

Multicultural Environments and Their Challenges to Crisis Communication

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Abstract

Grounded theory analysis was applied to qualitative interviews with 25 communication professionals concerning cultural influences on crisis. This approach yielded several findings. First, public relations practitioners had difficulties in defining multiculturalism, often equating cultural diversity with communicating with Latinos. Second, interviewees saw cultural differences as just one aspect of diversity, emphasizing that age, religion, and education differences also affect corporate discourse. Third, although professionals considered culture a key element of crisis management, they did not feel prepared to handle the challenges of a multicultural crisis, nor did they report that they used culturally adjusted crisis strategies often. By integrating cultural competence and crisis management frameworks, this study provides the foundation for an in-depth understanding of crises, where scholars and professionals can pair crisis strategies with audiences' cultural expectations. Training initiatives focused on increasing levels of cultural competence can make organizations and communication professionals ready to the challenges of a global market.

Keywords

crisis communication, cultural competence, intercultural strategies, multicultural environments, corporate communication

According to labor predictions, the workforce of this century is characterized by increased numbers of women, minorities, intergenerational workers, and different lifestyles (Langdon, McMenamin, & Krolik, 2002). As Wakefield (2001) stated, a global market composed of a multiethnic audience is currently a reality to the vast majority

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of companies. Enterprises face a need to work and communicate competently with expanding heterogeneity of internal and external audiences, including differences in gender, age, race, religion, ethnicity, and cultural background (Barker & Gower, 2010).

Mirroring society's interconnectedness, many organizations have become similar to flexible webs, where connections among organizational actors, such as employees, customers, suppliers just to name a few, transcend geographical and political boundaries (Castells, 2000a). Diversity has become part of companies' social fabric and can be understood as the potential behavioral differences among group members in relation to other groups (Roberson, 2006). Individuals and organizations create and share social, historical, and cultural values through their communication practices (Sha, 2006). As a result, public relations (PR) and communication scholarship needs to take into account the influence of diverse identities on PR strategies (Banks, 2000).

Several examples illustrate the ways in which crises in our global society and economy have multinational and multicultural effects. The recent U.S. subprime mortgage crisis provides an example of the interconnectedness between corporations around the world and the consequences for society. Since mid-2007, banks and their stakeholders all over the world have felt the impact of what was supposedly a U.S. crisis ("German Bank IKB Hit," 2007). National damages—understood here as economic, reputational, and emotional losses—have been massive. Thousands of people have lost their houses and jobs. Financial institutions have lost billions of dollars, pushing the United States to face a frightening recession. However, the subprime crisis has much broader consequences. Indeed, it represents a macro crisis that has put at risk the financial system worldwide ("As Crisis Plays Out," 2008).

When single corporations face crises, these troubling events can also encompass multicultural perceptions and multinational consequences, as crises affecting Merck's VIOXX and Mattel's toys showed. In fact, lead poisoning caused by Mattel's toy cars led to the discovery of very different perceptions about toys' safety among Chinese manufacturers. According to Emily Cao, a sales representative for a major Chinese producer of stuffed playthings, before Mattel's recall European companies had requested a substitution of vinyl or plastic noses, which may contain toxic chemicals, for embroidered noses on stuffed toys. According to Cao, for the Chinese producers the European request was an exaggeration of minimal risks. The request was ignored. After Mattel's recall, safety issues are being taken much more seriously by Chinese toy producers (Johnson, 2007).

According to the rhetorical approach to crisis communication adopted in this project, crises like these are created, described, and resolved through communication (Hearit & Courtright, 2004). Communicative actions, influenced by cultural perceptions and values, help to create reality through the meanings ascribed to situations (Eisenberg & Riley, 2000) as well as form the basis to interpret critical moments (Stohl, 2000).

Crisis communication scholarship has investigated to a certain extent the ways in which diverse audiences perceive and respond to crises. However, crisis communication scholars have not examined yet whether cultural influences are considered relevant by communication professionals during crises. This project aims to close this gap,

examining how producers of communication strategies—communication professionals—deal with cultural variability when designing crisis strategies and whether culturally sensitive communication strategies are consistently applied.

Crises and Communication Strategies

Crises represent serious threats to the most fundamental goals of an organization and its stakeholders. These events are unexpected and sometimes unpredictable. No matter what the size of an organization, a crisis interrupts normal business and damages corporate reputation; it can imperil future growth, profitability, and even the company's survival (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). Crises jeopardize the interests of employees, managers, suppliers, stockholders, victims, and community members. Sometimes lives are at stake. As a result, crisis episodes affect individuals' sense of reality, security, and normality. Problems happen at companies every day, but one single crisis may be enough to significantly damage or even destroy an organization (Coombs, 1999; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Hearit & Courtright, 2004; Heath & Millar, 2004; Lerbinger, 1997).

As Frandsen and Johansen (2010) postulated, crisis communication scholarship follow two major research traditions. One focused on the ways in which organizations communicate during crises. This represents a "rhetorical or text-oriented" approach to crisis responses (p. 351). The second major tradition—a "strategic or context-oriented" approach (p. 352)—focuses on "explaining when, where, and to whom an organization communicates during a crisis situation" (p. 352). Whereas this project adopts a rhetorical approach to the definition of crisis, assuming that these events are created and resolved through communication; it also examines the context of corporate responses to crises asking whether communication professionals take into account the cultural background of key audiences.

Crisis communication strategies have also a twofold role (Fearn-Banks, 2002) and not all crisis communication strategies have the same goal (Sturges, 1994). First, these actions aim to control damages, inform audiences of immediate risks and procedures to be followed and report corrective actions (Fearn-Banks, 2002). Second, crisis communication strategies play a symbolic role, aiming to construct a positive account of the events and the organizational actions (Coombs, 1998). In addition, during a crisis aftermath communication strategies also aim "to influence public opinion development" (Sturges, 1994, p. 303) in order to increase levels of positive opinions about the company or lower levels of negative opinions. Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, and Johansen (2010) corroborated this idea, arguing that crisis strategies can "reduce the level of negative emotions experienced by stakeholders" (p. 338), which in turn can diminish reputation threats.

