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The Effectiveness of Utilizing Social Media as a Public Relations Platform during an Organizational Crisis within the Cruise Ship Industry

Preparation

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to determine how social media can be employed as a PR platform to aid in crisis communication and message control in the cruise ship industry. The study evaluated positive public responses toward crisis management messages posted on Carnival Cruise Line's Twitter and Facebook platforms. This qualitative study was intended to assess how a public relations department in the cruise ship industry can maintain the organization's reputation and image when utilizing social media as a platform during a crisis. The findings show that social media is an effective tool in disseminating information, especially in times of crisis, due to its wide reach.

Introduction

A crisis is a precise, unanticipated, and unplanned occurrence or chain of events that may threaten or be perceived to threaten the objectives of a given establishment (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2016; Spence, Lachlan, & Griffin, 2007). In simpler terms, Coombs (2007a) defines a crisis as a significant threat to a particular operation that can culminate in adverse outcomes if it is not handled appropriately. Globally, different forms of crises have been witnessed in various industries over the last decade (Bundy et al., 2016). Institutional crises have been shown to exert a myriad of negative consequences, including a damaged institutional image or collapse of affected institutions (Coombs, 2007a). As a relatively new trade, the cruise ship industry has been facing numerous challenges in the realm of crisis management (Florida Caribbean Cruise Association [FCCA], 2016).

A crisis is a wholly unanticipated event (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2016). The management team has no control over the natural forces that create it (Pace, Balboni, & Gistri, 2017), but it must spring into action to mitigate the crisis immediately. When a crisis occurs, it is imperative to rebuild the reputation of the company by maintaining an operational public relations team (Pace, Balboni, & Gistri, 2017; Jin, 2014). In a crisis event, the public relations department of the cruise ship company is responsible for controlling the message flow and rectifying any negative publicity brought about by the crisis. This can be achieved by ensuring strategic communication procedures and channels that foster mutually constructive relations between the public and the company (Kadarova, Mihalcova, Kadar, & Vida, 2014).

Problem Statement

As a new industry in the field of hospitality and leisure travel, the cruise ship industry has been facing various challenges. One of the most prominent challenges it faces is the establishment of efficient crisis management procedures (Mileski, Wang, & Beacham, 2014). With the rise of social media, many cruise companies have been facing the challenges of ensuring prompt crisis communication and averting derogatory reports from the passengers, who in most cases rush to share any occurrences through their social media networks (Husain et al., 2014). According to Husain et al. (2014), during crisis situations, social media can be instrumental in message control through its ability to circulate information to a large group of people within a short period of time. This study is intended to reveal how the use of social media can be employed as a PR platform in crisis communication and message control in the cruise ship industry. The study will present an evaluation of positive public responses toward crisis messages posted on cruise ship companies' social media platforms. To accomplish this aim, the study will explore several crisis situations that this young industry has experienced over the past decade (Ryschka, Domke-Damonte, Keels, & Nagel, 2016).

Aims and Objectives

The main objectives of the study include:

    i.   To determine the effectiveness of using social media as a public relations platform through an evaluation of positive responses toward the content of messages posted during organizational crises within the cruise ship industry.

    ii.   To identify the best public relations practices for enabling the control of messages during a crisis in order to maintain an organization's reputation and image within the industry.

Research Question

RQ1. How can public relations maintain an organization's reputation and image when utilizing social media as a platform during a crisis in the cruise ship industry?

The Significance of the Study

The cruise ship industry offers services to the public wherein travelers use a ship's amenities as a source of pleasure (Coombs, 2015a). Crises in the cruise ship industry have become a common phenomenon, however, and no amount of preparation can be deemed enough to mitigate a crisis event (Yehya & Coombs, 2017). With the increasing changes in technology, the utilization of the Internet and social media as a means of mass communication has become one of the most efficient methods of controlling crisis situations in organizations (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008).

This study seeks to establish the efficiency of social media in crisis communication and message control through an evaluation of the positive responses to the content of messages posted during organizational crises within the cruise ship industry. In the event of a crisis, it is usually crucial for the affected company to be the first party to provide information about the crisis, as this reduces the circulation of false or exaggerated information by other parties (Yehya & Coombs, 2017).

Literature Review

The Role of PR Practices in Managing a Crisis

An organizational crisis is an event that is perceived by managers and other stakeholders as a significant, unexpected, and potentially disruptive threat to an organization's goals (Bundy et al., 2016). Such an event also poses negative implications for the organization's relationship with stakeholders (Bundy et al., 2016). After experiencing a major crisis, a company must engage in proper crisis management action to recover (Coombs & Jean, 2014; Yang,

2007). Using a collection of research published over an 18-year period, Kim, Avery, and Lariscy (2009) employed quantitative content analysis in evaluating crisis response strategies. Their results suggest that denial is the most commonly used response strategy employed by the majority of organizations, even though other findings have indicated that denial is the least effective strategy. According to Kim et al. (2009), regardless of the type of crisis, most organizations seem to be continuously engaging in this approach.

