

Crisis Communication – Why Sorry is the hardest word? Pati Mamiashvili

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Abstract: Crisis communications, presumably, have existed since the beginning of time, however, studying the subject and identifying it in practice (Fearn-Banks, 2007.1) started in the 80s of the last century, which is mainly caused by social with the increasing influence of the media in the direction of crisis management. Obviously, crises existed long before the Internet and some modern Geopolitical conflict is also a result of past mistakes and unresolved crises (Zamour & Gorpe, 2017). That's why in crisis communication the key issue is to identify and analyze cultural norms, which include not only the traditions, but also the art and peculiarities of the apology. In the process of analyzing the concept of apology, a question arises - why apology is so lacking in the process of solving crises? First of all, I would like to express my respect to all the researchers who perceived the challenge of apology in their scientific work, as **sorry seems to be the hardest words in crisis communication**. I have to admit, it doesn't matter which famous hit we like the version (although Blue Featuring Elton John is always on my playlist version), the main thing is that we are all well aware of how difficult it is to say sorry, not during a song, but during a crisis. Thus, the article discusses what what does the concept of apology mean and what is the importance of multicultural factors in crisis communication.

Keywords: Apology, Crisis Communication, Social Media, Culture, Resilience

1. Introduction

Naturally, "Crisis Communication" is related to the development of technology, but it is also clear that crises existed long before the Internet. Basic and modern concepts related to crisis management, especially in the field of communication, bear some resemblance to ancient civilizations. In this regard, the experience of ancient Greece and Rome is particularly important, as both empires focused on creating spaces for dialogue, debate and direct communication with society. As a result of the analysis of ancient civilizations and historical facts, the opinion that some geopolitical crises may be the result of insurmountable crises in the past appears quite logically (Zamour. 2017). When we talk about multicultural factors, we must remember that cultures are characterized not only by different traditions, religion or environment, but also by the appropriate terminology and gestures to express prayers and concerns.

An apology is useful because it helps to end the media coverage by closing the story of the crisis and can start the process of rebuilding the reputation (Coombs, 2019. 165). But it is also clear that "companies simply don't like to apologize because they see it as a de facto admission of guilt (Zaremba, 2015.125). As Kathleen Fearn-Banks points out, never mess up a sincere apology with an excuse/reason (Never Mess Up a Sincere Apology With an Excuse, because An excuse passes blame to others; an apology does not (Fearn-Banks, 2007, 34).

Apology in crisis communication focuses on the response strategies of individuals and organizations when their actions "violate universal societal values" (Sellnow&Seeger, 2021. 215). Sellnow and Seeger, based on Hearit's opinion, state that apologia is different from a simple apology: Apologia is of Greek origin and means "speech in defense", while apology expresses regret and forgiveness for one's actions.

Apology as a genre is included in the discipline of communication as a distinct form of public address. Apology, however, is the first crisis communication theory that outlines the challenges and rhetorical options for speakers in crisis situations (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021. 218). Thus, it is important to note who is apologizing, who is the spokesperson, and how authorized he or she is to speak on behalf of the organization.

