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# Towards a conceptual model of crisis communication with the media in the financial sector: a case study

A*BSTRACT*

Although crisis communication has emerged as a specialised study field for public relations scholars and practitioners and has been a mounting area of inter-disciplinary research in recent years, several gaps in current literature on crisis communication exist. Gaps include a notable focus on the planning, prevention and recovery stages with lesser attention being devoted to the crisis-response stage; a lack of a comprehensive conceptual framework to guide communication decision makers during this critical period; and that crisis-communication studies appear to be predominantly Western based. This article attempts to address these gaps by focusing on the crisis-response stage, with particular emphasis on communication with the media during a crisis. It is acknowledged that the success of a crisis-management effort is profoundly affected by what an organisation says and does during a crisis – termed the crisis response (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2004). This article focuses on this crisis response and is divided as follows: firstly, an introduction to key terminology is provided, followed by the theoretical background, the research approach and methodology, as well as the findings from the case studies, which culminate in the proposed conceptual model for effective crisis communication with the media. Lastly, a critical evaluation of the model is presented and recommendations for further research are provided.

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*INTRODUCTION*

The purpose of this study is both to translate existing literature on crisis-communication principles and theories and also the learning obtained from case studies of crises in the South African banking environment into a currently relevant conceptual model of organisational strategies of crisis communication with the media. For the purposes of this study, Clawson-Freeo's definition of crisis (2001:1) is adopted: "A crisis is any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of a company, usually brought on by adverse media attention. It can also be a situation, where, in the eyes of the general public, the media, shareholders, stockbrokers and analysts, the company did not react to any of the already mentioned situations in an appropriate manner".

Existing literature focuses mainly on the structure or fundamentals of preventing or planning for a crisis – the development of crisis-communication manuals, media training and selection of media spokespeople - and lesser attention is devoted to the actual content of crisis communication (Coombs, 1995). Media attention is identified in the literature as being endemic to most crisis situations (Gonzalez-Herrero, 1994; Fearn-Banks, 2002) and many scholars agree that an organisation's response to journalists during a crisis (the content of communication) can have far-reaching effects on its reputation (Kempner, 1995; Coombs, 1994; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Hale, Dulek & Hale, 2005; Mershan & Skinner, 2002). Furthermore, crisis communication is, according to Pollard and Hotho (2006: 721), "often portrayed in negative terms, even in extolling the need for crisis management planning, it is the potentially disastrous nature of such events that is focussed on, rather than the positive outcomes of planning". It is therefore proposed that credence be given to communication with the media during a crisis, especially during the response stage.

## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section presents a brief overview of the various theoretical approaches to crisis management and crisis communication, ranging from the traditional linear approach, through the systems approaches, to the situational crisis-communication theory.

### 1.1 Dominant theoretical approaches to crisis management and crisis communication: traditional linear versus progressive systems approaches

According to Gayeski and Majika (1996: 22), much classical crisis-management research has been based on a mechanistic view of control. Communicators believed that it was possible to predict how audiences would react to a carefully crafted message (Gayeski & Majika, 1996: 22). This traditional linear cause-effect view is called in question by the progressive systems theory, which takes into account the dynamic interdependence of factors such as context and the mind in meaning-making (Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 1999). The calculation of probabilities, rather than absolute predictions has become the norm (Gayeski & Majika, 1996).

The application of the **traditional linear approach** to crisis management and crisis communication suggests the following:

- In the traditional paradigm of seeing the world and organisations in a linear, mechanistic way, crises were viewed as signs of trouble (Keene, 2000: 15). Organisations following this approach seek to control their environment and they then experience frustration when their environment behaves in a way that is incongruent and in conflict with the operation of the organisation.
- The organisation is viewed as a closed system with information only flowing out of it in a linear, one-way fashion (Grunig, 2000). Such asymmetrical or persuasive communication (Grunig, 2000) is the key to control or manipulation. These dyadic, sender-receiver models emphasise transmissions and their effects (Woodward, 2000: 258).
- Traditional organisations are essentially conservative and resist change at all costs (Grunig, 2000). The crisis communicator's role is to defend the status quo (Holtzhausen, 1995).
- The linear assumption is that there are defined steps or actions that the crisis communicator can take to control the situation during a crisis. The traditional view focuses on ways to simplify things in an effort to obtain control (McDaniel, 1997: 26).

In contrast **progressive, systems approaches** to crisis communication are premised on the following assumptions:

- Environments are dynamic and change, and uncertainty or crises will come to pass irrespective of organisational efforts to control and direct (Keene, 2000: 16). Crises are viewed as leading to opportunity or beneficial restructuring (Bloom, Crystal & Verwey, 2002).
- The organisation is viewed as a system open to other interpenetrating systems, and it freely exchanges information with those systems. The emphasis is on relationships, two-way communication, interconnectedness and interdependence (Pearson, 1989a: 72), while taking into account social, economic and political contexts (Woodward, 2000).
- Crisis communication encourages understanding between the organisation and its publics, is ethical and socially responsible; both persuasion and one-way or asymmetrical communication are less desirable (Grunig, 2000). Crisis communicators practising symmetrical public relations tend to have an interactive and cooperative relationship with the media, whereas asymmetrical or traditional practitioners usually try to manipulate the media agenda and continually experience conflict with journalists (Grunig, 1990).
- The crisis communicator's role is to assist the organisation in co-operating and adjusting to the outside environment through negotiation and not through linear, controlled steps or force (Holtzhausen, 1995: 52). Mersham, Skinner and Von Essen (2001) believe that the crisis communicator should solicit the public's involvement in the problem as the latter can assist in solving the crisis.

Based on said differences, the models and theories mentioned in the next section can be classified on a continuum between the linear, traditional approaches to the more progressive systems approaches.

### 1.2 Models leaning towards the traditional continuum

The following models can be described as leaning towards the traditional continuum because of their emphasis on description and control:

- Meyers and Holusha's model (1986): This model analyses a crisis on the basis of four major considerations - dimension (size of crisis), control, time and options available to the organisation.
- Three stage models of crisis – authored respectively by Fink (1986), Mitroff (1988), Horsley and Barker (2002): These authors describe the stages through which a crisis moves and the corresponding types of crisis management required. In general the stages described but named differently by each author include a preparation stage, an actual crisis stage (termed crisis response) and a recovery or post-crisis stage.
- Hale, Dulek and Hale's linear crisis-response model (2005: 120): These authors describe a linear decision-making process that crisis communicators adopt during a crisis.

