

GIFTS

## **Crisis Exchange Program**

Kalah Kemp, College of the Ozarks  
Colleen Palmer, Carthage College

### **ABSTRACT**

Crisis communication is a fast-growing field in industry and scholarship. This teaching brief incorporates Benoit's image repair and Coombs's Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Two crisis case studies are presented to two different public relations classes by two different professors at two different institutions. The first case study is presented toward the beginning of the semester, and the second case study is presented at the end of the semester, after students have learned theory and strategy. Once the crisis is presented in each class, students have 45 minutes to develop a news release, a 60-90 second spokesperson video, and a social media post in response to the crisis, as a simulation of what would occur at an organization facing a crisis. Then, the responses from the colleges are shared with one another, providing an opportunity for competition, critique, and objective feedback.

*Keywords:* Image repair theory, situational crisis communication theory, crisis communication

**Editorial Record:** This article was originally submitted as an AEJMC Public Relations Division GIFTS paper, with a February 25, 2022 deadline. Top papers were submitted to JPPE June 2022, and accepted for publication at that time. Published November 2022.

Brian Solis (2013) tweeted, “we live in a time where brands are people and people are brands.” Reputation management, including crisis management, is an ongoing process as crises are expected and often unpredictable (Coombs, 2014). Due to this, as educators it is our responsibility to prepare students to maintain brands with strategic, theory-grounded responses to crises of all types within various organizations. This simulation involves two crisis case studies that actually occurred being presented to two separate public relations classes by two different professors at two different institutions. The cases should represent differing crisis typologies and affect one nonprofit organization and one for-profit organization. This way, students gain experience responding to unique crises on behalf of various organizations.

Once the case study is presented, each class uses the remaining class time, about 45 minutes, to complete a news release, a 60-90 second spokesperson video, and a social media post in response to the crisis. Competing with another institution incentivizes students to present their best work and encourages peer feedback, which studies show enhances educational relationships, fosters deeper learning, and develops students’ critical thinking skills. The professors together decide which class’s response might be more effective for each crisis to declare a winning team. Additionally, the Spider Web pedagogical method challenges students to collaborate with one another. This discussion method involves students sitting in a circle to problem solve within a group, while the instructor sits outside of the circle and records the discussion pattern, which often takes on the appearance of a spiderweb (Wiggins, 2010). Additionally, the instructor notes the nature and significance of students’ conversational contributions. Students become less concerned about interacting with the instructor to seek approval and more focused on working together to problem solve with this method. We also found that students are better able to criticize the work of their peers with whom they have no personal

connection than peers in the same class. Therefore, this teaching brief explains the process of the crisis exchange program, student learning goals, theories foundational to this project, and ways in which to assess the student learning goals.

### **Step 1: Selecting the Case Studies**

To ensure the crisis exchange program best meets the student learning goals, selecting appropriate crises for analysis is paramount. The first case study is presented to students toward the beginning of the semester, before they have learned the value of a crisis management plan, crisis communication theory, or strategy. As such, we select a simple, straight-forward case study involving a human error made by a nonprofit organization. We present this case study to each of our classes on the same day, so the sharing of responses and feedback is timely. Students feel the pressure of time that would exist in such a scenario. They first discuss their possible responses amongst the class and then quickly divide into smaller teams—one to write a news release, one to write a social media post, and one to record a 60-90 second video response. Students must email the professor their responses so they may be shared with the other professor after class.

The second case study (Appendix A) is presented to students toward the end of the semester, after students have learned how to develop a crisis management plan, crisis communication theory and strategy. We select a challenging case study that is difficult to classify. This incident occurs at a for-profit organization, and students take their time to strategize before breaking into smaller teams to develop the response. Students are encouraged to serve on a different team (video, news release, or social media post) than they selected in the first case study so they may gain practice with a second response type. Toward the end of class, students compare their news release, video response, and social media post for accuracy and consistency. While the students discuss the crisis, we record

the discussion using the Spider Web model. We use this record to provide detailed feedback on the contributions of each crisis communication team member (students).

### **Step 2: Critiquing the Responses**

Once the responses are collected and shared with the other professor, the next class meeting is used to critique the crisis responses. During the first crisis case study, students are often distracted by outfits worn by the other team or unique contextual features shown in the video. However, they also enjoy critiquing other students' work and uncovering important conclusions. These conclusions are summarized and shared with each of the two classes. We then show students how the organization responded, which helps them to critique their own work.

After the second case study, students are eager to show their best work to another class and professor, and eager to strategically critique the other team. Students apply theory, strategy, and textbook language to identify areas of concern from rhetoric to video details and even social media contextual factors. Similar to the first case study, students are then exposed to the way in which the organization responded to the crisis, which again helps them to critique their own work more thoroughly.

