

**Andrii Kyrychok, PhD in Social Communications**

*National Technical University of Ukraine "Ihor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute", Ukraine*

## **THE STUDY OF THE GENERAL NATURE OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

The article provides an overview of research in the field of crisis communications. The author reviews the main developments that have implemented specialists in public relations, crisis communications and related industries in the field of crisis response. The article focuses on the study of all the components of crisis response and communications. Crisis communication is a specific area of research in the field of public relations, which continues to grow. It also can be sad that the topic of crisis management has become dominant in studies of public relations. Soon we will be able to observe a situation where crisis communication will be virtually independent sector or minimally dependent on public relations. Crisis communication is inextricably linked with three other key areas of PR: risky communication, problem management, and reputation management. This three aspects need to be studied in combination.

**Key words:** crisis communication, crisis management, image, public relations, approach to investigation.

**Introduction.** Due to the technology development in the post-industrial era, there also grows the amount of information. As a result, the threat of information attacks increases. This leads to the long-term systemic information conflicts. The purpose of such conflicts is to make a mock of the opponent's successes, weaken its positions and impose point of view advantageous for the enemy. That is why both the private company and the state as a whole need to build an effective anti-crisis communication strategy that allows them to overcome the information threat and maintain their positions. In the civilized world the crisis communication has been already a topic for discussion for quite a perceptible time. Many scientists have investigated the crisis from different points of view, but it is difficult to find a study in which the general nature of the crisis communication and its components has been described. By nature we mean both the features and interrelated elements of the crisis communication, as a field of knowledge. Our goal is to analyze these features and the related spheres in order to study this phenomenon in more detail.

**Statement of basic materials.** Applied character of the crisis communication is reflected in the development of the body of knowledge. The first important study was written by practitioners and came out in non-academic journals<sup>1</sup>. It is important to remember that scientists carrying out the applied researches will anyway address the theoretical foundations to solve the problem. The managerial researches focus more on the crisis management itself and treat the crisis communications as one of the crisis counteraction elements.

The next stage of the evolution in the crisis communication research is the case studies. The very first example is the application of apology to the crisis communication<sup>2</sup>. Educational case studies were stricter, as they systematically applied special analytical methods and tools. A vivid example is the study of W. Benoit related to the restoration of images<sup>3</sup>. A large number of the published case studies used the image restoration techniques connected with this study. But some scientists began to call for using more analytical methods to study the crisis.

Communication is the essence of the anti-crisis management. We consider it expedient to expand on a review of the studies related to each phase. It is also necessary to clearly distinguish between the two main types of the crisis communication: the anti-crisis knowledge management and the management of the

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<sup>1</sup> Bergman, E. (1994). Crisis? What crisis? *Communication World*, 11(4), 9–13.

<sup>2</sup> Dionisopolous, G.N., Vibbert, S.L. (1988). CBS vs Mobil Oil: Charges of creative bookkeeping. In H. R. Ryan (Ed.). *Oratorical encounters: Selected studies and sources of 20th century political accusation and apologies*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 214–252.

<sup>3</sup> Benoit, W.L. (1995). *Accounts, excuses, and apologies: A theory of image restoration*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

concerned parties' response. The anti-crisis knowledge management includes the identification of the sources, the collection and exchange of information, its analysis, and decision-making. The management of the concerned parties' response involves communicative actions aimed at finding out how the concerned parties perceive the crisis and everything connected with it.

During the pre-crisis phase, the crisis communication is focused on the analyzing processes and reducing risks. "The Preventive model" of the crisis management is one of the most common in this sphere<sup>1</sup>. The preventive actions are a priority for such a model. It is based on the awareness at the pre-crisis phase. In order to ensure the decision-making in the crisis situations and to prevent them it is recommended to use the pre-crisis messages to get the concerned parties ready for the crisis<sup>2</sup>. Using a biological correspondence, the pre-crisis communication provides the concerned parties with the information about a potential crisis. This helps to create resilience to negative responses and negative media coverage of the crisis. The results of their studies in many respects repeat the results of the previous studies. In other words, a reputation plays a great role for the organization even in times of crisis.

Some studies divide the anti-crisis planning into four stages<sup>3</sup>. The idea is that the anti-crisis management will become more efficient when combined with the problem management. A proactive, symmetric process has four stages. The first stage is the problem management focused on the monitoring. The crisis managers try to find out the first signs of a crisis and take measures to solve this problem. The early detection gives time for analysis and strategy development. The second stage is the planning of the preventive actions. The crisis managers take measures to prevent a crisis. This stage develops into the monitoring and problem analysis. The crisis managers also assess threats in terms of losses that may be met by the organization.