As Sturges (1994) argued, a narrow focus on solely controlling damages may cause long-lasting effects on securing positive relationships between organizations and their key audiences. For example, more than two decades after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska, on March 24, 1989, the company still battles against economic and reputational losses. Exxon's communication strategies work to foster a proenvironmental

persona, attributing the cause of the incident to myriad factors (Heath, 2004). However, the company's actions contradict the proenvironmental façade. Exxon spent 20 years in a legal battle to avoid paying \$470 million in interest on more than \$507.5 million in punitive damages following the 11 million gallon spill of crude in Prince William Sound. It was not until June 30, 2009, that Exxon decided not to appeal further and announced that it would soon make a payment on the interest accrued during its years of resistance (Pemberton, 2009).

Despite the occurrence of a concrete event, crises are highly influenced by the communicative actions taken to define, describe, and solve them (Hearit & Courtright, 2004). Ni (2009) claimed that perceptions of events can be equally, if not more, important than the actual event. In effect, from a social constructionist approach, it is possible to argue that actual events are a questionable concept. Events take different forms in the minds of each and every actor involved (Eisenberg & Riley, 2000; Wakefield, 2001). Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge that crisis episodes are subject to different interpretations that sometimes illustrate competing points of view (Heath & Millar, 2004). In effect, crises and responses to these critical episodes are small narratives, representing individual interpretations of what has happened. Generally, these interpretations do not follow a linear and organized process (Tyler, 2005) but are subjective and greatly influenced by culture (Eisenberg & Riley, 2000).

Culture Diversity and Corporate Messages in a Networked Environment

The current state of society, characterized by high dependence on technologies, virtual forms of interaction, and vast possibilities for cultural exchange (Castells, 2000b), makes even more important an in-depth understanding of crisis communication strategies as symbolic actions, subject to myriad interpretations (Heath & Millar, 2004).

Cultural diversity (Curtin & Gaither, 2007) and the emergence of global cultures (Castells, 2000a, Urry, 2003; Van Dijk, 1999) are the two sides of a coin caused by an interconnected society and market. As these authors pointed out globalization brings faraway realities to almost everyone's living room. On one hand, we have more exposure to cultural diversity. On the other, global tastes mixed with local touches are emerging at a fast pace. As a result, organizations have to adapt the ways in which they behave and communicate by taking into account that the entire world is listening and expects to be addressed immediately and effectively when a crisis hits (Bush, 2009; Stohl, 2000).

As Hofstede (1984) proposed, culture is "the collective programming of the mind" (p. 21) that guides individuals' interactions with each other and with organizations. Culture is composed of the system of meanings that specific groups adopt to interpret and act upon reality (Banks, 2000). Individuals' reactions to corporation and their messages are strongly influenced by their beliefs, values, and culture. When human beings interact, they do so based on a deeply interconnected web of cultural values and traditions (Stohl, 2000).

However, it is necessary to emphasize that cultures are not stable and crystallized concepts passed from generation to generation, from group to group without changes or variations (Morris, 2002). As McSweeney (2002) and Aritz and Walker (2010) argued, critiquing Hofstede's (1984) model of cultural dimensions, national populations or ethnic groups do not necessarily share a unique culture. Different cultural values may be found based on distinct samples and contexts examined. It is necessary to exercise caution when applying broad cultural generalizations given that they overlook "variation within cultural categories" (Jameson, 2007, p. 201). This author argued that a comprehensive definition of culture identity should take into account other aspects in addition to nationality, such as vocation, language, class, and lifestyle, among others.

In effect, in theory and in practice, there are myriad definitions and understandings of multiculturalism, culture diversity, culture identity, intercultural, and intracultural communication. In order to make data collection and analysis feasible, this study adopts specific definitions for some of these terms. The definitions adopted are restrictive, bringing limitations to the analysis that will be discussed later. For operational reasons, this study focused solely on cultural diversity, understood as the potential behavioral differences among group members in relation to other ethnic groups (Banks, 2000; Roberson, 2006). It is necessary also to point out, that cultural values were not equated with nationality in this study or conceptualized as stable categories. It is understood that different ethnic groups in one nation may have different cultural values. In addition, cultural diversity is examined in light of its potential consequences to crisis events.

Indeed, lack of cultural sensitivity may prevent organizations from developing effective corporate messages. Prior scholarship has identified that transnational workplaces blend organizational cultures and diverse cultural values (Pal & Buzzanell, 2008), creating an environment where employees seek to understand the ways in which their cultural values affect their work, as well as adjusting their cultural identities in response to workplace situations (Bridgewater & Buzzanell, 2010).

Along the same lines, lack of cultural sensitivity will likely hinder organizations' chances to identify risk factors and to minimize the probability of a potential crisis. As Lee (2004) postulated, cultural misunderstandings is one factor that makes already-acute crises worse. Moreover, cultural characteristics may affect the importance regarded to crisis prevention and planning. For example, Liu, Chang, and Zhao (2009) showed that Chinese executives do not equate crisis management with prevention and planning. Problematic business behaviors are tolerated so as to maintain a harmonious environment.

Similarly, examining South Korean crisis communication practices, Kim, Cha, and Kim (2008) pointed out that collectivist values affect perceptions of what constitutes a problematic situation and an adequate crisis response: unconditional loyalty to corporations, the importance of interpersonal relationships, and internal harmony guide crisis communication strategies in South Korea. They emphasized that respecting the South Korean crisis communication style is a necessary condition for successful crisis recovery.