### **Step 3: Personal Reflection**

After these class meetings, students complete a self-evaluation form (Appendix C) questioning their individual contributions and teamwork throughout the crisis response and critique process. Feedback is given to the students based on the record of spider web discussions. We record how students interacted and the nature of their contributions to the conversations. The self-evaluation form also challenges students to summarize what they learn through the crisis exchange program. This final step is especially important as they articulate the challenge of crisis response, the quality of their responses or critiques, or even lessons learned about teamwork.

### **Student Learning Goals**

To best implement the crisis exchange program, student learning goals must be considered. This teaching brief is designed to meet four student learning goals. First, students will synthesize and evaluate a complex crisis scenario. Presenting students with two different crises at two types of organizations challenges them to incorporate textbook concepts with examples from the professional world.

Secondly, students will exhibit an understanding of professional strategies used in crisis communication. Since students work to develop a crisis response, they demonstrate their writing, video, and social media prowess. Thirdly, students will apply crisis theories and strategies in a simulated activity. For the second case study, we provided students with a worksheet outlining Coombs's Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Benoit's Image Repair Theory. This way, they use the language of theory to best articulate the crisis and ensure the responses fit the crisis typology and attribution level.

Finally, students will collaborate to develop a professional crisis response and provide critical feedback to students at another institution. Through the critique of their own work, work from another college, messages from the organization, and self-evaluation, students work together to critically analyze professional crisis responses.

### **Connection to Public Relations Practice and Theory**

The crisis exchange program is underpinned by Benoit's Image Repair (1997) and Coombs's (2014) Situational Crisis Communication (SCCT) theories. Heider's Attribution Theory is briefly discussed, but only within the context of SCCT. Regarding SCCT, Coombs asserts that to best respond to a crisis, the crisis type, history of the crisis, and the reputation of an organization must be considered. Once these elements of Coombs's SCCT are discussed, the classes are required to consider Benoit's Image Repair postures to develop their response content and tone.

During the critique process, students are challenged to uncover the image repair strategy used by the other class and the organization. They also revisit their own crisis response to discern whether their posture is the best strategy for clear and effective crisis communication.

### **Evidence of Learning Assessment**

At the core of designing the crisis exchange program is student learning goals and ways in which we may evidence their learning. The student learning assessment for this project is four-fold. First, pertaining to students evaluating a complex crisis, the professors employ the Spider Web discussion model, as described by Alexis Wiggins (2010), to document students' contributions to discussions. Students may use the textbook and crisis response strategy worksheet (See Appendix B) to guide their conversational input.

Next, students' understanding of professional crisis strategies is assessed through students' completing a reflective self-evaluation and nature of contributions made to the Spider Web discussion. Students' abilities to apply crisis communication theories is assessed by evaluating the news release, social media post, and video response of the other class to analyze their response and provide feedback to those students. Feedback from the Spider Web discussion is also considered.

Finally, students are required to develop a crisis response and provide a critique of a crisis response. This goal is assessed through the self-evaluation and level of critical analysis made about both college classes and the organization's responses to the crises. Not only is this program engaging for students, but they learn and apply crisis communication theory to simulated crises.

### **References**

- Benoit, W. L. (1997). Image repair discourse and crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*, 23(2), 177-186. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(97\)90023-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(97)90023-0)

- Coombs, W. T. (2014). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing and responding* (4th ed). Sage Publications.
- Solis, B. [@briansolis]. (2013, March 22). *We live in a time where brands are people and people are brands* [Tweet]. Twitter.
- Wiggins, A. (2010). *The best class you never taught*. ASCD.

### **Appendix A: Sample Case Study**

**In the late 1970s and 1980s**, Pepsi steadily gained on Coke in terms of market share. In the early 1990s, people loved Pepsi because it was sweeter than Coke. Pepsi was known for its aggressive, savvy marketing. In 1992, Pepsi launched “Crystal Pepsi,” a clear cola that put fans into a craze. Everyone wanted to try clear soda!

**Thursday, June 10:** An elderly couple in Tacoma, Washington, purchased a can of Diet Pepsi one evening. The next morning, they called their lawyer to report a syringe was found inside of the Diet Pepsi can. The attorney called the press and local health officials, who then notified the police.

**Friday, June 11:** A woman in Federal Way, Washington—10 miles away from Tacoma—reported finding a syringe in her can of Diet Pepsi.

### **Appendix B: Theory-Grounded Worksheet**

In Coombs’ (2014) *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing and responding*, he includes three tables that help to guide students with the crisis exchange program. Each of these tables is below described throughout the worksheet.