The third stage is a crisis. At this stage, the anti-crisis team involves representatives of the press service and enhances its activity. The fourth stage is a post-crisis, when the problem is still monitored in the media involving other concerned parties. The anti-crisis managers continue to interact with groups of the concerned parties and assess the efforts of the anti-crisis management. Unfortunately, there is a fairly small amount of studies on this topic, despite its enormous potential.

Nowadays the study of crisis perception is as relevant as ever. Especially it concerns the Internet. Here attention was paid to practicing specialists in the field of the crisis communications and their opinion on how to reduce the negative response to the crisis<sup>4</sup>.

Special attention shall be paid to the developments connected with the psycholinguistic component. In the course of the study it was found that when people hear the phrase "no comments" they start to think that the organization is guilty and the leaders hide something. The studies of the response to the transparency of events show that the organization's representative should build a team of the experienced speakers and people who understand the psychology of the masses. This is necessary to reduce tension during a crisis<sup>5</sup>.

The studies related to the psychological responses to the crisis events are very important. The scientists from the University of Tennessee R. Heath and M. Palenchar studied the activity of people after they were informed about the upcoming crisis. They found that the productivity and morale of these people significantly decreased, and instead of teaming up they just suffer from fear of a crisis<sup>6</sup>.

Since the existence of the organization may depend on its response to a crisis, this phase is the most studied. The first studies in the field of the crisis response were close to the guidelines for responding to the crisis. Scientists and practitioners note the problem shall be responded within an hour<sup>7</sup>. The advent of the

<sup>1</sup> Seeger, M.W., Sellnow, T.L., Ulmer, R.R. (1998). Communication, organization and crisis. In M.E. Roloff (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 21*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 231–275.

<sup>2</sup> Olaniran, B., Williams, D.E. (2008). Applying anticipatory and relational perspectives to the Nigerian delta region oil crisis. *Public Relations Review*, 34: 57–59.

<sup>3</sup> Wan, H.H., Pfau, M. (2004). The relative effectiveness of inoculation, bolstering, and combined approaches in crisis communication. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 16 (3), 301–328.

<sup>4</sup> Coombs, W.T., Holladay, S.J. (2002). Helping crisis managers protect reputational assets: Initial tests of the situational crisis communication theory. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 16, 165–186.

<sup>5</sup> Coombs, W.T. (2007). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding* (2nd edn.). Los Angeles: Sage.

<sup>6</sup> González-Herrero, A., Pratt, C.B. (1996). An integrated symmetrical model for crisis- communications management. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 8 (2), 79–105.

<sup>7</sup> Feeley, T.H., de Turck, M.A. (1995). Global cue usage in behavioral lie detection. *Communication Quarterly*, 43 (4), 420–430.

Internet reduced this time. The suppression of facts allows the enemy to control the flow of information<sup>1</sup>. In addition, the studies have proven that it is very important for the organization to announce bad news itself. If the organization is first to disclose the information about the crisis, the harm to its reputation is lower than if this is done by media. This effect was called “to decorate the noise” and proves that organizations should discuss the crisis instead of ignoring the situation.

The major part of the studies in the field of the crisis communication focuses on the use of anti-crisis measures. For quite a long time the scientists try to understand how the crisis communication can be used to achieve special results. It is important to remember that different crisis response strategies are used to achieve different goals. A scientist from the University of Texas D. Sturges defines three strategic elements of the crisis communication: information briefing – how to cope with the crisis physically; information adjustment – how to deal with it psychologically; improving reputation – an attempt to smooth the damage, caused by the crisis. It is obvious that these three interrelated elements effectively influence the process of overcoming the crisis.

D. Sturges also states that the informational briefing is a priority task amid the crisis. In this case the public safety comes out on top. The scientists studied the reaction of people to information about the crisis and came to the conclusion that it is very important to conduct “the informational briefing” in terms of a preventive response to the crisis<sup>2</sup>. This is the way the organization can protect itself from the undesirable consequences caused by the crisis.

The information adjustment includes expressing condolences to the victims and conducting explanatory work regarding the activity of the organization aimed at preventing a recurrence of the crisis. The scientists considered these elements as a reputation improving strategy. They claim that it is very important for the organization when its management cares about the staff and expresses condolence<sup>3</sup>.

The crisis communication has been studied from many points of view. For example, the scientists from the University of Missouri M. Allen and R. Caillouet have studied the anti-crisis measures of one organization for two years consecutively<sup>4</sup>. Other scientists have studied different types of political crisis. They express the idea that different crises require different anti-crisis measures. This study reveals that the type of crisis situation directly affects the anti-crisis measures<sup>5</sup>. Another interesting study is conducted on the basis of the content analysis on how the leaders of organizations interact with the media during the crisis<sup>6</sup>. This study was supplemented by other, no less important studies on how budget organizations recover after the crisis<sup>7</sup>.