### 1.3 Models leaning towards the progressive open systems continuum of crisis management and crisis communication

The approaches discussed in this section move away from the traditional, linear approaches discussed towards a progressive systems approach and include:

- The spiral crisis-response communication model (Hale, Dulek & Hale, 2005: 121): This model represents an advance on their previous model: This model illustrates how repetitive and circular the decision-making process is during a crisis as additional information is obtained and greater understanding is achieved.
- Chaos theory: a derivative of systems theory, chaos theory contends that crises can neither be predicted nor controlled – but organisations can adapt to the circumstances with positive results (Murphy, 1996: 108).

Both sets of models discussed – traditional linear and progressive systems - are helpful in that they provide a structure or framework for understanding and describing the principals drawn from crisis-communication literature. A valuable recommendation from the models reviewed - particularly the more traditional models - is that an organisation should remain alert to signals and address issues before they become serious problems. Although prior planning in advance of a crisis is acknowledged, flexibility in terms of approach during a crisis, rather than strict adherence to the plan is advised by progressive theories.

However, while the majority of models mention the importance of communication decisions made during a crisis, they neglect to examine such decisions and responses. The next model,

which can also be described as being predicated on systems epistemology, addresses these responses and forms the basis of the model designed from this research.

### 1.4 Situational crisis-communication theory (SCCT or SCC theory)

The SCCT or SCC theory recommends that communicators assess the crisis situation to protect an organisation's reputation during a crisis (which is conceptualised as the frame used by the public to interpret the event), and select a crisis response strategy that fits it. According to this model, the public will ask themselves whether the crisis was something the organisation could have controlled or prevented (Coombs, 2004). Control implies responsibility (Weiner, 1995), and greater attributions of responsibility further lead to stronger feelings of anger and increasingly negative views of organisations (Coombs, 1995).

The development of crisis clusters (groupings of similar crisis types) is based on the premise that similar crises can be managed in a similar fashion (Coombs, 2004). Three distinct clusters can be used to summarise crisis types (Coombs, 1995; 2004):

- Victim: T organisation is viewed as innocent; it did not cause the crisis - harm has been inflicted on it.
- Accidental: the crisis was caused by unintentional actions by the organisation/or staff member/s.
- Preventable or intentional crisis cluster.

According to SCCT, the stronger the potential damage to the organisation's reputation and/or the more the organisation is held accountable, the more the crisis response strategy must try to accommodate those adversely affected and vice versa (Coombs, 2004). For the purposes of clarity, Table 1 summarises a list of SCCT response strategies.

| Crisis clusters | Strategies | Tactics |
|---|---|---|
| Victim | Non-existent Suffering | Denial, clarification, attack, intimidation |
| Accidental | Distance | Excuse (e.g. scapegoating), justification |
| Culprit | Mortification | Remediation, repentance, rectification |
| All | Ingratiation | Transcendence, bolstering, praising others |

**Table 1: SCCT crisis-response strategies and tactics to match crisis clusters**

#### 1.4.1 Critical comments on the SCCT
The quest for simplicity may affect the application of this theory to real life situations. Because it is possible that some valuable, explanatory factors and variables have been excluded (Coombs, 1995), these are next discussed briefly.

While SCCT acknowledges that the crisis response should be tempered with consideration of the organisation's history, it does not mention other context variables that may impact on

the choice of crisis response such as perceptions that the public could have of an industry as a whole. Other factors, such as the cultural context in which the organisation operates, could possibly also have an impact on the choice of crisis-response strategy. The theory does not cater for the variance from one country to another, let alone one city to another. Another aspect not addressed by SCCT, is that it may be in the interests of competitors or journalists to exaggerate the consequences of the crisis. This would of course impact on public perceptions of the organisation in crisis and on the attributions made. Even though these perceptions may be unjust, they could nevertheless exist and thus need to inform crisis-response strategies. In addition, the morality of crisis-response strategies is not addressed by SCCT. It could be inferred that an organisation should not admit to anything that is going to cost them money. According to Cohen (1999: 1012), *respect for others would seem to require that when offenders have hurt others, they should apologise to the extent that they feel at fault*, but he (Cohen) admits that lawyers may advise their clients not to risk apology because of the implications of liability. Cohen further maintains that the ideal is for crisis communicators and legal counsel to work together to develop a response that satisfies the public's need to know, yet avoids self-implication of legal wrongdoing.

A further point of criticism is that the human response is not mentioned in the theory. Horsley and Barker (2002: 409) state that "[I]f an organisation is at fault, its spokespersons repair the organisation's reputation much faster if they apologise, accept responsibility, and show remorse". In the same vein, if a disaster has occurred that is not necessarily the fault of the organisation, "the public and the media are still looking for some humanity; they want to see the organisation spokespersons express regret for what happened and show compassion for the victims" (Horsley & Barker, 2002: 410). Englehardt et al. (2004: 150) found that Coombs's crisis-response strategies do not allow for corporate statements that express concern and sympathy without placing the blame on the organisation. Compassion may affect stock prices, but it avoids the liabilities associated with apologies (Fitzpatrick, 1995; Tyler, 1997). Like apologies, compassion addresses public concerns by acknowledging victims' needs, thereby bolstering the organisational reputation (Barton, 2001). The most useful way to maximise both social and legal concerns during an accident crisis could be to incorporate compassion in the crisis response. In addition, initial early responses when organisations are trying to find out what happened to cause the crisis, are not included in SCCT. Englehardt et al. (2004: 151) maintain that statements such as "[I]t's too early to know if our airplane maintenance was a key factor in the crash", do not fall into Coombs's repertoire (1995). At this particular stage in the crisis the organisation is not denying anything, it is not making an excuse, nor is it clarifying: it merely does not have an answer (Englehardt et al., 2004: 151). SCCT also does not suggest that the client or victims of a crisis be put first. A number of recent studies predict a strong connection between an organisation's values and culture and its behaviour during the response stage (Hale et al., 2005: 116). At the heart of the decision-making process conducted by the crisis team is an organisation's values. According to Foster and Snyder (1983), the effectiveness of the decision-making process is significantly enhanced if these organisational values are made explicit and communicated clearly to decision makers in times of crisis. Furthermore, the crisis-response strategies of SCCT have been derived