2. Literature review

The public may have a general idea of what crisis communication means, but misconceptions, influenced by assumptions and myths, can "derail" and render existing communication strategies ineffective. Dr. Alan Jay Zaremba in **Crisis Communication Theory and Practice** presents myths related to crisis communication deficits, successful and unsuccessful examples of crisis communication, and discusses apology as an important factor in crisis communication (Zaremba, 2015). Basic and modern concepts related to crisis management, especially in the field of communication, bear some resemblance to ancient civilizations. In the work **Crisis management: a historical and conceptual approach for a better understanding of today's crises** (Khaled Zamour and Tevhide Serra Gorpe) by observing the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, the opinion is expressed that many geopolitical crises are the result of old causes (Zamour & Gorpe., 2017) as different Ethnic groups, as well as organizations, have different cultures, therefore, organizational communication should take into account the religious-ethnic values and customs of employees. In the article **Multicultural Environments and Their Challenges to Crisis Communication** (Maria de Fatima Oliveira) it is described that there is a certain relationship between organizational culture and organizational communication, which affects crisis communication. The results of the research cited in the paper prove that in the process of crisis communication, PR and marketing specialists are sometimes not able to fully deal with multicultural challenges (Oliveira, 2013). There are crises that can start in a social network and without an apology strategy and quick response, turn into a global crisis. What is the concept of resilience in crisis communication, what does paracrisis mean, and what does a sincere apology mean on the example of Mortin's advertisement, this is discussed in the guide **Ongoing Crisis Communication – Planning, Managing, and Responding** (W. Timothy Coombs). The paper also discusses the challenges of crisis management in pre-crisis, immediate crisis and post-crisis, as well as the role of social media in crisis communication on crisis management (Coombs, 2019). Against the background of the strong influence of social media in crisis communication, new theories are created and existing theories are modernized in order to clarify the role of social media in crisis communication, focusing on communication variables that are an integral part of new media. **Theorizing Crisis Communication** (Timothy L. Sellnow and Matthew W. Seeger). The handbook reviews adaptive and emerging models of social media and crisis communication, and also describes theories of apology and other theories that also include components of apology, including chaos theory and image restoration theories (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). Communication experts claim that crises in corporate life are no longer a matter of "if" but "when". Corporations must be prepared to respond to a crisis that can easily damage the organization's image, identity, and reputation. The book **Social Media and Crisis Communication: Theories and Best Practices** (Tegan Ford) analyzes the theoretical framework, causes of social media influence, threats and historical perspective, where media is one of the main components in crisis communication (Ford, 2011). **Crisis Communications - A Casebook Approach** (Kathleen Fearn-Banks) Third Edition, like previous editions, deals with how organizations, companies and individuals deal with the communication aspects of crisis management. how to communicate with the news media, employees and customers, how to choose words for messages and what is the correct and appropriate method of delivering the message for different cultures and societies (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Apology as a strategic approach to crisis communication is related to cultural norms. The article **Apology as Crisis Communication Strategy-Importance of Cultural Context**

(Zelimir Kesetovic, Ivan Toth, Nedzad Korajlic) discusses the resilience and resilience of the Japanese people during crises and natural disasters. The article also discusses the following issues: Crisis Situations in Cultural Context, Culture and Crisis Communication, Apology as Crisis Communication Strategy, Apology in the Cultural Context (Kesetovic, Toth, & Korajlic, 2014). Apologies are an image recovery strategy and tactic when reputation is threatened. The paper **Sorry is not Enough: Apology as a crisis management tactic** (Amiso M. George) explains that although the ritual of sometimes apologizing is an expected social norm, it can make the situation worse. Another important element is the cultural factor. An apology that does not conform to cultural norms may not be received positively, thus worsening the crisis situation (George, 2020). Apology has a strategic purpose in crisis communication, but the content and ethical norms of communication are also important. What is discussed in the article **The Apology of a Sports Icon: Crisis Communication and Apologetic Ethics** (Finn Frandsen & Winni Johansen Hermes) (Frandsen & Hermes, 2007). It should be noted that the social media crisis, as in the case of Facebook, is not only a threat of financial and reputational damage. The global crisis is very often considered by the stakeholders in a legal perspective, so the apology depends on the real danger of reducing the credibility of the customer, and often, the apology is the result of the pressure of the customer and their interests. In this sense, to prepare the article, I used important assessments from two works - **Effect of penitence on social media trust and privacy concerns: The case of Facebook** (Emmanuel W. Ayaburi & Daniel N. Treku, 2020); **Facebook Scandal Raises Data Privacy Concerns** (Hilary Tuttle, 2018).

3. Methodology

Due to the unpredictable nature of crises, especially in light of the growing influence of social media, managing communication processes creates certain difficulties. Accordingly, the task of crisis communication researchers from the beginning was to find, evaluate and synthesize all knowledge about crisis communication (Coombs, 2014, 2), which is possible by studying and analyzing specific cases.