In general, the variety of studies in the field of the crisis communications is impressive. For example, the scientists from the University of Tennessee K. Stephens and P. Melon investigated the role of the technical translation in a strategic response to the crisis and the speed of response using this type of activity. The subject of their research was mainly the human-caused crises. They studied how and in what form this information gets into the mass media through press releases<sup>8</sup>.

It is commonly believed that most studies in the field of the crisis communication came to us from the Western science. We agree with this statement, but we want to note that a large number of studies in the Eastern science have made a significant contribution to establishing the crisis communication as a field of knowledge. The scientists from China studied the features of the crisis response in their country and the differences in the crisis response approaches. Another group of scientists investigated the reasons that led one of the largest Chinese companies to a crisis situation<sup>9</sup>. The crisis provides an opportunity to assess

<sup>1</sup> Heath, R.L., Palenchar, K.J. (2000). Community relations and risk communication: A longitudinal study of the impact of emergency response messages. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12, 131–161.

<sup>2</sup> Barton, L. (2001). *Crisis in organizations II* (2nd edn.). Cincinnati: College Divisions South-Western.

<sup>3</sup> Brummett, B. (1980). Towards a theory of silence as a political strategy. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66, 289–303.

<sup>4</sup> Gibson, D.C. (1997). Print communication tactics for consumer product recalls: A prescriptive taxonomy. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 42 (2), 42–46.

<sup>5</sup> Allen, M.W., Caillouet, R.H. (1994). Legitimation endeavors: Impression management strategies used by an organization in crisis. *Communication Monographs*, 61, 44–62.

<sup>6</sup> Huang, Y.H. (2006). Crisis situations, communication strategies, and media coverage: A multicase study revisiting the communicative response model. *Communication Research*, 33, 180–205.

<sup>7</sup> Holladay, S.J. (2009). Crisis communication strategies in the media coverage of chemical accidents. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Lerbinger, O. (1997). *The crisis manager: Facing risk and responsibility*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

<sup>9</sup> Stephens, K.K., Malone, P.C. (2009). If the organizations won't give us information: The use of multiple new media for crisis technical translation. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 21(2).

the activities of the organization, including those which led to the crisis and the efforts necessary to settle the crises.

We consider it expedient to define the principles of the crisis communication interaction with other involved / related spheres of science. Under the term “related spheres” we mean branches that intersect in theoretical, methodical, methodological and applied aspects and interact with crisis communications during a crisis.

The problem management is a relatively young branch of learning. It is aimed at strategic management in problem situations. This type of activity involves the identification of the problem and measures to address it. R. Heath, a leading expert in the problem management, points out that this is a “strategic and ethical formation of national interests”<sup>1</sup>. One of the results of the problem management is the organizational change aimed at adapting to the new requirements arising from the problem situation. The scientist from the University of Design and Communication in New York R. Heath also highlights the complexity of the problem management in his definition: “a strategic set of functions to reduce friction and increase harmony between organizations and their audience on the stage of public opinion”.

At a time when the problem management emerged from politics, problems have ceased to exist only in the range of influence of the decision-makers from the government. The effective problem management is one of the forms of preventing a crisis. By managing the problems that arise, crisis managers can take actions before the problem grows into a full-blown crisis.

Secondly, the crisis can cause problems, focusing on the problem itself. The crisis can increase the level of social discontent. Since the problem management is often used in the government, the managers, namely the government officials, may introduce new effective laws to improve the situation. The crisis and the problem are interrelated elements and can be derived from each other. Usually, problems arise when risks become more visible due to a crisis. Taking this into account, farther, let us consider the interaction of communications and risk management.

The risk management is an activity which helps to detect the potential risk of loss. The term “threat”, for example, is used to state a more serious risk potential.

First, the risk can develop into a crisis. Most of the studies conducted by the crisis managers are designed to identify risks before they grow into a crisis. The preparation for a crisis itself is based on the analysis of the crisis situations onset. The effective risk management can prevent a crisis. Anti-crisis managers can identify the risk that may turn into a crisis and take measures to reduce or eliminate this risk<sup>2</sup>. Second, the crisis may uncover a barely noticeable risk. The terrorism was rarely an important part of the anti-crisis planning before the events on September 11, 2011. The crisis may create the need to manage such risks.

Risk communication is a “social object, a transactional communicative process between individuals and organizations regarding the nature, cause, degree, significance, variability, control and overall perception of the risk”<sup>3</sup>. Risk communication is, by definition, a dialogue between the organizations, that create risks, and the concerned parties, that carry the risk. Risk management helps risk carriers, those who face risks consequences, to get used to this state. The explanation of the risks to those who carry them and the attempt to understand their concerns is a part of the risk management process.