from interpersonal communication research (Benoit, 1995). This may limit their applicability to the organisational world. For example, the denial of volition (the intention to do harm), as a distance strategy suggested by SCCT, may be more effective in an interpersonal setting, than as an effective explanation for an organisation that has caused harm to its clients. The public may not care whether the crisis was intentional or not, particularly in the case of large, wealthy organisations. The ingratiation strategy of bolstering recommended by SCCT, which entails emphasising the positive aspects of the organisation, may appear to be in bad taste during a crisis. One could ask whether the organisation should be trying to garner support when it is dealing with a crisis where the public's primary concern is the impact of the crisis. In similar vein, the justification strategy recommended by SCCT - aimed at minimising the damage associated with the crisis - would need to be skilfully managed so as not to appear callous in response to the injury or damage done to the parties concerned.

According to Horsley and Barker (2002), attempts to blame the incident on some other entity or to take the pressure off the organisation by using suggested strategies such as justification or excuse, can backfire and thus obstruct further public relations. Huang (2005: 32) warns that the excuse response could be associated with manipulation and control, and could ruin relationships between the organisation and the public. Hearit (2001: 509) criticises approaches to public relations messages during crises such as SCCT because they often treat "the responses of organisations as static and linear when in reality they are dynamic and variable". According to Ihlen (2002: 185), while focusing on choosing crisis-response strategies, "the study of combining, and especially changing, strategies is left unexplored". For example, media coverage could force an organisation to change its response strategy (Ihlen, 2002). Two issues, according to Coombs and Holladay (2006: 135), merit further consideration: *Does a favourable prior reputation create expectations about how an organisation should respond?* Will "good" organisations be expected to exceed the normal response? It may be that, if a prior reputation is favourable, an organisation will need to use the most expensive response regardless of the crisis situation. No evidence as yet supports this conclusion.

In spite of the shift in communication and public relations towards a more symmetrical means of communicating and towards more socially responsible actions and interactions, it would seem that persuasion or influence lies at the heart of crisis-communication dialogue and decidedly at the core of a theory such as SCCT. The organisation wishes the public not to judge it too harshly and therefore designs messages using techniques such as bolstering, scapegoating, minimisation and so on to persuade the public or the media to view it in a more favourable light.

## 2. RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case-study approach was chosen because it provides researchers with a wide range of evidence (text, observations, conversations) about a research topic and can be used as a retrospective learning tool of real-life situations (Du Plooy, 2001; Neuman, 2000; Wimmer &

Dominick, 1991: 156). In this particular research, the case-study methodology helped to gain some understanding both of why communication decisions were taken by the crisis communicators during a crisis and of whether they were successful or not.

These advantages outweigh the possible disadvantages of the case-study methodology, such as a lack of scientific rigor or its time-consuming nature (Du Plooy, 2001; Wimmer & Dominick, 1991). The qualitative in-depth interview was chosen as the data collection tool because of the researcher's intention to understand informants' perspectives regarding their situations, as expressed in their own words. In contrast to structured interviewing, qualitative interviewing has been referred to as non-directive, unstructured, open-ended and non-standardised (Breakwell, Hammond & Fife-Schaw, 2000; Du Plooy, 2001).

The heads of organisational communication at three large banking groups in South Africa were interviewed and encouraged to share in detail their memories of dealing with organisational crises that made the newspaper headlines in recent years. These participants were the key communication decision makers during the crises and were thus able to provide rich descriptions about the strategies employed.

The sample is termed a convenience sample because the participants were conveniently available (Du Plooy, 2001). According to Wimmer and Dominick (1991: 72) this kind of sampling does not follow the guidelines of mathematical probability. The sample was considered appropriate for the researcher's goal, i.e. to collect information for an in-depth qualitative investigation (Du Plooy, 2001). The supplementing news coverage of the crises over the period 1999–2003, discussed during the interviews, was drawn from three major South African business publications: *Business Times, Business Report* and *Business Day*. This formed the basis for the case studies.

Consistent with the qualitative paradigm on which this study rests, data analysis was undertaken using an interpretive hermeneutic approach that helped the researcher to impose order and meaning on the mass of data collected (Neuman, 2000; Rapmund, 1996).

### 3.   FINDINGS FROM THE CASE STUDIES

The findings of the case studies were organised into themes and compared with current literature on the topic.

Several new crisis-communication tactics -  not included in the SCCT literature - were discovered. These will be discussed in detail later in the article. These tactics include: the ingratiation strategies of third-party endorsements; providing the media with a new angle to the crisis story; and, the use of emotive arguments to persuade the media to perceive the organisation in a favourable light. The distancing tactic of making the crisis an industry issue and ordering independent investigations into the matter further emerged as a new tactic not included in the literature.

Other findings from the case studies, not specified in the literature, included the need to control executive stress, which emerged as a necessary factor in ensuring effective crisis management.

The importance of an organisation's attitude during a crisis was found to be more important than good relationships with journalists prior to a crisis. Arrogant and self-serving statements without consideration for victims were shown particularly to have negative consequences in terms of media coverage. These strategies and principles should form part of a comprehensive crisis-communication strategy to the media.