Other scholars have concentrated their research on the ways diverse audiences perceive and interpret corporations and their communication strategies during acute crises. For example, Lee (2004), investigating Hong Kong consumers' evaluation of organizational crises, suggested that attributions of responsibility are influenced by cultural values, affecting what type of crisis strategies should be applied. She pointed out that a no-comment response is equated with wisdom in the Chinese culture, and is therefore a well-accepted crisis strategy in Hong Kong, whereas in Western cultures, silence at a critical moment is interpreted as lack of control and uncertainty by a corporation, and is not an effective strategy (Coombs, 1999).

Exploring different aspects of Asian cultures, other scholars have investigated the consequences of personal connections and collectivist values in communication strategies. For example, Sriramesh (2002) showed that PR practices in Asia often are limited to maintaining good relationships with the government. Hung (2004) argued that the relational orientation of Chinese culture greatly affects organizations' communication practices. Guanxi, the Chinese word for personal network, has to be the basis for PR and crisis tactics, according to Hung. Similarly, analyzing how collectivist values shape crisis communication strategies in Taiwan, Huang, Lin, and Su (2005) stated that relationship maintenance and cultivation are the main purposes of communication in the Chinese culture. As a result, these researchers identified new categories of crisis responses grounded on strategic ambiguity that can put a crisis to rest. Termed *diversion*, this new type of crisis response represents the necessity to maintain a harmonious relationship even if a problem cannot be solved.

Cultural influences on corporate strategies are not limited to differences between countries. Cultural diversity is an increasingly important characteristic of audiences within the United States as well (Becker, 2005; Sha, 2006). For example, Marimoto and La Ferle (2008) examined the influence of culture on Asian Americans' perception of source credibility. The authors argued that ad models who share the same ethnicity with the study's participants were considered more credible and were able to influence, to a greater degree, participants' willingness to buy the product advertised. Although their study focused mainly on advertisements, it is possible to trace a parallel with organizations' spokespersons during a crisis. In fact, as Liu et al. (2009) postulated, the perceived similarity and sense of responsibility of corporate leaders play a key role on their levels of credibility and effectiveness.

Exploring cultural preferences for explicit and implicit information, Usunier and Roulin (2010) describe another potential consequence of cultural diversity for corporate communication strategies. These authors examined more than 500 business-to-business websites and found that websites from low-context cultures tend to be more direct, offer more informative content, and are more transparent than their counterparts from high-context cultures.

All these studies focused primarily on the way cultural background influences perceptions of crises and corporate communication strategies. Multicultural elements permeate each aspect of a crisis. In fact, culture should be seen as the nexus of PR practices and globalized markets (Sriramesh & Duhé, 2009). However, there are still much to be investigated regarding cultural influences in crisis events and communication

strategies. This project aims to expand the crisis communication scholarship, applying the filtering function of culture to assess communication professionals' ability to manage crises in diverse environments. Therefore, the following research questions are proposed:

Research Question 1: How do communication professionals themselves define multiculturalism and its role in crisis communication?

Research Question 2: To what extent do communication professionals perceive cultural elements as important aspects of crisis episodes?

Research Question 3: According to communication professionals, what are the most relevant cultural elements to be addressed when designing crisis communication strategies?

Research Question 4: How often, according to communication professionals, do corporations culturally adjust crisis communication strategies?

Method

Interviews are a particularly appropriate method to investigate people's perceptions, beliefs, and opinions on specific issues (Pontin, 2000). Through qualitative interviews, researchers are able to better understand how individuals experience facts and can reconstruct situations based on participants' accounts of the event (Hung, 2004). In addition, through qualitative interviews, researchers have a chance to apprehend both latent and manifest content, thereby acquiring rich data and an in-depth understanding of people's behavior and experiences (Pontin, 2000; Sommer & Sommer, 1991).

Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 25 communication professionals with previous experience in crisis management to discover their understanding of, and opinions about, the role of cultural influences on crisis communication strategies. The sample was drawn from communication professionals currently employed in a wide array of industries in the Charlotte area. Charlotte is the biggest city in North Carolina, with a population of approximately 700,000 in 2008 (Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, www.charlottechamber.com). The area houses the headquarters and branches of a wide array of national and multinational companies and industries, in which professionals from all over the United States and the globe work. As Hung (2004) pointed out, for qualitative interviews, the size of sample is not as important as proper selection of participants. A purposive sample, where individuals identified by the researcher as well versed in the topic examined, was recruited (Babbie, 2004; Singleton & Straits, 2005). Hence, only communication professionals with experience in managing crises were interviewed. Crisis history of the organizations they worked for was not assessed given that this study focused on practitioners' general ideas about the role of cultural diversity on crisis events. Particular industries or crisis situations were not under scrutiny in this project.

Using the strategy of snowball sampling, additional participants were found through the interviewees' suggestions. Interviewees agreed to participate anonymously; hence, they are identified in this report by position title and type of industry. Nineteen interviews were conducted face-to-face at participants' offices and five were conducted over the telephone, each lasting about 30 minutes. One interview was conducted via e-mail.

Aiming to obtain in-depth information from the participants, this study relied on semistructured interviews. This type of interview not only allows some degree of structure necessary to make possible a comparison between participants' responses, but it also allows the researcher some freedom and flexibility to change the questions' order and wording, and to explore complementary topics (Singleton & Straits, 2005; Sommer & Sommer, 1991).¹

As an incentive, participants were told that the project results would be shared with them and their companies, and that 100 trees would be planted in recognition of all participants' contributions to the project, via the Green Belt Movement (www.greenbeltmovement.org). Pilot interviews were conducted with four professionals to identify confusing or unnecessary questions.

Interview Transcripts

This project used qualitative textual analysis to examine the interview transcripts. Qualitative interviews generate large amounts of rich data. To better understand the information provided by interviewees, researchers look for major themes and concepts that can be the object of future cross-case comparisons (Byrne, 2001).