Crises - significant socio-political, economic and environmental threats are likely to cause changes faster than any other single phenomenon (Sellnow&Seeger, 2013.1), because crises are characterized by negative consequences or the potential for negative consequences, stress, emotional damage, traumatic exposure (Freberg, 2011. 8). However, it is also clear that crisis can give rise to change for the better, if the lessons of crisis cases are learned correctly.

In order to properly analyze the lessons learned from the crisis, a case study is used in crisis communication. In the current article, using this method, I will discuss cases related to the strategies and importance of apology in crisis communication. These include the **Facebook scandal** and the **Motrin Mom** ad campaign crisis.

In the final part of the paper, evaluations from my own scientific articles are used: **Crisis Communication and social media challenges**, Bulletin of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences MOAMBE, 2023a; **Crisis Communication and Social Media - How to Prepare for Crises**, International Scientific Journal Theoretical & Applied Science, 2023b.

4. Discussion

As observations show, the same communication strategy is not suitable for different organizations and organizational cultures. Considering multicultural values in crisis communication is a dilemma for professional PR and marketing specialists, according to the research results, PR specialists do not always use crisis strategies adapted to different cultures, although they realize that it is necessary to analyze cultural competence and crisis management frameworks and in-depth understanding of crises. In the digital world, although geographical boundaries have been removed due to the influence of social media, globalization has not been able to ignore cultural diversity. Large corporations and small

organizations can manage crises virtually, from one pole of the earth to the other, but as Zaremba explains: the creation and instigation of crises is influenced by different cultural norms, race, religion, politics and history; And ethnocentrism does not bring success in intercultural dialogue (Zaremba, 2015.100). in order to meet the expectations of audiences with different cultures. (Oliveira, 2013).

Failure of companies to consider different cultural characteristics or language barriers often creates awkward situations and leads to crisis. For example, General Motors became the object of criticism and ridicule when it tried to bring the NOVA to the Mexican market. No Va means does not go in Spanish, so it is unlikely that a car that "does not go" would be successfully sold (ibid).

But there are cases when disregarding cultural norms creates not only misunderstandings, but also causes political-economic changes. In crisis communication, the famous 1945 case of **Mokusatsu: One Word, Two Lessons** is often used to illustrate this during World War II. The Japanese word mokusatsu translates as "ignore" and "to refrain from comment". The reason for the misunderstanding was the fact that Japanese Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki's response to reporters that he was "refraining" from commenting on the Potsdam Declaration topic was translated as "ignorance." Misunderstanding the context has led to political misunderstandings, determined war strategy, and is still the subject of judgment and debate in scholarly circles.

In crisis communication, intercultural dialogue is an important factor because it determines the instructions for action and behavior in crisis situations. Thus, it is important to understand how resistant a particular culture is to crises. The best example in this regard is the action of the Japanese people during the disaster caused by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. The article Apology as Crisis Communication Strategy-Importance of Cultural Context rightly describes the strength, calmness and orderliness of Japanese people while standing in line for food and water, as they follow the motto "calm and together" (Kesetovic, Toth & Korajlic, 2014. 171).

Thus, it is important to increase resilience to crises in different cultures. That is why resilience is becoming an increasingly popular concept in crisis communication. It is a skill that enables us to maintain stability in the face of risk and danger. An effective way to achieve resilience is to train staff and managers through training, which involves the ability to deal with crises, improve competencies and increase creativity (Coombs, 2019. 85).

When we talk about communication as a relationship between sender and receiver of a message, we must consider not only cultural values and values, but also that apologetic strategies must be oriented to the cultural norms of the audience.

Apology is not a universal concept and its expression varies in different cultures and environments. That is why the crisis communicator must create messages for stakeholders so that not only the text, but also the non-verbal elements of communication and the general context of the messages conform to cultural norms (Kesetovic, Toth & Korajlic, 2014. 177). Moreover, an apology that does not match the cultural patterns to whom the message is directed may threaten reconciliation, increase resentment, and complicate crisis resolution (Amiso M. George, 2020).