Other observations from the case studies confirmed the existing literature. These include: the need to have a multidisciplinary crisis-communication team with access to management decisions; the creation of key, consistent messages; proactive responses and a flexible strategy that is responsive to changes in the environment. In all the case studies, the crises led to positive organisational changes, this suggesting that crises can indeed be viewed as opportunities for beneficial restructuring and change as proposed by progressive approaches, such as chaos theory. The research thus indicates that crises do not necessarily have to be regarded as negative events. By managing the crisis and its media communication competently, positive outcomes are possible.
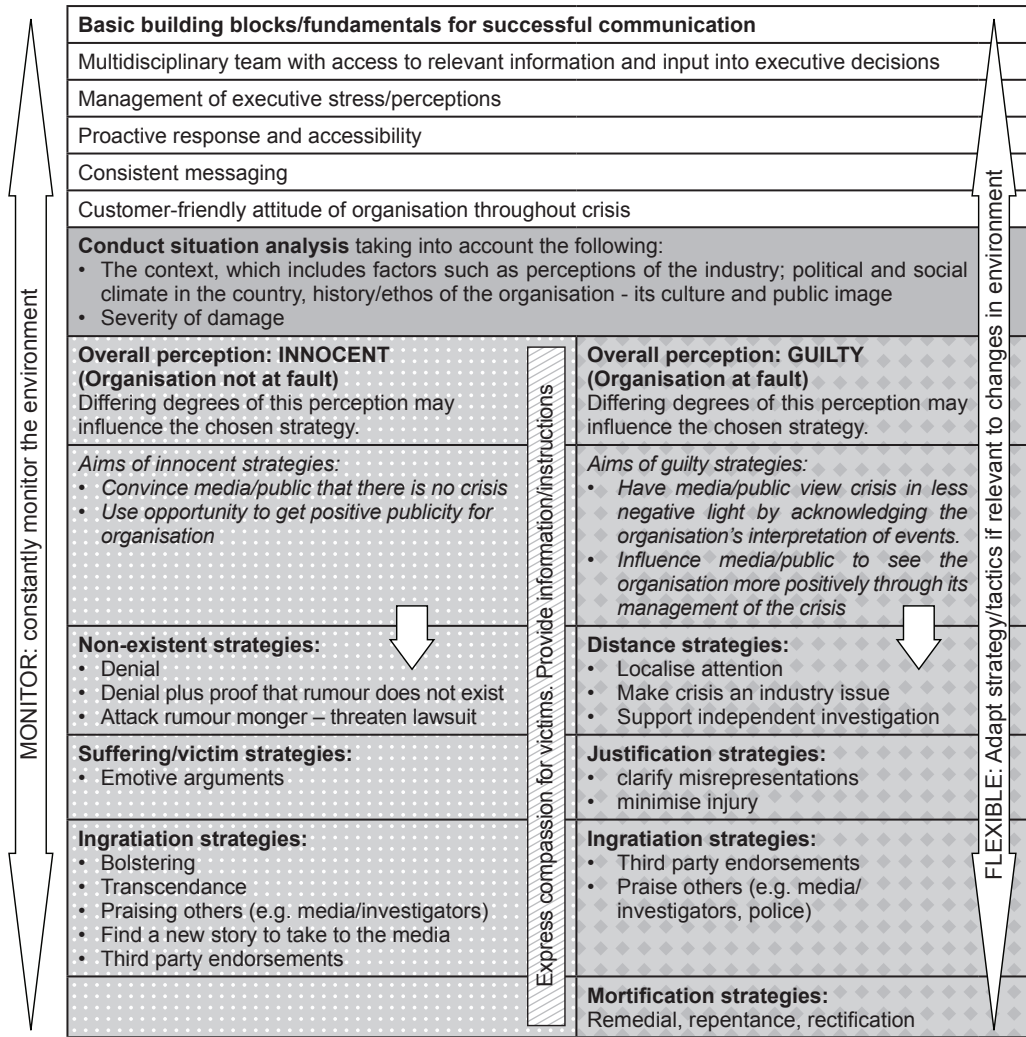
## 4. A CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIES OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION WITH THE MEDIA: THE CRISIS RESPONSE OR CR MODEL

This section represents a culmination of the literature study and the research undertaken by proposing a conceptual model that can be used by communicators to make strategic decisions during the crisis-response stage. The model recognises that no two crises are identical and that no single crisis-communication strategy is going to resolve every problem. However, given the short timeframe for making communication decisions, which is generally endemic to crisis situations, this model is intended to assist crisis communicators in their task of communicating to the media. This model is based on the assumption that communication to the media is but one element of a crisis-communication plan that takes into account communication to shareholders, government, analysts, staff, interest groups and customers. Communication to the media is given prominence because of its value in dispersing information, its critical role in shaping public opinion and because the media intrude themselves upon a crisis situation.

Because the best crisis is the one that is avoided (Coombs, 1999: 125), a significant part of crisis management is devoted to detecting and preventing a crisis proactively. However, according to Coombs (1999), an organisation cannot avoid, prevent or prepare in advance for all possible crises. The success of a crisis-management effort is heavily dependent on what an organisation says and does after a crisis commences – termed the crisis response (Benoit, 1997). It is acknowledged that the crisis-response phase puts any organisation's normal communication systems and processes under enormous additional pressure. Hale et al. (2005: 131) therefore suggest that communication models can prove most beneficial under such circumstances. Bloom (2001: 85) further states: "Inventing a response to a crisis as it breaks cannot be done to the best of a public relations consultant's advantage under the pressure of events". Given this state of affairs, a set of guidelines - described in the next section - could help crisis communicators to formulate responses to the media during a crisis.

### 4.1 Conceptual model for effective crisis communication with the media

A diagram of the conceptual model, the crisis-response model (CR model), appears in Figure 1.

| MONITOR: constantly monitor the environment | **Basic building blocks/fundamentals for successful communication** | | FLEXIBLE: Adapt strategy/tactics if relevant to changes in environment |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Multidisciplinary team with access to relevant information and input into executive decisions | | |
| | Management of executive stress/perceptions | | |
| | Proactive response and accessibility | | |
| | Consistent messaging | | |
| | Customer-friendly attitude of organisation throughout crisis | | |
| | **Conduct situation analysis** taking into account the following:<br>• The context, which includes factors such as perceptions of the industry; political and social climate in the country, history/ethos of the organisation - its culture and public image<br>• Severity of damage | | |
| | **Overall perception: INNOCENT (Organisation not at fault)** Differing degrees of this perception may influence the chosen strategy. | **Overall perception: GUILTY (Organisation at fault)** Differing degrees of this perception may influence the chosen strategy. | |
| | *Aims of innocent strategies:*<br>• *Convince media/public that there is no crisis*<br>• *Use opportunity to get positive publicity for organisation* | *Aims of guilty strategies:*<br>• *Have media/public view crisis in less negative light by acknowledging the organisation's interpretation of events.*<br>• *Influence media/public to see the organisation more positively through its management of the crisis* | |
| | **Non-existent strategies:**<br>• Denial<br>• Denial plus proof that rumour does not exist<br>• Attack rumour monger – threaten lawsuit | **Distance strategies:**<br>• Localise attention<br>• Make crisis an industry issue<br>• Support independent investigation | |
| | **Suffering/victim strategies:**<br>• Emotive arguments | **Justification strategies:**<br>• clarify misrepresentations<br>• minimise injury | |
| | **Ingratiation strategies:**<br>• Bolstering<br>• Transcendance<br>• Praising others (e.g. media/investigators)<br>• Find a new story to take to the media<br>• Third party endorsements | **Ingratiation strategies:**<br>• Third party endorsements<br>• Praise others (e.g. media/investigators, police) | |
| | | **Mortification strategies:**<br>Remedial, repentance, rectification | |