In order to identify these themes, this project adopted Glaser and Strauss's (1967) principles of grounded theory. This approach presents important advantages: First, its openness and flexibility are key features for the type of exploratory analysis undertaken here, whereby data are not seen as monolithic, as "a window on reality" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 524), but rather as opening the possibility to understand reality through multiple meanings. Moreover, this approach seeks to understand experiences and their consequences within social practices, which is appropriate to the analysis conducted in this study (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007; Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Following Glaser and Strauss's (1967) principles, the interview transcripts were open coded. At this initial stage, the researcher looked for patterns in the data, identifying similarities in the data. From this process core categories emerged, representing concepts and its properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the second stage of coding—the axial coding phase, according to ground theory principles—links between categories were identified (McCann & Clark, 2003). The last step sought to understand the conditions, properties and dimensions, and consequences of each core category, identifying subcategories. These subcategories represent the conditions that give rise to each core category, the context in which it is embedded, and the consequences of the specific opinions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees.

Characteristic	<i>n</i>
Interviews conducted	25
Gender	
Male	9
Female	16
Types of companies	
For profit	14
Nonprofit	1
Governmental agencies	4
Public relations agencies and consulting	6
Size of workforce, no. of employees	
0-100	6
101-500	2
501-1,000	3
1,001-10,000	3
20,000-50,000	8
>200,000	3
Tenure in years as communication professionals	
<10	1
10-14	5
15-19	6
20-24	7
≥25	6

Findings

Most of the interviewees were female (64%); most have been working in the communication field for 15 or more years (76%). Fourteen out of 25 interviewees (56%) worked for companies that operate abroad and have workforce abroad or have clients who did—in the case of PR firms and consulting. In addition to that, four other participants emphasized how diverse the key audiences of their companies were. These four practitioners represented companies serving large Latino and Asian communities in the United States (two of them) and abroad (other two professionals). The types of industry and size of companies represented by these professionals varied considerably. Table 1 describes demographic characteristics in detail.

Following Glaser and Strauss's (1967) principles of grounded theory, the transcripts were open coded with the aim of identifying patterns in the data suitable for object of future cross-case comparisons. As a result of this process, four core categories were identified, and then potential links between categories were sought (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The first one represented participants' understanding (or lack thereof) of multiculturalism and diversity. It was named accordingly: *diversity and its various elements*. The second core category represented the importance ascribed by practitioners to culture during crisis and was accordingly named *cultural diversity and crisis strategies—corporate asset or overemphasized concept?* The third core category was named *proper planning, channels, and tactics* and identified the key elements taken into account when professionals design communication strategies to multicultural audiences. Finally, the fourth category identified how often practitioners culturally adjust corporate communication strategies and was named *addressing diversity*.

Diversity and Its Various Elements

The first core category that emerged from the transcripts characterized communication professionals' understanding of multiculturalism, the ways in which interviewees equated cultural diversity with diversity in general terms, and the role of culture during crises, as perceived by practitioners. This category addressed Research Question 1: How do communication professionals themselves define multiculturalism and its role in crisis?

Participants had difficulties in defining multiculturalism. Their responses in general reflected their concerns when communicating to one specific group, such as designing communication messages to Latino populations. Participants agreed that cultural expectations have a role in shaping internal and external audiences' attitudes toward organizations and crises. Yet 12 out of the 25 professionals interviewed equate cultural diversity with communicating with Hispanics. For example, the senior vice president of corporate communication for a financial institution mentioned that their "marketing and public relations departments have a team focusing on culturally diverse segments. This team works exclusively with Hispanics" (February 26, 2009).

In addition, participants acknowledged that multiculturalism is part of a more complex phenomenon, which is diversity in general. Interviewees emphasized that cultural elements are just one piece of the diversity puzzle. It is worthwhile to mention that this investigation aimed to reveal whether communication practitioners were attuned to potential behavioral differences among group members in relation to other ethnic groups (Banks, 2000; Roberson, 2006) during crisis situations. This restrictive conceptualization was pointed out by interviewees and potential limitations that this brings to the study will be discussed later.

Generation gaps, educational gaps, differences in lifestyle, and disability issues are some other factors that practitioners reported as having an influence on corporate discourse. For example, the assistant director of PR of a governmental agency recalled a situation that arose during a natural disaster when the region hosted several hundred refugees. A community organization representing citizens with hearing difficulties formally complained that during numerous press conferences held by the agency there was nobody translating the speeches into sign language. The participant said, "I have to admit that this complaint got me completely off guard. In the heat of the crisis, we thought about translations, about respecting gender and religious differences. But we didn't think about hearing impaired citizens" (February 27, 2009). This example showed the way in which cultural diversity and the necessity of translations was

combined with the need to address other elements of diversity, such as gender, religion, and disability issues. Among the total group of 25 participants, 5 indicated that cultural influences are just one of the factors that practitioners might consider when analyzing diversity issues in general.

Moreover, practitioners pointed out that differences in educational level have an effect on how communication strategies are perceived and the ways in which these strategies should be designed. The vice president for marketing and community relations for a higher education institution described this effect. She said,

I managed three different organizations in one. First, our office communicates often with faculty, an audience highly educated and well-versed in most types of technologies. Second, we have an administrative staff composed of approximately 200 employees. This group is also well-educated and versed in technologies, however messages to this group can be more succinct. Faculty, on the other hand, demand detailed explanations of everything. Finally, we have our maintenance staff. This audience doesn't feel very comfortable with e-mail messages and the most efficient way to reach them is through their immediate bosses. This group has a great respect for hierarchy. (February 16, 2009)

The interviewee emphasized that different educational levels create specific in-group subcultures that are more relevant than employees' cultural background. According to the participant, the subculture of each group dictates to a greater degree the type of communication strategies and messages that are effective.

