

# The theories of image repair and corporate apologia in crisis management

[Business](#), [Management](#)



As such, a genre of discourse is needed to help individuals and organisations respond to charges of wrongdoing. Therefore, the study of image and image restoration is worthwhile because it provides insight into the strategies that organisations use in order to restore their tarnished image.

An extensive body of knowledge concerned with crisis communication has developed, and several theoretical approaches for responding to organisational crises exist in past and present literature. Today, the most prominent theories within crisis management are Image Repair Theory and Corporate Apologia. This review of theory will begin with investigating the literature around the overall practice of crisis management and then examine the theories of image repair and corporate apologia.

### **Crisis Management**

Seeger et al. (2003) define a crisis as “ an unexpected event involving either an organisation or particular individuals within it, whose significant negative impact can harm and cause loss to the overall organisation”. As such, to manage the communications process around a crisis, organisations must look at its crisis management approach in order to best repair its image.

Crisis management is an area that communication scholars have been studying heavily since the 1970s. Coombs (2007) defines crisis management as “ a process designed to prevent or lessen the damage a crisis can inflict on an organisation and its stakeholders”. To put this into context, Massey and Larsen (2006) examined the crisis response efforts of the Metrolink Commuter Rail System (Metrolink) after two of their trains collided in April 2002. They argue that it is essential for all organisations to have an

elaborately designed crisis management and image restoration team to carry out the correct actions during the crisis management process.

Corporate scandals require a huge deal of thought in relation to crisis management. Kuhn and Ashcroft argue that “ corporate scandals generate public scrutiny of organisational communication practices, invoke discourses about systemic change, and problematise firms’ legitimacy as communication agents”. Obtaining a negative reputation can have detrimental effects on a corporation’s market position, stock value, sales and its brand. It can cause shareholders and stakeholders to lose trust in the company and can damage employee morale, resulting in reduced production, poor communication and loss of commitment and vision. Therefore, when faced with a crisis, it is crucial that corporations initiate appropriate crisis management strategies to minimise such negative impacts and to protect their reputation. Consequently, crisis management and image restoration, in particular, are of huge importance for organisations.

### **Image Repair**

In order to set the context of image repair, it is meaningful to understand the definition of image. Benoit (1995) defines “ image” as the perception of a communicative entity shared by an audience. It is evident that crisis communication is a broader category in which image restoration strategies fall in to, as Benoit’s Image Repair Theory looks at a particular aspect of crisis management. Image restoration is considered as a crisis communication approach in recovering an organisation’s image. Benoit’s theory of image restoration discourse (1995) explained that “ when [a

person's or organisation's] image is threatened, it is often considered essential to take action to repair that image" As such, the field of crisis communication and image repair in particular, has experienced increased clarification of concepts and expansion of theoretical understanding. Nekmat, Gower, and Ye (2014) reviewed studies on image management which covered a ten-year period from 1991 to 2011 and found that studies on image repair began to increase between 2008 and 2009. However, Benoit's theory (1995) built on the initial works of Goffman (1959) on sociology of impression management, Scott and Lyman's (1968) accounts, and Ware and Linkugel's (1973) theory of apologia, which identified four main strategies that speakers use to respond to accusations. These strategies are divided into reformatory strategies, denial and bolstering, neither of which changes the audience's definition of the situation; and transformative strategies, differentiation and transcendence, which attempt to redefine the audience's meaning of the situation.

Benoit (1995) defines image restoration theory as " strategies used to mitigate image damage following a threat to a reputation of an organisation or an individual" and breaks his image restoration strategies into five broad categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Benoit then adapted the approaches and subdivided them into a diverse set of tactics. For instance, denial may involve simple denial or shifting the blame. Additionally, evading responsibility has four tactics that include responding to provocation, defeasibility as well as making excuses based on accidents and then

justifying the action based on a motive of good intention. Reducing offensiveness has six tactical components such as bolstering, minimisation of the offence, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and offering compensation. This shows a clear depth in theory and how easily this can be adapted to real-life events.