*Vertical text between columns: Provide information/instructions. Express compassion for victims.*

Legend:  section 1: ☐ – Foundation
section 2: ▨ – Analysis of the crisis situation
section 3:  Content of communication ▨ – innocent tactics;
◈ – guilty tactics

**Figure 1: Proposed crisis-response model (CR model)**

The three consecutive sections of the model are next described.

### 4.1.1    Section 1 of conceptual model: the foundation
*Fundamental building blocks for effective crisis communication with the media*

This section of the model (highlighted in ☐) represents the fundamental factors or foundation necessary to ensure effective communication with the media during the crisis-response stage.

**Multidisciplinary crisis-communication team with access to executive decisions and all crisis-related information**

The model reminds us that it is important to select a crisis-communication team that represents to a practicable degree the diverse, and sometimes conflicting concerns and interests of all stakeholders and departments in the organisation – customers; institutional shareholders; government relations; the departments responsible for media communication; public relations; legal issues; human resources; operations, finance and risk management. The team has to balance the interests of all of these stakeholders in making communication decisions and, according to Kempner (1995), a senior executive should have the final word on key decisions to be implemented. The consequences of each decision or action should be discussed, debated and addressed before implementation. This team may need to meet daily in cases of severe crises in order to determine media/public responses or changes in strategic direction. Any board activities or strategic management decisions that could potentially impact on the work of the crisis-communication team will need to be addressed. Nothing should be hidden from the team so that it does not have to deal with any surprise elements.  It is therefore essential that this team should have access to all information pertaining to the organisation during a crisis. Scholars such as Barker and Angelopulo (2006) advocate that the crisis-communication head should form part of the top management of an organisation, have open access to information and the authority to make decisions.

**Executive stress management/management of executive perceptions**

The team needs to ensure that the spokespeople stick to the strategic communication messages and not deviate or have knee-jerk reactions in their efforts to control media coverage. Company executives should understand that the organisation can not win every battle in the media space, especially if it is at fault. By following a strategic plan and meeting on a regular basis, the team can shape, but not control precisely, the tone of media coverage.  Executives need to be made aware of the fact that the media can be hostile (and often is, because of the nature and requirements of the media industry) and that it is necessary to manage stress levels in order to make level-headed communication decisions. Executive stress management/management of executive perceptions as a

fundamental building block for successful communication has not been mentioned in the literature, but was found to be an important factor in the case studies conducted.

### Customer-friendly attitude of organisation throughout crisis

During a crisis an organisation must constantly be aware of its attitude toward journalists and the public. Public perceptions play a key role in the successful resolution of a crisis and an organisation that comes across as arrogant and unsympathetic will incur criticism for its handling of a crisis. In contrast, an organisation that clearly puts people first and is honest, forthright, humble and non-defensive in approach, will stand a better chance of having its reputation upheld, or even enhanced at the conclusion of the crisis. The spokesperson who is appointed to face the media on behalf of the company will need to have undergone prior training to control factors such as body language and expressions that could impart negative messages to an audience. Mersham and Skinner (2002) warn that a spokesperson without training can appear to lack credibility and honesty. A compassionate attitude conveyed by an organisational spokesperson during a crisis can help to build positive perceptions, even in cases where the organisation has no previous relationships with journalists or the public. An organisation cannot rely on its irrevocable stocks of goodwill from shareholders prior to the crisis and must focus on creating goodwill during a crisis. This factor was highlighted by the case studies.

### Proactive response and accessibility

By proactively engaging the media and having an open-door policy, an organisation is positioned to build trust and credibility with journalists and therefore has a better chance of managing public perceptions. An organisation that refuses to speak to the media and is merely reactive or slow to respond may appear to be guilty or hiding something. Proactive media briefings or one-on-one meetings with trained media spokespeople and the release of media statements and/or editorial ensures that the organisation is not merely reactive to the media's agenda. Accessibility of key spokespeople to engage with journalists should be a top priority during a crisis. Even if the crisis is protracted, the organisation should keep the media informed, otherwise they will find alternative sources of information that may be completely inaccurate (Fink 2005). Bloom (2001) warns that without facts, a journalist is likely to publish an article based on speculation. Fink (2005: 109) suggests that not engaging with the media can sometimes make the organisation appear arrogant, or not in control of the situation.

### Consistent messages

It is important for the organisation to speak with one voice, without contradiction and to design clear key messages so that there is no information overload or confusion in the public space. Coherence is achieved by analysing the output from the organisation and ensuring that spokespeople are briefed. Mersham and Skinner (2002) suggest that

centralising all media contacts with a single spokesperson minimises the possibility of conflicting statements.

**Monitor changes in the environment and flexibility**

By being alert and monitoring public perceptions the team can be responsive and seize opportunities to enhance strategic communication to the media/public. Media pressure may force an organisation to change its response strategy. It is therefore necessary that the crisis-communication team continuously analyse media coverage. If the crisis response is proved unconstructive or not accepted by major publics such as the media, the crisis-response strategy should be amended. The crisis team must bear in mind that because it is human nature to fail occasionally, the organisation might have to admit a wrongdoing and apologise, and in these cases should not cling to an initial strategy. The strategy throughout the crisis should therefore be flexible and fluid in nature, not rigid and uncompromising. The organisation should however attempt, as far as possible, to keep its arguments coherent and consistent even when a change of strategy is adopted, except of course, when the organisation has to admit wrongdoing and repent (cf. mortification strategy). By analysing the incidents, arguments and positions presented in the media coverage and adhering to the initial characterisations of the situation or problem, the crisis team can leave the impression of communicating consistently even when adjusting a strategy that has failed. Inherent in this precept of flexibility and monitoring is the principle of two-way communication. Symmetrical communication ensures that communication is not just one-way – from the organisation to the media. The monitoring of feedback both from the media and the environment is important towards developing a robust crisis-communication strategy.

