

Effect of Crisis Communication Strategy Used in Handling Flight MH370 to Youths' Perception of MAS Organization

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Global aviation is under a lot of pressure after two recent accidents involving Malaysia Airlines aircrafts. Those incidents have hit the Malaysian aviation business which is always been proud to be the safest form of transportation, which ringed the alarms for aviation safety and brought negative effects to youth's minds when it comes to flying. Implementing the right communication strategies as well as increasing high quality of services and customers relationship could reduce this uncertainty feelings among youth. Hence, it is argued that a good crisis communication strategies is the major key in managing crisis. A strong organizational reputation can take years to develop. Yet, it can easily be damaged or destroyed with a single crisis event (Coombs and Holladay 2008:252). Unfortunately, in many cases, the role of corporate communication, especially in managing crisis, is often disregarded in many companies in general. Mostly because the companies usually do not recognize the advantages that communication provides or they do not implement the strategies in ways that exploited all the effects of crisis communication strategies.

The purpose of this study is to look at how Malaysia Airlines executed its crisis communication strategies during the disappearance of flight MH370 and the youths' perception of the credibility of different response strategies used by MAS, particularly in middle of the global aviation recession. The study is rooted from the socio-psychological tradition to aid in predicting when a communication behavior will succeed and when it will fail.

The research is based on two theories by W. Timothy Coombs' (2007), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory by William L. Benoit (2004). The Coombs' analysis entails looking at the contextual factors to develop relevant strategies.

Benoit's analysis involves using a framework in the textual analysis to explore which strategies MAS employed via scrutinizing press releases from MAS. The researcher compare the 'ideal handling' of SCCT and the 'actual handling' analyzed through the terminology of Benoit's Image Restoration theory.

This paper is a case study of 'Malaysia Airlines' crisis communication strategies. In conducting this research, the researchers adopted both quantitative and qualitative research methods and better known as a mixed method research. The qualitative research is carried out to support the quantitative method data. Questionnaire were distributed to 300 respondents using 'drop and pick' method to MAS passenger. For qualitative methods, five informants were interviewed in depth to support the quantitative data. In depth interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to thematic analysis. For quantitative methods, data were analyzed using SPSS to get the descriptive analysis data. The effect of Malaysia Airlines' crisis communication is uncovered and discussed by combining the two separately conducted investigations.

The findings of the study show that traditional media sources were rated as most credible while the organization-generated content was rated least credible, even though the content may be the same. Nevertheless, it is imperative for an organization to have an online presence in order to start a dialogue with youth to create trust, the ultimate protection during a crisis. Result shows that Malaysia Airlines failed to provide an adequate and consistent information flow to its stakeholders during the crisis, which resulted in a double crisis that gave the airline an unprecedented communication challenge. Malaysia Airlines mistakenly decided to adopt its own crisis strategy, and the airline therefore misjudged the crisis type which served as a launch point for the employment and combination of several inappropriate crisis response strategies. The analysis of the case study confirms that the SCCT was applicable in this complex crisis situation, in that the youths' perceptions on MAS were relatively consistent and did not vary noteworthy, suggesting that the SCCT is applicable also in situations where there are multiple actors involved. Although MAS overall did not follow the prescriptions from the SCCT, certain measures indicated that the corporate reputation was preserved after the crisis. The findings generally revealed that the youths perceived MAS's crisis communication strategies to be inconsistent. As the youth's expectations were breached, they perceived MAS less positively,

and it served as a launch point for a damaging transformation of MAS's reputation. Seventy seven (77) % of the total sample consequently responded that their perception of MAS following the crisis were either poor or very poor. Since the airline's reputation is based on youths' perception, it can be argued that MAS' reputation has been severely damaged during the crisis. The uncoordinated crisis communication strategies carried out by MAS made youth obviously began to reject the airline's services and look elsewhere for an air travel provider. Thus, there is an effect of communication strategies on youth's perception of MAS.

Consequently, it created difficulty for the Malaysia Airlines to maintain positive stakeholder relations, and the airline's reputation became severely damaged. Malaysia Airlines lost its means to sustain profitability, and it ultimately made the organization aware of the need to restructure its business operations. The findings can give crisis managers a useful insight into the communicative challenges they may face during a crisis. If an organization mismanages the original crisis, it may be overlaid by a double crisis. In such an instance, it may prove difficult for crisis managers to carry out a successful crisis communication strategy due to a gap in existing literature. Nevertheless, it is imperative for an organization to have a strategic crisis communication in order to start a dialogue with stakeholders, in this context, the youth to create trust, the ultimate protection during a crisis.

The results of the experiment indicate that SCCT's different levels of acceptance are limited to measuring the acceptance of crisis responses and are not able to measure overall perceptions of an organization. Separating perceptions into four dimensions provided a more comprehensive picture of how the public perceives crisis responses (Avery, 2010). For instance, an excuse response can be the most effective response strategy in certain circumstances. According to Avery (2010), a full apology response is not recommended in some situations. Crisis responses of no comment or denial are so publicly unacceptable that when an organization responds with either of these strategies, compensation has to be made in order to improve public perception of the organization (Benoit, 2004).

Despite some limitations, this study contributes to the understanding on public perceptions of organization during crises. Specifically, its main contribution is its experimental design using

two-phase crisis responses. Respondents perceive two different responses at two different times about the same organization during the same crisis. By taking different phases of crisis responses into account as well as identifying the changes of public perception and quantifying their effects, this study expands on existing crisis communication theories and adds practical knowledge for dealing with real-world crises.

The findings can give crisis managers useful insight into the communicative challenges they may face during a crisis. If an organization mismanages the original crisis, it may be overlaid by a double crisis. In such an instance, it may prove difficult for crisis managers to carry out a successful crisis communication strategy due to a gap in existing literature. Findings suggest that the type of crisis communication strategies must be suitable according to the type of crisis event. This paper also provides a deep insight into the crisis communication effort carried out by Malaysia Airlines in a corporate communication context from both an organizational and a stakeholder/customer perception perspective.

Keywords: Corporate communication, reputation management, crisis management, crisis communication, crisis type and intensifying factors, crisis response strategies, guidelines with recommendations, stakeholder/customer perception, and youth.

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