalent about their relations with journalists from traditional media (allies and “muckrakers”).
- Greatest challenge: provide honest and accurate answers to their questions as quickly as possible.

“Journalists can be our allies, but they expect a lot. We know they have a job to do, but they have to respects ours as well.”

- Most respondents specify that media make it possible to relay correct information to stakeholders and rapidly reach a large number of people (which is very useful!)

Main results

Traditional media

- Working in conjunction with journalists prevents from relaying confusing information.
- A small number of interviewees claim that, although journalists play a vital role in communicating more accurate and credible information, they make crises more difficult to manage.

“There’s a tremendous risk of losing control of the information. Journalists don’t always realize that we’re dealing with a huge number of requests”.

- Most interviewees believe that the traditional media should not be overlooked in favor of social media.

Main results

Social media

- A company with good social media presence will be in a better position to handle a crisis from an online perspective.
- Several interviewees mention the possibility of a company losing control of a situation when it comes to using social media.
- Many of them view social media as a double-edged sword.

“Our intention was to correct the situation and remind people that [incident X] had not resulted in the disastrous consequences that we have dreaded. But we took the wrong approach and things got out of hand on social media. We were seen as heartless, when we were just trying to take responsibility and send the message that this type of thing would never happen again. Unfortunately, it came out all wrong.”

Main results

Centralizing communication

- During a crisis, corporate communications should be more centralized than ever.

“I felt like I was losing control of the situation, with everything that was being said here and there. [...] At one point, we had to appoint a single spokesperson and tell the employees not to answer any more questions from journalists.”

- The importance of setting up a crisis unit.
- Even managers who work for companies whose organizational culture tends toward decentralized communication agree that, during a crisis, it is necessary to “tighten everything up and make sure that information is coming from a single source”.

Discussion

- Crisis communication is perceived as an essential element that should not be ignored or improvised.
- When a crisis occurs, communication is seen as both a management tool and a weapon!
- Opinions are often contradictory:
 - Although they want to plan for it, they dread it.
 - Although they are in favor of transparency, they adopt communication policy that are both open and closed.
 - They want to embrace social media, but they don't always know how to handle it.
 - They maintain that journalists in the traditional media can be allies... but then can sometimes be disruptive.

Discussion

- But they all agree on one thing: the need for centralized communication during a crisis.
- In scientific literature, centralized approach is generally not the preferred model under “normal” circumstances.
- But, during a crisis, companies tend to centralize power in the hands of senior management in order to have better control over decision making (Mintzberg, 1982).
- However, it is important to avoid locking yourself up in an ivory tower and refusing to communicate!

Conclusion

- Several future avenues of research must be considered in order to be able to develop a crisis management communication model that takes manager's perceptions of crisis communication into account.
- Improving or developing a crisis management communication model would not only fill a void from a theoretical standpoint. It would help maximize the efforts of all player required to manage or communicate in a crisis and minimize the negative impact on stakeholders.