The same argument holds for audiences with significant generational gaps. Three participants called attention to the fact that baby boomers and members of Generation X communicate using different channels. As the outreach coordinator of a governmental agency mentioned, "no matter how much effort we put on our website to make it resourceful, some elderly customers will not look for information online. We still need to send letters communicating changes in our services" (January 23, 2009).

In summary, this first core category from the interview transcripts represents the numerous factors pointed out by participants as having an influence on organizational discourse and crisis strategies. Responding to Research question 1, which asked how communication professionals themselves define multiculturalism and its role in crisis, it is important to highlight that many interviewees had difficulties in defining multiculturalism, equating multiculturalism with communicating with Latinos. Whereas they recognized a role for cultural influences in crisis events and strategies, many professionals also pointed out that other elements affect corporate discourse, such as gender, religious, and disability issues, as well as generational and educational gaps.

Cultural Diversity and Crisis Strategies: Corporate Asset or Overemphasized Concept?

The second core category identified in the transcripts represented the importance ascribed by communication practitioners to cultural diversity during crises. This category addressed Research Question 2: To what extent do communication professionals perceive cultural elements as important aspects of crisis episodes?

A large group of interviewees—17 of the total 25—not only affirmed that cultural diversity is an important element of crises, but they also saw cultural diversity as an important asset of their corporations. The internal communications manager for a major manufacturer of electronic equipment stated:

The human brain is like a parachute; it works better when is open. In our company, we strive to address diversity in our daily routines. For example, all managers have to go through a diversity training program. Our level of diversity awareness and our capacity to promote diversity initiatives are aspects evaluated annually in our company. We have a diversity calendar, where each month portrays curiosities about a country in which we have operations. Diversity is and has been an asset in our company for a long time. (December 11, 2008)

For this participant and many others, diversity was discussed mainly as cultural differences. These interviewees emphasized the role played by the audiences' cultural upbringing during crises, pointing out that respecting cultural diversity in our global society is a valuable corporate asset.

For these professionals, having a diverse communication team was considered a corporate requirement to thrive in a global market. Many interviewees highlighted that decision makers have to become more diverse in order to better understand the necessity and importance of respecting different cultural expectations. As the assistant director of PR of a governmental agency stated,

One of the best ways to address diversity is to bring diversity to the decision-making table. Having a culturally diverse communication team is certainly an asset that increases your company's chances to see the world through multiple lenses and to better understand how different audiences will interpret your messages. (February 27, 2009)

As this example showed, a substantial number of participants (17) regarded culture as an important element affecting crisis events and strategies, as well as corporate discourse as a whole.

Conversely, some interviewees questioned the need for addressing cultural diversity at all. Five out of the 25 participants affirmed that new technologies affect communication practices to a greater degree than multiculturalism. The CEO of a nonprofit organization strongly advocated that the changes brought by new technologies "have had a much more dramatic impact in communication practices than issues of diversity" (February 18, 2009). Similarly, the president's assistant for community relations and marketing services at a higher education institution stated that "generational differences in our audience greatly influence your communication tactics and which media should be used. New channels such Twitter and YouTube are changing the PR landscape forever" (February 10, 2009).

Three PR consultants working for small and midsize businesses mentioned that often organizations merely pay lip service to diversity. The costs involved in producing different messages and using different communication channels were cited as one of the biggest barriers to small companies' initiatives to address cultural differences.

These participants also mentioned that very tight deadlines and small communication teams are other reasons why small businesses in general do not address cultural diversity in their communication strategies.

A substantial number of participants—17 of them—considered cultural elements an important aspect of crises, regarding their ability to address cultural diversity as a key corporate asset; considerably fewer (8) described culture influences on crises as an overemphasized concept, pointing out that new technologies exert a greater influence in communication strategies, as well as that many corporations simply pay lip service to this concept.

A relevant intervening factor shaped participants' opinions on the relevance of culture during crises. The importance given to cultural elements during crises was directly related to professionals' definition of crisis. For participants who focused mainly on financial losses, cultural expectations had a merely tangential role during crises. In contrast, practitioners who emphasized the relevance of reputational damage and its long-term consequences were considerably more worried about addressing cultural expectations in their responses to troubling events. For example, a diversity specialist and PR consultant stated: "A crisis can be any threat that harms an organization and its relationship with its publics. It doesn't have to be catastrophic. It has to be only significant enough to disturb constituencies' perceptions of your company" (December 10, 2008). Along the same lines, another practitioner noted that

The most important attribute of a crisis is the exogenous factors impacting the event. You can control your costs, inventory, and quality of products. But you cannot control individuals' perceptions of events. Reporting not impressive profits can be interpreted as a sign of honesty by consumers and shareholders. On the other hand, a small incident in a plant can taint your reputation globally. (December 11, 2008)

As these examples show, a majority of participants (17 out of 25) regarded reputational losses and controlling audiences' perceptions of corporations during crises as the most challenging elements of these events. In fact, seven participants reported that reputational losses are by far the most important consequences of a crisis event. According to these practitioners, if corporate reputation is not damaged, the chances of a full and quick recovery are greater. On the other hand, if one company's reputation is severely tarnished, lack of confidence can threaten the company's survival.

A case reported by the marketing communications manager of a utilities company exemplifies the effect of reputational damage. Many years ago, the company cut the power of an elderly citizen. Although this is a standard procedure and many notices were sent to this customer before any action was taken, the consequences of such action were serious and unforeseen. It was winter; the elderly citizen suffered from dementia and due to lack of power this person died from hypothermia. As soon as the company learned about the incident the procedures to cut power were stopped and revised. The company also provided aid to the family of the deceased customer. But none of these actions could reverse the major reputational damage. The incident got national media attention; stockholders sold the company's stocks; the company's

customer service was inundated by thousands of complaints, calling its staff “killers”; and employees’ morale sank. As the interviewee said, “We used to follow the procedures adopted by most utilities companies in the country. It was a very unfortunate incident. The reputational damage to our company surpassed by far any financial losses” (January 22, 2009).