In the event of a crisis, many stakeholders tend to engage in various forms of communication in order to learn about the incident, reduce uncertainties, and gain a sense of control over the situation (Turner, 2008). Use of the most appropriate combination of public relations strategies is considered critical in managing a crisis (Jin, 2014). The apology has been losing its effectiveness in crisis communication, while failure to choose the right response methods may aggravate the situation (Coombs, 2016). A major shortcoming in crisis communication was evident in the public relations measures utilized in the 2014 Dairy Khoury crisis, in which the company was reported to be using Natamycin, a banned preservative, in its milk products (Yehya & Coombs, 2017). According to Yehya and Coombs (2017), the company decided to employ the defensive approach, which did not produce a positive outcome.

Bundy et al. (2016) cited the example of BP's crisis management efforts in response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, one of the biggest crises ever experienced in the oil industry worldwide. The incident plunged BP into a crisis that negatively affected the company's financial performance and reputation as well as its relationship with its employees, clients, and general stakeholders. This study revealed that researchers in business communication and public relations have begun concentrating on the responsibilities of internal crisis communication. Effective leadership style is essential for improving an organization's chances of overcoming the effects of a crisis (Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009). Consequently, it is important to engage employees as

shareholders in times of crisis to alleviate the adverse effects associated with neglecting employees within such situations (van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014; Koc, 2013).

Veil and Husted (2012) evaluated the American Red Cross's reaction to Hurricane Katrina to demonstrate the importance of exceptional crisis communication. Qualitative case study methodology provided a thorough description of the incident based on a media (including social media) analysis as well as internal and external evaluations. The best public relations practices in crisis communication were then used to evaluate the efforts of the Red Cross. The research showed the significance of upholding flexibility in a crisis management plan; creating a public relations procedure with business associates; considering the various impacts of referent procedures on the emotional and physiological health of crisis victims; and establishing connections with diverse populations and local communities surrounding the organization (Veil & Husted, 2012). According to Pace, Balboni, and Gistri (2017), the use of social media in crisis management has proven effective in ensuring reliable communication within crises of such magnitude since it facilitates fast and widespread message transmission.

The Role of Social Media in Crisis Communication

In the last decade, social media has played an integral role in the social lives of millions of people throughout the world (Cho, Furey, & Mohr, 2017). Social media emerged as a category of an online platform where people can freely create, share, and save content while networking at an exceptional speed. According to Cho, Furey, and Mohr (2017), Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace have been some of the most used social media platforms around the globe. Due to its ease of use, engagement in social media has been exponentially rising across the world (Cho, Furey, & Mohr, 2017). The increasing number of social media users and the speed at which a message can be conveyed on these

platforms has generated a shift away from the conventional crisis communication strategies (Hagen, Keller, Neely, DePaula, & Robert-Cooperman, 2017).

According to Ott and Theunissen (2015), despite the numerous benefits associated with the use of social media in organizational crisis communication, inappropriate use of social media platforms can aggravate a crisis or trigger the onset of a new one. In an analysis of how social media presents both opportunities and challenges in crisis situations, Zhu, Anagondahalli, and Zhang (2017) used the case study of McDonald's and KFC's social media crisis response on food safety scandal crisis in China 2012. McDonald's promptly addressed the issue through social media using a rather subtle and apologetic tone. The crisis message was well received by the public, generating hundreds of positive comments. Conversely, when KFC was faced with a similar crisis, it reacted by shifting blame and failing to address the crisis in time, which worsened the situation (Zhu, Anagondahalli, & Zhang, 2017). This paper seeks to study the effects of utilizing social media in cruise ship companies' crisis communication through a review of Carnival Cruise Line's social media use that assesses the number of positive comments the company has received from the public. An abundance of positive comments is usually considered a strong sign of effective public relations in an institution.

Ryschka, Domke-Damonte, Keels, and Nagel (2016) evaluated the role of social media in the restoration of clients' perceptions of a company's reputation during crisis management in a cruise ship business background. The researchers sought to determine the influence of the speed and precision of a crisis communication response on people's perceptions of a cruise line during a crisis. The results suggested that the speed and clarity of a company's response on social media has an effect on people's perception of the affected company.