Even though the theory is labelled as image restoration, the terminology of the theory has been altered in later studies. Benoit (2000) acknowledges that the 'restoration' of an image to a pre-crisis state might not be possible – or even desirable – to an organisation, where the 'repair' of one's image is a more fitting definition.

Both the Image Repair Theory and Theory of Apologia operate under the basic premise that, when accused of wrongdoing, an individual or organisation will act to repair their image. However, given that no two events are the same, neither of approaches has agreed on any sort of unified method of analysis with which to examine them.

Furthermore, Burns and Bruner (2000) suggest that the term "image" is subject to potential misinterpretation as it may suggest a static or homogenous representation of an organisation: "A corporation's image is not fixed. We seek to avoid essentialism in describing the target." They also argue that in defending corporate reputations, new identities are formed rather than a restoration of a prior image. Benoit (2000) responds by stating that the focus of his theory is not a regression of identity but rather the

constant creation of identity for a multiple number of audiences and how they interact and react to public corporate discourse.

Since Benoit's work, scholars have attempted to clarify the difference between reputation and image – concepts that were used interchangeably in early studies. In fact, Benoit's initial theory does not outline the difference between the concepts. However, Stuart (1999) argues that organisational image is less stable and is more likely to change.

Other scholars have expanded the understanding of image repair strategic options. Smithson and Venette (2013), for instance, discovered the 'stonewalling' strategy while studying British Petroleum's (BP) image repair. This involves redirecting audience attention to less significant matters instead of addressing key issues. Sanderson (2008) identified 'victimisation' when studying Roger Clemens' image response to an accusation of using performance enhancement drugs. Victimisation refers to the accused's framing of self as a victim. As such, the discovery of these additional image repair strategies has made Benoit's theory richer and supported his ideas further.

Since its inception, several scholars have tested various aspects of Benoit's theory with regard to real-life case studies and the results have been surprisingly mixed. For example, Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) explored the image repair process following reports of sexual assaults at the Air Force Academy in 2002. They concluded that bolstering was the most effective strategy for image repair but found, unexpectedly, that apologising, or

mortification was the least effective. This is in direct contrast to the findings of Sheldon and Sallot (2009) who conducted an experiment testing the effects of crisis communication strategy and performance history after a politician's faux pas. They found mortification (apology) to be significantly effective along with certain cases of bolstering and discovered corrective action to be least effective. These apparent conflicting results indicate that the effectiveness of image repair is possibly associated with a mediating factor that may be the context, perceived intention of the agent, and the agent's prior credibility. Therefore, several scholars illustrate that image repair is more effective when multiple strategies are used.

Over time, scholars have also utilised case studies with a particular focus on both sports organisations and individual athletes in order to clarify Image Repair Theory's validity as a crisis communications strategy. These case studies include analysis on the image repair strategies adopted by Michael Phelps, Duke University's Lacrosse Team and Lance Armstrong, all of which have a focus on Image Repair Theory, further clarifying its relevance today.

### **Corporate Apologia**

Since the 1960s, when the philosophical assumptions of image repair focused mainly on public officials, scholars have extended the focus on the role of apologetic rhetoric in crisis communication within corporations and, to a lesser extent, in popular culture figures such as sports and media celebrities.

Corporate Apologia is defined as “ how a corporation, in the midst of a public relations crisis, can respond to criticism, and defend its image, while dealing

with the problem of guilt". It concentrates on apologising for wrongdoing and features primarily defensive communication strategies for such apologies.

However, it should be noted that in Hearit's perspective, an apology represents " a response to criticism that seeks to present a compelling competing account of organisational accusations". Hearit (2006) outlines five distinct stances that an organisation may use to defend its actions; denial, differentiation, counter-attack, apology and legal.

It is important to understand that when Apologia is used by an organisation, it does not necessarily mean that an organisation is apologising for its actions in a crisis by accepting full responsibility. The organisation's effort may deny, explain, or apologise for the action through communication discourse. Corporate apologia has been deployed for decades by organisations when dealing with organisational crises.