*4.1.2    Section 2 of model: analysis of the crisis situation*
Bearing in mind the fundamental building blocks or structure for successful crisis communication with the media, the crisis-communication team is advised to undertake a situation analysis. This section of the model has been based on amendments and additions to the SCC theory (SCCT). According to this theory, the situation in which the crisis is occurring should influence the organisational response to the media. The crisis situation is both a constraint and an asset when articulating a crisis response (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). It follows that the more comprehensive the understanding crisis managers have of the crisis situation, the better prepared they will be to come up with an effective crisis response (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). It is critically important that the organisation in a particular context is perceived to be either responsible or not for the crisis, because, according to SCCT (Coombs, 2004), the greater the crisis responsibility, the more accommodative the crisis-response strategy should be .

Although this section of the model has been influenced by SCC theory, the researcher has made amendments and additions to the theory based on the findings of the case studies examined and on the literature review conducted. These amendments and

additions are noted. The main points of SCCT will merely be highlighted in this chapter for the purpose of clarity.

Factors to consider as part of the situation analysis are:

- **The context:** SCCT takes into consideration only one element of context - the organisation's history - specifically whether it has endured similar crises in the past. The proposed conceptual model (or CR model) expands the definition of context to include factors - such as public perceptions of the industry as a whole in the country in which it operates. Such factors could include the reputation of the banking or insurance sector, the ethos of the organisation itself (whether the organisation customer is focused or not), as well as the political and social climate (additions to SCCT). The crisis-communication team would need, for example, to consider whether there is a huge public outcry regarding the crisis and overt demands by government for compensation to victims in order to design a response sensitive to context and expectations. An organisation that is perceived to have a good ethos may have an easier time convincing the public to accept its interpretation of events. Context is also noted as a critical factor in the decision-making process by both the spiral crisis-response model and chaos theory (Hale et al., 2005). The spiral crisis-response model illustrates how additional information and data from the environment affect the decision-making process during a crisis (Hale et al., 2005). Advocates of chaos theory, such as Bloom et al. (2002), stress that crisis communicators should determine acceptable courses of action from environmental trends.
- **The severity of damage:** This refers to the impact of the crisis on victims. Severe damage to victims may dictate more substantial rectification strategies and statements (Coombs, 2004).
- **Whether the organisation is perceived to be responsible for causing the crisis or not:** According to Coombs (2004), if the organisation could have prevented the crisis, the media are more likely to be critical of the organisation.

The three perceptions listed above will dictate the type of response chosen, according to this section of the proposed model. For the purposes of simplicity and clarity, it was decided to divide the overall analysis of the crisis situation into two categories as perceived by the media and the public – one, for entitled organisations either at fault or guilty and the other for organisations not at fault or innocent. This reflects a deviation from the SCC theory which divides the overall analysis of the crisis situation into the *accidental, preventable* and *victim* clusters (amendment to SCCT). While it is acknowledged that the aforementioned categories proposed by SCCT can be useful in distinguishing between crises that the organisation did not purposely intend, it is proposed that perceptions of a crisis by the media or public are generally either one or the other (that the organisation is responsible or not – albeit to varying degrees) and that crisis responses can be adjusted accordingly. It is suggested that the excuse tactic or explanation of "we did not mean for the crisis to happen" might be applicable as an ingratiating strategy in an interpersonal context but decidedly not in an organisational context. It is thought that

the public would generally not accept this as an excuse from an organisation, given an organisation's perceived responsibilities and its legitimacy, or sanction to operate (Boyd, 2000). A financial institution that states that it did not intend to lose a client's investment would probably not be forgiven or viewed in a kinder light. This kind of excuse tactic recommended by SCCT is not included as an option in the proposed model for this very reason (amendment to SCCT). Even if perceptions are negative, the organisation can choose a response that can lessen media criticism and which may even earn it positive exposure.

*4.1.3    Section 3 of model: content of communication to the media*
This section of the model describes some alternatives for the actual content of communication to the media.

At this point, the crisis communicator is confronted with a range of possible responses (or a combination of them) from which to choose. These have been separated into two columns (see Figure 1): the right-hand column is entitled "guilty" (organisation at fault) and the left hand column is entitled innocent (organisation not at fault). The aforementioned headings describe the dominant perception of both the public and the media towards an organisation in crisis.

If an organisation is perceived by the public/media to be guilty, but is in fact innocent, the crisis communicator could apply the appropriate non-existent tactics in the innocent/ left-hand column. Conversely, if the organisation is perceived to be innocent, but is in fact guilty, no response is necessarily required, as the organisation's reputation would not be under threat and the situation would not be classified as a crisis from a communication perspective. In the majority of cases, in terms of crisis-management principals, it is only when an organisation is negatively portrayed in the media that a response is required. There are, of course, exceptions. Another organisation or person could be wrongly accused of causing the crisis or the organisation could be concerned that investigations may reveal the truth at a later stage. In such cases, the response adopted would be guided by senior management who are responsible for the ethics and governance of the organisation.

**Non-interchangeable strategies/tactics (addition to SCCT)**

It should be noted that some of the strategies in each column are not interchangeable (addition to SCCT). That is, if an organisation is guilty, it should not employ the denial tactic, or if the organisation is innocent, it is neither necessary nor appropriate to use the justification strategies (addition to SCCT). Ingratiation tactics such as taking a new story to the media or bolstering are only advised when the organisation is not to blame (amendment to SCCT). This is because these tactics might be construed as an avoidance mechanism being utilised by the organisation to draw attention away from its responsibilities. However, when the company is at fault, ingratiation techniques should be subtle, such as through the employment of third-party endorsements.