As five interviewees pointed out, on some occasions organizations create their own crises, putting audiences’ confidence and companies’ reputation in jeopardy. The PR general manager of a security technology company noted that “miscommunication can be the greatest and worse source of problems. A crisis of confidence can destroy a product, a brand, and an entire organization” (December 2, 2008). Another practitioner who works in the health care industry corroborated that point of view:

Taking actions to correct the misdeed is only as important as reconstructing perceptions. You have to tell the truth to your audiences, so they will trust you in the future. You have to understand their expectations. Individuals forgive mistakes, but they don’t forgive lies. (December 11, 2008)

In contrast with this emphasis on reputation, eight interviewees emphasized that crises mainly jeopardize companies’ profits. Disruption in operations, cost of recalls, and liability are all very concrete and common consequences of a crisis (Sellnow & Ulmer, 2004). As some practitioners affirmed, “Crises have financial consequences that are overwhelming, and this is the first aspect to be dealt with during these situations” (vice president of corporate communication for a major manufacturer of electronic equipment, January 21, 2009). For 8 participants, regardless of the type of event, one of the main effects of a crisis is its financial consequences. The opinion of a communication manager in the financial industry epitomizes this position. She said,

Crises are unexpected events that need immediate response to mitigate their negative consequences. While it can be a natural disaster, a disgruntled customer or employee, or something related to our buildings, crises bring significant financial losses. And because of this, such events have to be handled immediately. It is paramount to stop further financial losses. (February 6, 2009)

In sum, the second core category represents interviewees’ ascribed importance to culture during crises. It addresses Research Question 2—the extent to which communication professionals perceive culture as an important element of crisis communication. Practitioners’ responses gave mixed messages. For most interviewees—17 out of 25—cultural diversity is a key corporate asset and a relevant aspect of crises. For a few others (5), new technologies exert a greater influence on corporate discourse as a whole, including during crises. A small minority of interviewees (3) pointed out that many organizations simply pay lip service to cultural diversity. Professionals’ own definitions of crises appeared to shape the relevance accorded to cultural influences. Practitioners who concentrated on the financial losses brought by a crisis played down audiences’ perceptions of the events and the role of cultural influences. Interviewees

who were concerned about reputational damage brought by crises argued that audiences' perceptions are an important component of a quick corporate recovery. For these participants, cultural differences were considered an important aspect of crisis events.

Proper Planning, Channels, and Tactics

The third core category that emerged from the transcripts identified the main elements pinpointed by communication professionals when designing communication strategies to multicultural audiences. Proper planning, use of alternative channels and tactics, and the importance of hidden meanings in translations were some of the key elements. This category addressed Research Question 3: According to communication professionals, what are the most relevant cultural elements to be addressed when designing crisis communication strategies?

Participants' responses once more indicated practitioners' mixed feelings toward cultural diversity. Whereas the interviewees were able to single out specific elements that must be addressed when communicating with culturally diverse audiences, they described these elements as challenges only when multicultural audiences are involved in crises. Such evidence suggests, not a profound appreciation of cultural diversity as a corporate asset, but only an understanding that multicultural audiences are part of the current global environment and thus need to be taken into account. As a PR consultant stated,

Crises affecting diverse communities bring many challenges and many lessons. First, be aware of language barriers. Second, think outside the box. Alternative channels may need to be used. Never forget that cultural experiences vary immensely within one specific community. And finally, take a proactive educational approach. For example, specific groups of individuals might have never experienced an ice or snow storm. Be proactive and teach them how to protect themselves from winter extreme conditions. (January 26, 2008)

As this quotation suggests, when discussing the challenges or key elements specific to multicultural crises, 22 out of 25 professionals interviewed highlighted the crucial role of proper planning. The senior vice president of corporate communication for a financial institution affirmed that as part of a crisis analysis, practitioners have to ask themselves if the event has a high impact on a diverse community: "If yes, you will have to address diversity. And, to have better chances to succeed, you do have to learn about the intricacies of the community before the crisis hits" (February 26, 2009). Along the same lines, a PR specialist at a crisis management consulting firm pointed out that "Nowadays, strategic planning is key in our profession. Even audiences within the U.S. have a different cultural heritage and, therefore, different cultural expectations. You need to learn about these differences before a crisis hits you" (February 25, 2009).

As a key element within proper planning, participants mentioned translation and its potential problems. The majority of the participants (18) mentioned some situation

where corporate messages were lost in translation. The interviews also showed that global communication involves issues more complicated than simply translation. For example, the marketing communications manager of a utilities company reported many problems with Spanish-speaking customers who could not understand why they should call a service named "Power On" in English and translated to meaning "power on" in Spanish to report power outages. As the practitioner mentioned, "the message was completely lost in translation" (January 22, 2009). While the translation was accurate, the service's catchy name in English was simply awkward in Spanish.

Expanding their views on challenges created by translation, participants also pointed out that spokespersons play a key role during crises, and differences in language and communication style can hinder their function in these situations. As a diversity specialist and PR consultant emphasized, during crises a spokesperson who is able to relate to the specific community affected is central to effective crisis management. He said, "People with different cultural backgrounds may have different communication styles and this has to be respected. An effective spokesperson is the one capable of wearing the same cultural eyeglasses that the community affected by a crisis event wears" (December 10, 2009). As five professionals indicated, sometimes a company's CEO might not be trained or able to address cultural nuances. In connection with this point, a senior partner at a PR agency mentioned a case that his company was hired to manage: A disgruntled employee shot and killed several coworkers. The person was arrested immediately, but families of the victims decided to sue the company, which commonly happens in cases of workplace violence. The manager of the plant where this tragedy occurred was from Eastern Europe. The interviewee stated,