Content of Communication - Apologies used in crisis communication must also conform to ethical standards. Frandsen and Johansen, based on Hearit's view, describe the characteristics that an ethical apology should include: unequivocally admit wrongdoing, take full responsibility; to express regret; identify affected stakeholders; ask for forgiveness; seek reconciliation with injured stakeholders; to fully disclose information related to the crime; provide an explanation that meets the legitimate expectations of interested parties; Offer appropriate corrective action and compensation (Frandsen & ohansen, 2007).

From this point of view, using the case study method, let's consider cases that include the components of an apology:

1. Social media, at the expense of its interactivity, allows for the rapid dissemination of information and especially the sharing of apologies, but what happens when social media giants have to apologize and use their own online space to do so?

Case study - Facebook crisis

The crisis of the influential player of digital media - Facebook became known after it was revealed that the UK-based company *Cambridge Analytica* was accused of disclosing the personal information of millions of Facebook users for political purposes (Netgazeti, 2018), influential publications, including According to a journalistic investigation by the *New York Times*, *Channel 4* and *The Guardian*, the accounts of 50 million Facebook users were used for electoral purposes by *Cambridge Analytica*, a company linked to the Donald Trump election campaign (Tabula, 2018a).

As a result of the personal data scandal, facebook shares fell by 7%, at the end of March 2018, Facebook lost more than 60 billion dollars in market capitalization (Tuttle, 2018), regulators in the United States and Europe quickly demanded answers to the company's handling of user personal data A federal investigation was launched into why Zuckerberg was forced to testify to Congress.

At the same time, the consulting company *Cambridge Analytica* decided to close. The company cited the loss of customers and suppliers due to negative media coverage as the reason for the closure, and also stated that their actions were legally sound and a perfectly acceptable practice in the online advertising business, politically and commercially (Tabula. 2018b).

In fact, the Facebook privacy crisis started not in 2018, but in 2014, when approximately 270,000 users used Facebook's Application Programming Interface (API) to take a PERSONALITY TEST FOR ACADEMIC RESEARCH PURPOSES. The developer of the API, Alexander Kogan, was also allowed to collect information about friends of Facebook users as well (the feature was closed in 2015). Eventually, Kogan handed over 87 million user data to the political consultancy *Cambridge Analytica*. And as *Cambridge Analytica* whistleblower Christopher Wiley claimed, the company used the data to help Donald Trump's campaign predict and influence voters in the 2016 presidential election (Tuttle, 2018). The discussion about apologies is an active topic not only for crisis communicators, but also for PR specialists and blogs. For example, Stuart Bruce (PR Adviser|, published the post **How to say sorry. What is a good apology?** (April 12, 2018) in an interview with France 24's *People and Profit with Stephen Carroll* about the art of apologizing.

According to his assessment, a "good apology" has nine main elements: Genuine, Acknowledge fault - Admit responsibility, Express regret, "From the top - the genuine apology must come from the top to prove you really mean it"; Heart, not script, Fast, Offer of repair and Multiple channels - that is, using multiple channels so that more people hear about the apology.

From this point of view, Stuart Bruce believes that "Facebook initially failed on many of these elements" because its apology was delayed (information related to Cambridge Analytica appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* on March 17, and (Zuckerberg didn't post his announcement on Facebook until March 21). Zuckerberg noted "I started Facebook, and at the end of the day I'm responsible for what happens on our platform.", but he didn't say sorry.

That same day, in a televised interview with CNN, Zuckerberg said, "I'm sorry that this happened," although as Bruce describes it, it was a "classic fake apology," and he considers Zuckerberg's words, which he delivered to US senators on April 10, to be the real apology: We didn't take a broad enough view of our responsibility, and that was a big mistake. And it was my mistake. And I'm sorry. I started Facebook, I run it, and I'm responsible for what happens here. ", which included recognition and responsibility.

Of course, in the case of Facebook, the apology came with a number of responsibilities, including political, legal and financial ones. But here comes an important issue: In 2014, users' personal information was collected with their consent, voluntarily, not coercively, because APIs were

sanctioned ways to access company databases. Therefore, accusing Facebook of violating personal data disclosure is not justified. Obviously, Facebook also knew that a third party - Cambridge Analytica was collecting user data, but here is a controversial issue: did Facebook know that the data would be used for electoral purposes (Tuttle, 2018).