***Interchangeable strategies/tactics (addition to SCCT)***

The findings of the case studies revealed a number of new strategies that are not included in the SCCT and which can be classified as interchangeable strategies. The first two ingratiation tactics listed below should be incorporated in the crisis response for good effect, regardless of whether the organisation is perceived to be innocent or guilty (amendment to SCCT). These are illustrated in the ▱ panel (see Figure 1) between the left- and right-hand columns and they comprise the following: *Compassion* for any possible victims or casualties of the crisis should be incorporated in the wording of the response (amendment to SCCT). This stance illustrates the integrity of the organisation and does not necessarily mean that the organisation has to pay compensation. If the organisation does not acknowledge the plight of any possible victims and does not express its concern, it could be severely criticised in the media, which could create a further crisis for the organisation. Any bolstering or ingratiation tactics that an innocent organisation applies and that are not preceded by a compassionate statement could be misinterpreted as boasting, arrogance or insensitivity. *Information* about the crisis and/or advice instructional information to prevent further casualties where relevant. The rationale for including the aforementioned tactic in both situations is that, even in cases where the organisation is not to blame, it should still express concern and ensure that it provides the correct details so that clients know what to do during the crisis to protect their finances or their lives.  This is the correct thing to do in a crisis, regardless of whether the organisation is innocent or guilty. Examples of this pertaining to the financial-services sector could be the issuing of tips on how clients can protect themselves when banking online or at an ATM, or from being deceived by pyramid schemes (amendment to SCCT). A word of caution here, however, is that this strategy may be misinterpreted by the public as an obfuscation of duty by the organisation or an attempt to shift the blame to the customers. The tips/information must be phrased in such a way as to be helpful, without giving the impression that the company is absolving itself of all responsibility. Information should be preceded by compassion, as mentioned in the previous point.

Other interchangeable strategies that can be used effectively in both innocent and guilty contexts include: The ingratiation tactic of *third party endorsements* (addition to SCCT); and the *ingratiation tactic of praising others*, such as the media or investigators, for their work in exposing or dealing with a crisis.

An important factor to remember is that any strategy chosen may need to be adapted according to the principles of constant monitoring and flexibility as part of the fundamental building blocks/foundations of crisis communication (Section 1 of model).

*Innocent category:  Strategies to be employed if the organisation is perceived to be not at fault:* If the organisation is not at fault, the crisis-communication team can employ any of the listed options (see left-hand column of model), the aims of which are to convince the media/public that there is no crisis and at the same time to garner positive publicity for the

organisation, particularly through the use of ingratiation strategies. The innocent strategies are classified as: non-existent, suffering/victim and ingratiation. *Non-existent strategies* seek to eliminate the crisis. They could include a categorical denial statement without explanation; a denial statement together with evidence that the rumour is unfounded; or, in certain cases, the organisation might threaten lawsuits against those spreading the rumour (attack tactic). The denial strategy should only be used if the rumours are unfounded (Coombs, 2001). The organisation in crisis may also need to take into account that protestations of innocence could be treated with scepticism by a wary media (Smith, 2006). Another factor to consider is that an attack strategy can be highly risky in that it portrays the organisation in an aggressive light (Hearit, 2001). It is therefore suggested that this strategy only be used in extreme situations (amendment to SCCT). *Suffering/ victim strategies* use messages to elicit public sympathy and may involve emotive arguments and/or third party endorsements (additions to SCCT). *Ingratiation strategies* are where public approval is sought for the organisation through the following tactics: bolstering (associating the organisation with positive traits), transcendence (seeing the context or bigger picture of the crisis), praising others (for example by complimenting the media on their role in the investigations), third party endorsements (addition to SCCT) or finding a new story to take to the media (addition to SCCT).

*Guilty category: strategies to be employed if the organisation is perceived to be at fault:* If the organisation is at fault, the crisis-communication team can choose from the listed tactical options (refer to right-hand column of model – see Figure 1) the aims of which are to get the public/media to view the crisis in a less negative light by acknowledging the organisation's interpretation of events. An organisation can gain positive publicity for its sensitive handling of a crisis, even in instances where it caused the crisis. The following can be employed:

*Localise attention or put the attention or spotlight on one area/person:* A strategy employed by the bank's crisis-communication teams in one of the case studies ensured that the focus was placed on the accused member and not on the full board of the bank. SCCT uses the term *scapegoating*, but because of the negative connotations of this word, *localising attention* is preferred by this model (amendment to SCCT). Unlike SCCT, the proposed model does not recommend either making an excuse for the crisis or shifting blame but rather for the tactic of localising attention, though only if it is legitimate and is not done in a defensive manner.

*Make the crisis an industry issue and not one experienced only by a particular organisation* (addition to SCCT): A bank in one of the case studies was perceived favourably because it brought together all the banks to discuss and tackle the problem of fraud as one affecting the entire banking industry. This tactic helped dilute the negative attention given solely to that one bank in the media space and so protected the organisation's credibility.

*Support an independent investigation into the crisis* (addition to SCCT): This tactic is aimed at creating credibility with the public by showing a transparency and willingness to have external parties investigate the matter and share the findings with the media.

**Justification strategies**

These strategies seek to minimise damage associated with the crisis, often through clarification. From the case studies conducted, it seems that justification strategies should be used with caution and are not always successful because they may come across as insensitive and defensive (amendment to SCCT). The proposed model suggests a cautionary approach when using tactics such as that of minimising injury as proposed by SCCT (amendment to SCCT). This finding concurs with that of Huang (2005: 32) who argues that this response could be associated with manipulation and could ruin organisation-public relationships. If the organisation is perceived to be to blame, even if technically it is not - as in the case study conducted - the proposed model suggests that, at the very least, compassion be demonstrated for the victims of the crisis.

**Ingratiation strategies**

These strategies are designed to improve public perceptions about the organisation by associating it with positive attributes and include independent third party endorsements and praising others (addition to SCCT). These tactics involve either soliciting comment in support of the organisation's arguments, or defence from respected, independent third parties (addition to SCCT). All of the banks investigated engaged in this practice that has however not been mentioned in the literature. Again, this tactic lends credibility to the organisation in crisis and helps to dilute negative sentiment. In cases where the organisation is at fault, this particular tactic serves as a defence, and because it comes from a source outside the organisation, it is perceived as being more reliable than if the organisation themselves put forward the argument. Praising third parties, such as the Competition Board for pointing out unfair practices, or the police for their investigations into the matter, or even the journalists for exposing a situation, can earn the organisation favourable publicity.

