
IMAGE RESTORATION: CASE STUDY OF PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY'S RESPONSE TO THE SANDUSKY SCANDAL

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Abstract

Duke University's Lacrosse scandal suggests immunity from crisis does not exist within collegiate sport. One of the most recent high profile collegiate athletic scandals involves the Jerry Sandusky sexual assault case at Penn State University. The impact on the university and community was both immediate and long term. Penn State University, a large and prestigious institution, had to address the situation, honor and support the victims and move the university forward. The university had to manage the crisis while making sure justice and respect for all the victims remained the priority. The love for the football program and those directly involved, such as legendary coach Joe Paterno, made this case especially difficult. This is a situation where it will take years to repair the image of the football program and the university, and for some it may never recover. This case study examines the university's response to events surrounding the crisis. Specifically, what image repair strategies did the Pennsylvania State University Board of Trustees and President Rodney Erickson use in responding to the crisis involving the Sandusky scandal facing the Penn State football team?

BACKGROUND

In developing his theory of image restoration strategies Benoit (1995) relied on the works of others who examined accounts (Scott & Lyman, 1968) and apologia (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Benoit's (1995) theory of image restoration strategies incorporated two underlying assumptions. The first, communication is a goal driven activity and secondly orators seek reputation maintenance. Hence, when an individual perceives their reputation is jeopardized they will communicate to restore their reputation. Benoit's theory of image restoration strategy incorporated the aforementioned apologia and accounts strategies into five overarching categories including denial, evading responsibility, reducing

offensiveness, correction actions, and mortification. Denial takes two forms, simple denial and blame shifting. Evasion of responsibility includes stances such as provocation, defeasibility, accident, or claims of good intention. Reducing offensiveness involves bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacks of the accuser, and compensation. Corrective action describes steps taken to restore things back to before the negative action occurred. Mortification involves statements indicating remorse, acceptance of responsibility and requests for forgiveness. Coombs (2012) consolidated existing theory into a group of crisis response postures including denial, diminishment, rebuilding and bolstering postures.

METHODOLOGY

Media coverage rendered a complete examination of all crisis related documents unrealistic. Initial data collection generated hundreds of university documents and media reports. Using these documents a brief timeline of events developed. The research team narrowed their examination to the communication from the highest levels of administration at the university. Documents selected for analysis included responses from the Board of Trustees and interim President Rodney Erickson. Based on the literature review of Benoit (1995) and Coombs (2012) image repair theory (IRT) and relevant sport cases we carefully analyzed and coded the selected documents for strategies used by the Pennsylvania State administration. A twofold qualitative content analysis occurred. First researchers examined selected documents individually identifying response strategies employed by the university. Then the team collectively charted the strategies and recoded our data until a consensus occurred. This type of case analysis is an appropriate approach to examine the use of image restoration techniques during a crisis (Meng & Po-Lin, 2013).

RESULTS

Analysis reveals Erickson's use of corrective action and bolstering (Benoit, 1995). A deeper understanding of Erickson's bolstering communication occurs when viewing his communication through the lens of Coombs' (2012) bolstering postures of reminding, ingratiation, and victimage. Additionally, corrective action statements further expressed a desire to understand the causes of the scandal and commitment to prevention of future events. Later in the scandal at an Alumnus meeting Erickson employed a scapegoating strategy. Communication from the Board of Trustee reveals an image restoration strategy consistent with President Erickson's pattern of expressions of concern for the victim, corrective action, seeking to understand and prevent further incidents, bolstering, using victimage, ingratiation and reminding. At times, Trustees also attempted evasion of reasonability by using defeasibility or lack of understanding of all details stemming from withheld information

(Benoit, 1995). Overall, university officials used multiple image restoration postures.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this case study indicate the use of a thoughtful and coordinated response when faced with an organizational crisis. Joined with other crisis communication research, this study enhances the understanding of public relations practitioners by providing additional examples of crisis communication management in response to organization crisis situations. By examining another's crisis responses practitioners may develop a better understandings of crisis management practices.

References

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