It seems that the main reason for Zuckerberg's famous apology is not so much legal or political issues, but another real threat - a decrease in user trust. As Ayaburi & Treku point out, "it was the growing concern of users that led Facebook's CEO to testify before the US Congress", in addition, in order to prevent users from closing their accounts, on March 25, 2018, Facebook placed advertisements in British and American news organizations, where he apologized to his users. However, despite the apology, a survey conducted in major markets, including the US and Germany, showed that trust in Facebook has declined precisely because of privacy violations (Ayaburi & Treku, 2020).

2. There are social media crises that individual posts on the company's social networks can turn into a reputation crisis. Despite its great impact on social processes, social media crisis is still a very vague concept (Coombs, 2014.7). The term paracrisis, coined by Coombs and Holladay in 2012, refers to "the threat of a publicly visible crisis that accuses an organization of irresponsible or unethical behavior." According to Coombs, the "offensive" Motrin ad is a paracrisis (Coombs, 2019).

Case study – Motrin Mom

In 2008, a **Motrin Mom** print and online video advertisement was created that described how mothers suffer back pain from using baby slings. The ad was offensive to many mothers. Twitter in particular has become a convenient online platform for angry moms to attack Motrin, and a nine-minute video was created on YouTube that compiled comments and complaints posted on Twitter. On the third day after the ad appeared, McNeil Consumer Healthcare, the maker of Motrin, removed the ad from the Internet and posted a lengthy apology, effectively defusing the crisis.

This topic is actively discussed by blogs. For example, according to a post on kakiewrites, brands should monitor social media opinions and listen to consumers because using social media allows brands to respond quickly and "build bridges with the public" (kakiewrites.wordpress.com.2009). Moreover, this case showed how important it is to make a timely and savvy apology in a crisis (crisiscomm.wordpress.com. 2009).

Consider an intercession strategy that is remarkable not only because it involved a sincere confession, but also because the speaker was chosen correctly. The lengthy thank you letter was signed by Kathy Widmer, Vice President of Marketing McNeil Consumer Healthcare, who, as a mother of three daughters, also had an emotional connection to the ad's recipients - other mothers. "On behalf of McNeil Consumer Healthcare and all of us who work on the Motrin brand, please accept our sincere apologies," the letter said, explaining that the real reason for the ad was not to offend mothers, but to show compassion and appreciation for all the What parents do for their babies. The company apologized to its audience for this disappointment and promised to "take swift action on this ad" in light of the feedback.

5. Conclusion:

Apology is a key direction of crisis communication, and apology is a very relevant tool, the effectiveness of which depends on the cultural context, the time factor and the environment where it is communicated. The existing theories and strategies of crisis communication are evolving along with technological progress, which poses completely new challenges for companies and users of social networks (mamiashvili, 2023b). Thus, for the development of crisis communication as a relatively new educational discipline, it is important to study specific cases using the Case Study method.

It is also clear that the so-called crisis communication offered by digital marketers. Universal strategies are not suitable for different companies, because in such policy documents, the specific

characteristics of a specific country/organization are not taken into account, the analysis of which should evaluate social media threats, existing risks (Mamiashvili, 2023a) and multicultural features.

When we talk about communication as a relationship between a sender of information and a receiver, we must remember cultural values and values.

In this sense, it is especially important to have awareness and knowledge about cultural differences, which will contribute to the effectiveness of crisis communication and crisis resolution.

Given that different cultures react to crisis in different ways, the theory of resilience is considered a promising model in crisis communication, which provides training for crisis managers and employees to learn and develop skills to deal with crisis strategies.

As the case study has shown, apologies are strategically important for crisis communication. A belated apology, as in the case of Facebook, may be due to political, legal or economic preconditions, and financial or reputational damage may also become inevitable, although a sincere and timely apology can slow down and mitigate the crisis.

And finally, why sorry is the hardest word in crisis communication? Apologizing means accepting responsibility, which is likely to have legal, political or economic consequences and reputational damage. But it is also clear that sorry is not such a difficult word if the company has to make a choice to maintain the trust of the customer.

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