**Mortification strategies**

These strategies are designed to encourage the public to forgive the organisation. They include: remedial action, repentance and rectification. Remedial action could include an explanation of what the organisation is doing to prevent the crisis from re-occurring. An organisation could combine praise with remedial tactics. For example: Thank you for drawing our attention to the issue. To ensure that this does not happen again we are taking the following actions. To prevent further negative publicity, even though it was not obliged to do so, one of the banks in the case studies also offered full financial compensation to the victims – an example of a rectification strategy. The value of compensation would be dependent on a full situation analysis which would determine how much responsibility an organisation should bear. Repentance is when the organisation publicly accepts full responsibility for the crisis and begs the stakeholders' forgiveness.

## 5. CRITICAL EVALUATION OF PROPOSED CRISIS-RESPONSE MODEL (CR MODEL)

### Weaknesses of the CR model

As with most models, the quest for simplicity may affect the application of this model to real-life situations of crisis. It is possible that some explanatory factors and variables have been excluded. Because this is an interpretive model, there are obvious shortcomings regarding the potential for generalisation. However, the aim is neither to provide a model of standard response nor to dictate all organisational behaviours in a crisis. Rather, the aim is to provide guidelines for the decision-making process. It must be remembered that crises are complex and demand complex, situation-driven responses (Englehardt et al., 2004).

### Strengths of the CR model

The CR model specifies the basic building blocks necessary for crisis response and suggests some strategies and tactics to adopt in communicating with the media, which are dependent on the context in which the crisis occurs. It thus combines and synthesises all the critical factors and decision-making processes for considered communication during the crisis-response phase. It provides the crisis communicator with a process to follow and offers suggestions about the actual content of crisis-response communication and strategy. It also warns the communicator of the potential pitfalls to be encountered in applying certain tactics. The literature review indicates that no other model illustrates or combines these factors with the integrity of the CR model, which thus makes it unique.

The model can also be applied during the crisis-preparation stage to guide the communicator in formulating possible standard responses to predictable crises. It provides a comprehensive summary of all the factors needing to be considered before compiling a media response.

The model also facilitates the categorisation of the crisis – as one in which the media will consider the organisation to be or not to be at fault, and then, based on research, the model suggests ideas for various strategies and tactics that have been known to be successful. Because it is based on tried and tested strategies gleaned either through the literature review or from the research material, the model has empirical significance. It addresses the limitations of other theories - such as SCCT - by acknowledging that context plays an important role in deciding what strategy to adopt. Although the context of the research was limited to the banking environment in South Africa, the model highlights the imperative that context should be considered before making a decision about content. This gives the model a certain degree of adaptability to different organisational sectors and different cultures or countries. This is a key advantage of the model.

It also accommodates crisis-response strategies that allow for organisational statements that express concern and sympathy without placing blame on the organisation, which situation may carry legal and financial responsibilities (Englehardt et al., 2004). This factor is sadly lacking in other models.

The bulk of related research offers task-level support of specific foreseen crises (Hale et al., 2005) and thus provides excellent planning strategies. What the CR model does is to provide crisis-communication support and content-decisionmaking tools during the actual crisis. Not every crisis-communication strategy can be planned in exact detail before a crisis commences because the crisis-communication team needs to monitor and adjust its communication to meet public perceptions and to exploit possible opportunities that may arise.

The model highlights the precepts of progressive systems approaches by focusing on two-way symmetrical communication, through both a constant monitoring of the environment and flexible responses thereto. In this, it presents a more dynamic and responsive approach than those of the traditional linear models.

In summary, the article has built a qualitatively based model of crisis-response communication that could prove to be useful when an organisation is under time pressure to provide a response to the media. The more we know about the crisis-response process, the more effective a crisis manager can be (Coombs, 1999). The model has been based, in large part, on data collected from crisis managers in a real business context, based upon their actual experiences in handling crises, and also, for the rest, from knowledge gained from an extensive literature review of material gleaned from similar studies. The article thus provides empirical evidence to demonstrate the value of categories of responses and is not purely theoretical.

### *Recommendations for future research*

Future research could further investigate and evaluate the various categories of responses in order to determine their effectiveness and to create further response options to add to the model. The link between the responses chosen and the context of the crisis could be examined in order to advance the arguments made. Additional research could assess how people perceive the various crisis responses. A larger sample, which could include other industries and other contexts, would increase a researcher's ability to generalise the findings, which is however not possible with a sample of the present size. In these ways, the model could be further refined.

### *6.   CONCLUSION*

In this exploratory article, literature and data drawn from South African case studies are translated into a conceptual model that acknowledges the importance for crisis communication of context, flexibility and constant feedback/monitoring of the environment. The new crisis-response model (CR model) was designed to assist an organisation in protecting its image during a crisis by assuring the media that there is no crisis (in the case of unfounded rumours); by encouraging the media to view the crisis in a less negative light by acknowledgment of the organisation's interpretation of events; and, by influencing the media to see the organisation more positively as a result of effective management of the crisis. A significant contribution has been made towards addressing the current crisis-communication dilemma with the media by filling the gaps in the literature to such an extent that attention has been drawn to the crisis-response stage, especially

in dealing with the media. Specifically, crisis communication with the media has been seen from an integrated perspective and goes beyond the actual management of a specific crisis. Furthermore, this has been supported empirically by a case-study approach to link the crisis-communication media literature with reality and to distinguish - from the various dimensions of crisis-response strategies - one aspect that tends not be explicitly explored in the rapidly expanding crisis-communication literature. This article has hopefully made a contribution to the limited knowledge in this important field of study, which could form a benchmark for further research and analysis. This article further supports Pollard and Hotho's view (2006: 722) that we should "move beyond the exclusively negative definitions preferred in the literature and to note that a crisis, while immediately of negative impact, may also have positive consequences, and, in fact, may even constitute a crucial 'turning point' for the organisation".

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