Risk management can be an important part of preparing for a crisis. By sharing crisis preparations with those who carry the risk, organizations demonstrate that they take the responsibility for risk and work with those who carry the risk. Thus, they demonstrate a high level of management, including the effective investments search. The scientists from the University of Houston R. Heath and K. Palenchar found that the knowledge of the emergency warning systems increased the concern about the risks, but at the same time helped to resolve the crisis situation more quickly. Informed citizens were more attentive and did not lose their vigilance because of a false sense of security<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Heath, R.L. (2005). Issues management. In R. L. Heath (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of public relations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 460–463.

<sup>2</sup> Coombs, W.T., Holladay, S.J. (2002). Helping crisis managers protect reputational assets: Initial tests of the situational crisis communication theory. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 16, 165–186.

<sup>3</sup> Palenchar, M.J. (2005). Risk communication. In R. L. Heath (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of public relations* (pp. 752 – 755). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

<sup>4</sup> González-Herrero, A., Pratt, C.B. (1996). An integrated symmetrical model for crisis- communications management. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 8 (2), 79–105.

Risk management may also be needed during the crisis response period. Information regarding the risk and problems may be a part of the communication needs after the crisis. For example, which risk of chemical waste does exist now, and which will exist in the future? Risk management involves advisory and regulatory information. The advisory information helps to protect oneself from the crisis physically, while the regulatory information helps to cope with the crisis psychologically. For example, when the members of the community are told of evacuation or shelter in place, they will be more cooperative if they are informed of the crisis and sure of the given recommendations. So, only the effective risk management at the preparation stage may have a significant effect later.

Information management also includes the determination of the crisis causes. Technical information and risk information may be part of this explanation. Risk communication may help in this process and ensure a proper response to the risk<sup>1</sup>.

In view of this, it is important to mention the management of risks for the purpose of reputation support. This social phenomenon has quickly become an important aspect of the research for any organization. A fair reputation helps to motivate employees, attract customers, promote investment, recruit the best employees, and increase financial results. Figuratively speaking, reputation is the attitude of the society towards an organization<sup>2</sup>. To be more precise, reputation is a collective estimate on how well an organization justifies confidence in the past. Also, reputation is a form of attitude based on whether an organization meets or does not meet certain criteria or expectations of the concerned parties regarding this organization. It shows the evaluation criteria applied to the organization.

Reputation is created due to the direct and indirect contact with the organization. The direct contact includes the possibility of buying a product, going shopping or using services. The indirect contact involves a message from the organization, oral communication, the Internet message from the organization, and information received about the organization from mass media.

Large organizations can spend millions of dollars on creating and cultivating a positive reputation. At the same time, any crisis can pose a threat to the reputation of the company. The crisis is also a failure, which signals about a mistake, which could be made by the organization itself. In this view, the reputation can be compared with the bank account. The organization spends time and energy to deposit to the reputation account. The crisis acts so as to revoke the credit of reputation<sup>3</sup>. That is why a part of the crisis response is devoted to its recovery. Reputation is a vital, intangible resource that shall be recovered as quickly as possible. The effective protection of reputation during a crisis minimizes the damage it may cause to the organization's reputation and lays a solid foundation for the relief of the crisis consequences<sup>4</sup>. The ineffective protection of reputation in times of crisis increases the harm to the organization's reputation. That is why, protection of the reputation during a crisis is an important tool for creating and maintaining a fair reputation. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a strong relationship between reputation and its protection in a down economy.

The reputation of the company before the crisis plays an important role in the crisis management. Negative reputation in turn impedes efforts to settle a crisis, increasing losses caused by the crisis. This was called the "velcro effect". The researchers found that the crisis in any case causes some harm to the reputation of the company, regardless of whether it is positive or negative. It is important to remember that a positive reputation will help to recover after the crisis and to restore the public's confidence more quickly, while a bad reputation can increase damage from the crisis.

**Conclusion** The above-mentioned highlights the crisis and the post-crisis relationship between the reputation and the reputation protection during the crisis. However, reputation is an important factor in preventing a crisis, too. It should be said that the social problems can be part of the evaluation criteria used to analyze the reputation. In fact, the management of social issues is one of the forms of the reputation risk management. Problem management helps to identify the relevant social problem. The reputation management department integrates the social problem into organizational practices and expresses

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<sup>1</sup> Palenchar, M.J., Heath, R. (2007). Strategic risk communication: Adding value to society. *Public Relations Review*, 33, 120–129.

<sup>2</sup> Davies, G., Chun, R., da Silva, R.V., Roper, S. (2003). *Corporate reputation and competitiveness*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> Coombs, W.T., Holladay, S.J. (2007). The negative communication dynamic: Exploring the impact of stakeholder affect on behavioral intentions. *Journal of Communication Management*, 11, 300–312.

<sup>4</sup> Coombs, W.T. (2007). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding* (2nd edn.). Los Angeles: Sage.

the organization's commitment to the social problem through various means, such as advertising or PR. Problem and reputation management can be combined in order to prevent crises deemed to jeopardize the organization's reputation.

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