### **Crisis Response Strategy**

**Step 1:** Categorize the nature of the crisis.

*Circle one:* Paracrisis, Crisis, Disaster

*Circle one of the below crisis types:*

*Table 1:* Types of crises by level of responsibility. This table lists crises in order of low to high levels of attribution and organizational responsibility.

**Step 2:** What is the history of the crisis? What is the prior reputation of the organization?

**Step 3:** Determine which response strategy best fits the type of crisis and possible liability of that response.

*Circle the strategy(s) that should be considered:*

*Table 2:* Crisis response strategies according to the liability and the most appropriate situation for each response strategy.

**Step 4:** Develop an objective where you consider the ultimate goal of all crisis communication efforts.

Examples: There are 8 types of objectives from “media coverage favorability” to “word of mouth” that are listed by Coombs (2014).

**Step 5:** Consider the form of your crisis response. (News release, 60-90 sec. spokesperson video, social media post).

Spokesperson(s):

Mediums:

Target audience:

**Step 6:** Develop strategic messages that meet the crisis communication objective. Use the table below to guide you with executing one of the



repair postures.

*Table 3:* Image repair postures. Each posture, along with a definition, is included.

**Now that you've completed steps 1-6, develop your crisis response.**

**Step 7:** Develop a follow-up plan. After distributing your initial crisis response message(s), how might you follow up with stakeholders? Consider both victims and non victims. Revisit your objective. How would you gather information to discern whether you met the objective?

### **Appendix C: Reflective Self-Evaluation**

#### **Crisis Exchange Program Self Evaluation**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. On which team did you participate?

Circle one: News Release Social Media Spokesperson

2. On a scale of 1-5 (1 being you were present but didn't significantly contribute, and 5 being leading the team or offering the most significant contributions), how well did you perform as a CCT member on Wednesday?

Circle one: 1 2 3 4 5

Comments about your contribution(s):

3. On a scale of 1-5 (1 being you were present but didn't significantly contribute, and 5 being leading the team or offering the most significant contributions), how much did you contribute to the analysis of Carthage College's response?

Circle one: 1 2 3 4 5

Comments about your contribution(s):

4. Who in your team (including yourself) would you like to nominate as the most valuable CCT/CMT member? Explain.
5. Reflecting on the crisis strategy response worksheet, which step did you find most challenging? Explain.
6. What did you learn from this project? Write one paragraph connecting textbook concepts with your experience.

#### **Appendix D: Examples of Student Work**

NEWS RELEASE (College of the Ozarks)

**Harrison, NY** – Over the last twenty-four hours foreign objects have been reported in PepsiCo (Pepsi) products in numerous states. In response, Pepsi has launched an independent investigation into these claims across all facilities.

For decades Pepsi has delivered high quality products to its consumers, and Pepsi holds itself to high standards of quality and safety.

Above all, we value our customers. These standards are in place to ensure that our valued customers each receive a consistent experience.

Moving forward, Pepsi will remain committed to all stakeholders and to exceeding expectations. We are still safe. We are still committed to quality. We are still caring for our customers. We are still Pepsi.

NEW RELEASE (Carthage College)

**Indianapolis, IN** – After a recent finding of a needle in a PepsiCo product, the company is taking every step available to find the cause of this hazard. “It has come to our attention that a needle was found in one of our PepsiCo products. We are just as horrified as the customer was by this finding, and we apologize for the distress this caused to the loyal customer who was affected by this,” says a PepsiCo spokesperson. “To prevent this hazard from happening to any of our other loyal customers, PepsiCo is temporarily recalling this product from shelves until we have found the cause of this unprecedented issue.”

In addition to temporarily recalling their products, PepsiCo is offering a free Crystal Pepsi to any customer who sends a receipt of a Pepsi beverage to the company (terms and conditions apply). Additionally, to encourage transparency, the company is welcoming any and all stakeholders to come to the factory and view its cleaning procedures and is having all machinery and equipment inspected by an outside company to ensure safety. “We are excited to use this opportunity to review all aspects of our factory and machinery and to continue to guarantee 100% our customers’ safety.”

#### **SOCIAL MEDIA POST (College of the Ozarks)**

Twitter. “In response to the allegations of compromised Pepsi cans, we have decided to hire an outside investigator to ensure the quality of our product. Thank you to our loyal customers who continue to believe in us. We are still safe. We are still committed to quality. We are still caring for our customers. We are still Pepsi. #stillPepsi” \*link to video release

#### **SOCIAL MEDIA POST (Carthage College)**

Twitter. “We are disturbed and stunned by yesterday’s news. Many have expressed their thoughts and concerns to use about the situation. We are sorry this happened and are doing everything we can to get to the bottom

of the situation. If you would like to bring in your receipt in showing proof of purchase within the past two weeks, we are willing to exchange your Pepsi Cola for one free Crystal Clear Pepsi drink.”