More than language barriers, the mainly communication problem that we had to manage was differences in communication styles. The manager was able to speak English and was genuinely feeling the pain of the families' victims. But this person was not able to show any emotions, which was misinterpreted by the families. This difference in communication styles caused further problems to the company. Many hours of training were necessary to prepare this successful and efficient yet extremely rational executive for the role of spokesperson. (December 8, 2008)

In addition to culturally attuned spokespersons, another key element identified by a majority of interviewees (15) was the use of alternative communication channels and strategies that respond to particular cultures. For example, a PR consultant stated, "More than translating information, it is necessary to understand how particular groups prefer to receive information" (February 11, 2009). In this connection, another participant emphasized the importance of reaching community leaders when communicating with minorities. Specifically, the vice president of corporate communication for a utilities company described the example of an ice storm that left the region without power for a couple of days. After the first night without power, several members of Latino communities experienced carbon monoxide poisoning from improvised indoor heating devices. The professional commented,

We realized that these members of our community had no experience with extreme weather. PSAs [public service announcements] about this issue were on TV channels that they most likely didn't watch. We had to approach community leaders to swiftly communicate to Latinos the hazardous effects of bringing gas or charcoal grills inside. (December 9, 2008)

Openness to using alternative channels seemed as important to the interviewees as openness to adopting different message tactics. For example, the president's assistant for community relations and marketing services for a higher education institution emphasized "the necessity to adapt communication tactics in response to audiences' preferences. In some cases, being part of a town meeting or giving a lecture at a neighborhood association will be much more efficient than going on the evening news" (February 10, 2008).

Another interviewee highlighted the importance of respecting cultural habits not only when choosing proper communication tactics but also when implementing them. As the participant stated,

In some Latino communities dinner time is almost a sacred time that it is meant to be spent with family. If you set a neighbors' meeting around this time with the help of a community leader, most likely the attendance will be minimal. You got the tactics right, but the implementation was faulty. (Director of public relations and corporate communications of a governmental agency, February 20, 2009)

In summary, this core category responded to Research Question 3, which asked what the most relevant cultural elements to be addressed when designing crisis communication strategies are. Twenty-two practitioners mentioned that proper planning is essential to allow corporations and communication teams to learn about different cultural expectations before a crisis hits. They also emphasized the potential for trouble inherent to translation, indicating the necessity to take into account underlying meanings and communication styles. Moreover, participants indicated that alternative communication channels and tactics adequate to cultural expectations and habits are necessary and important. Nonetheless, most of the interviewees (19) described these elements as additional challenges brought by multicultural crises, showing participants' understanding of a diverse operating environment, but not necessarily a full appreciation of the complexity or value of multiculturalism.

Addressing Diversity

The fourth core category that emerged from the transcripts showed that corporations seldom culturally adjust their crisis communication strategies. This category addressed Research Question 4: How often, according to communication professionals, do corporations culturally adjust crisis communication strategies?

As with the two prior core categories, participants' responses showed a contradiction. Interviewees unanimously agreed that audiences are more and more diverse.

They also described communication strategies as a tool for relationship building, emphasizing the importance of knowing the target audiences and understanding their expectations, including their cultural expectations. Yet nearly all of the interviewees (23) recognized that their organizations could do far better in addressing multiculturalism than they now do. As the vice president of corporate communication for a utilities company said,

We are fully aware that our community has significantly become more diverse. Not only the Latino population has considerably increased, but we are also seeing a big influx of Asian immigrants. We have been working hard to address all these changes. Yet probably only 25% of our communication campaigns have specifically addressed cultural diversity. (December 9, 2008)

Whereas participants agreed that their organizations do not culturally adjust communication strategies often enough, the same respondents emphasized that cultural habits influence the ways in which audiences relate to a company and respond to its communication strategies. Typically, the vice president of corporate communication for a financial institution said,

It is very important to address the values of your audiences to successfully communicate and build a relationship with them. This is valid to all situations, not only crises. Individuals' upbringing and cultural habits will influence how they relate to your company. (February 27, 2009)

As these quotations indicate, with respect to Research Question 4—how often corporations culturally adjust crisis communication strategies—the response is not often enough, despite the relevance professionals attributed to audiences' cultural expectations.

Discussion and Implications

The interconnectedness of a globalized society is a key element for crisis communication management. Indeed, new technologies have the potential to make any local event an international crisis in minutes (Martinelli & Briggs, 1998; Taylor, 2000). According to the rhetorical approach to crisis communication adopted in this project, crises are created and resolved through communication (Hearit & Courtright, 2004), and communicative strategies are influenced by cultural perceptions and values that help individuals to create reality through the meanings ascribed to situations (Eisenberg & Riley, 2000). Cultural values modify individuals' ways of thinking, judging situations, and communicating (Banks, 2000; Hall, 1976). In a global business environment, cultural understanding is an essential tool for successful communication and relationship building between organizations and strategic audiences. Thus, understanding cultural influences on crisis communication is an increasingly important topic.

Responding to the research questions proposed, interviewees reported having mixed feelings toward cultural diversity. Viewed as a whole, all four core categories emerging from the interviews showed a lack of consensus about the meaning and role of multicultural influences in crises. Participants had difficulties defining multiculturalism, yet acknowledged that cultural expectations affect audiences' perceptions of corporations and crises. They also emphasized that gender, religion, and disability issues, as well as generational and educational gaps, are some other relevant factors influencing corporate discourse. The importance ascribed by practitioners to culture during crises varied significantly. For some, addressing cultural diversity is a valuable corporate asset; for others, the relevance of culture in communication strategies is overemphasized. The definition of crisis that each participant subscribed to directly affected how important cultural diversity was perceived to be. For some professionals, financial losses are the central element of crises; for those, cultural diversity has a tangential role. For many others, reputational losses are the most relevant aspect of critical events; this group considered cultural expectations to be very significant. Practitioners pointed out that proper planning, language and translation, and adequate use of alternative communication channels and tactics are key elements to be addressed during crises. Such conclusions showed that professionals are attuned to the demands of a global environment, but not necessarily fully appreciative of multiculturalism as a complex phenomenon. Last, participants recognized that they are not addressing cultural diversity often enough. Even though the majority of the participants described cultural influences in crises as an important element, they seldom addressed this element, indicating that practitioners themselves and/or their teams may not be fully equipped to manage crises involving multicultural aspects.

As Banks (2000) argued, PR strategies are intended to connect organizations with their key audiences, "taking full account of the normal human variations in the systems of meaning by which groups understand and enact their everyday lives" (p. 20). However, as the interviews showed, communication professionals have not been able to fully address potential differences present in a multicultural audience.

Using the theory of cultural competence as a framework (Sue, 1991, 2001), it is possible to offer suggestions for the development of the field. As Sue postulated, culture-competent individuals are able to identify cultural expectations, understand differences, and when necessary adapt behaviors. This framework (Sue, 1991, 2001) takes into account that culture identity is a fluid concept (Morris, 2002) composed by knowledge, values, and attitudes learned through formal and informal membership in myriad groups (Jameson, 2007). At different contexts, different aspects of individual cultural identities increase or decrease salience. As a consequence, broad cultural categorizations overlook cultural nuances, which are affected by and adjusted in response to social context. Therefore, a comprehensive framework for crisis communication should incorporate cultural diversity. Crisis strategies should not be only paired with degree of corporate responsibility (Coombs, 1998, 1999) but also with internal and external audiences' cultural expectations. Audiences and PR practitioners may differently perceive locus and level of corporate responsibility, as well as the proper use of

crisis responses to specific crisis situations. Cultural influences can be an intervening variable that mediates level of responsibility and the use of defensive or accommodative crisis strategies. Finally, the cultural competence framework can be used as a training tool to prepare the workforce to meet the demands of a global market.

Implications

Most of interviewees were able to identify different cultural expectations; however, to become in synch with the demands of a global market, communication professionals need to go beyond seeing cultural diversity as a challenge. Nowadays, fully understanding cultural differences and having the necessary skills to adapt communication messages accordingly is a requirement in our society.

Practitioners can benefit from training initiatives promoting cultural competence. Such initiatives can equip professionals with the necessary skills to understand their own cultural biases, to learn about diverse worldviews, and to adjust crisis responses to different cultural expectations. Considering how quickly crises unfold, having previous training in cultural competence and an extensive understanding of audiences' cultural expectations are the grounds for effective crisis management procedures.

There are educational implications from these results as well. PR instructors can explore the pedagogical potential of cultural competence elements in crisis communication theory. According to the results of this project, communication professionals considered culture to be a significant influence in crisis management. Unfortunately, these same practitioners graduated from college to become professionals who do not consider themselves well prepared to handle multicultural crises. Instructors therefore need to develop lectures, in-class exercises, group projects, and other activities where students can increase their openness to learn about diverse worldviews as well as practice their skills at handling multicultural situations. Such initiatives will help to create a PR curriculum attuned with the demands of the profession and of society.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Care was taken to construct a clear and unbiased interview protocol; however, potential misunderstandings might have happened. Most of the interviewees were located in an urban area in the Southeastern United States. Even though they worked for a wide array of national and multinational companies and industries, interviewees' opinions might portray specific characteristics of this area of the country. Given the difficulties of random sampling, a snowball sampling procedure was adopted, which might have limited the scope of the findings, because the participants might all have shared experiences and views on crises and communication strategies. Furthermore, interviews with a larger number of subjects might have yielded different trends. Therefore, it is necessary to exercise caution in generalizing the interviews' findings.

In addition, the operational definition of multiculturalism adopted in the project, restricted to solely cultural differences learned through membership in distinct ethnic groups, was somewhat at odds with the definition of PR practitioners. In practice, the interviewees indicated that their discussions of cultural differences are intertwined with other diversity issues, such as gender, disability, religion, and education and generational gaps. Moreover, as Babbie (2004) and Sommer and Sommer (1991) pointed out, the interviewer's presence might have affected participants' responses, yielding socially desirable answers. Finally, adopting ground theory to analyze the interviews' transcript posited its own challenges. In order to yield valid results, this approach relies on researchers' theoretical sensitivity and ability to determine theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Unintentionally, researchers might cross the line between identifying sensitizing concepts and imposing concepts that validate an existing framework (Schreiber, 2001).

Finally, this study opens several possibilities for further research. First, interviews with a greater number of PR professionals working across the United States is necessary to identify if practitioners in other areas of the country will share the same views regarding multiculturalism and crises. As a next step, interviews with PR professionals working in different countries can also extend knowledge in the role played by culture during crises.

Moreover, studies examining specific types of industry may show that the relevance ascribed to cultural influences in crisis management varies from industry to industry due to tight in-group cultures. For example, employees and audiences of high-tech companies may all share an in-group culture, characterized by devotion to innovation. Such a trait may influence audiences' responses to crises to a greater extent than individuals' cultural backgrounds. The same argument may hold true for specific corporations with strong organizational cultures. For example, employees and customers of companies that produce environmentally conscious sports products, such as Patagonia Sportswear, may share similar lifestyles and values that constitute the company's culture. Further research needs to examine if strong organizational cultures based on shared lifestyles and values supersede the influence of cultural backgrounds and expectations.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations and the number of questions to be answered by future research, this project extends knowledge in PR and crisis communication scholarship. This study demonstrates that cultural diversity has a significant effect on crisis communication management. Future communication scholarship may achieve a more precise understanding of the ways in which culture and cultural competence influence crises and communication strategies. These findings may also assist in preparing communication students to function effectively in a global environment. Thus, by integrating a cultural competence framework and crisis communication scholarship, business communication scholars can foster better practices in the field, attuned to the demands of society.

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