Research Method

Case study research design has been selected for this qualitative study. The study is intended to assess how a PR team can maintain an organization's reputation and image by utilizing social media as a communication platform during a crisis in the cruise ship industry. This question cannot be addressed by any other research design, such as ethnography or observation, because both of those designs demand that a researcher must directly experience or observe the event. Since this study is intended to answer the research question using data gathered from past crises, the case study research design was most applicable. Furthermore, this methodology aids in understanding a complex crisis event.

In this study, we chose to focus on Carnival Cruise Lines, which is well recognized for offering memorable and luxurious vacationing services to its passengers. Despite employing the latest technology, the company has experienced a series of cruise crises that have resulted in deadly incidents for its passengers. The company has been scrutinized due to the occurrence of three consecutive crises in the middle of its voyages. Two fires in ships' engines and the collision of a ship generated chaos inside the company, triggered the proliferation of rumors, and raised the eyebrows of stakeholder groups. These events forced Carnival to turn toward social media outlets instead of relying on conventional communication mediums for conducting public relations communication and reaching out to its existing and potential customers as well as other concerned parties on a frequent basis. Thus, Carnival is the best subject company for this study, as an assessment of its PR strategy allows us to explore the impact of utilizing social media as a public relations platform during a crisis.

The case study method enables this study to investigate the crisis situation in a real-time context with the help of multiple sources (Widdowson, 2011), which will, in turn, illuminate the best public relations practices for enabling the control of messages during a crisis as a means of maintaining an organization's reputation and image within its industry. Carnival's cruise crisis

triggered criticism and led to a surge of two-way communication on social media among passengers, the general public, and the company. It is therefore important to critically review the event in order to assess the impact of PR efforts on the company's reputation. No other method except a case study can allow for a thorough examination of the public relations strategy and permit the generalizing of the findings across the industry.

Data Collection Method

This qualitative study focuses on specific crisis situations to assess the impact of social media on a company's image. Three tools (interview, focus group, and content analysis) are readily available for collecting data to respond to the study question. Interviews would make the data collection phase quite expensive and time-consuming. Moreover, the likelihood of biased intervention would be high due to human engagement in the data collection process. The interviewers (experts) may have their own preferences and personal opinions regarding Carnival's use of social media. Focus groups could generate the same problems of biasedness, as groupthink might prohibit the members from taking an aerial view of the situation and assessing the impact of social media mediation in crisis communication on Carnival's image. Thus, content analysis has been selected due to its ability to facilitate the collection of unbiased and reality-based data related to the event.

The content analysis method was introduced by Philip Marrying. Initially, it was considered a set of techniques used to collect and assess data in order to quantitatively test a hypothesis. It involved applying a set of codes to theoretical data to put it into quantitative form and attain the results through the appropriate statistical test. Content analysis was introduced to qualitative research after identifying the shortcomings of using this method in quantitative studies (Gavora, 2015).

Wang and Dong (2017) codified the content of the selected articles in terms of the focused crisis, theoretical approach, and social media platform

utilized in order to assess the employment of social media in crisis communication. Ye and Ki (2017) analyzed the content of communication when assessing British Petroleum's communication in the media. Since this study focuses on exploring the impact of social media on Carnival's crisis, content analysis therefore serves as the most suitable method of evaluating the positive responses to the content of messages posted during organizational crises, which enables the study to identify the role of social media as a public relations platform in maintaining the organization's reputation and image in the cruise industry.

Coding Process

Two social media outlets, Twitter and Facebook, were explored to assess Carnival's communication with the public during the crisis. The comments posted in the first two weeks of each crisis were then codified for content analysis. The positivity or negativity of each was assessed through the presence of keywords reflecting satisfaction, dissatisfaction, or neutrality toward the post. The following are a few examples of the keywords:

Positivity Keywords	Negativity Keywords	Neutral Keywords
Appreciate	Scary/crazy	Don't know
Thank you	Frustrating	Can't understand
Grateful	Stuck	Seems
Fantastic	Irresponsible	Wonder
Going out of the way	Insane	Surprising
Doing great/good	Disruptive	Unable
Agree	Worst	
Like	Discomfort	

Love	Tired of
Don't be scared	Can't stay
Expert	Shame
Well done	Compensation/refund
Awesome customer service	Distress
Good	

The responses to each post were assessed using set criteria, including the time of the post and customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction (as measured by a negative or positive comment). The comments posted by users were then assessed using the keywords to determine whether they were satisfied.

Sampling Technique

Some of the posts had more than 200 comments, which made it difficult and time-consuming to assess the number of positive, negative, and neutral ones. Instead, simple random sampling was used to select both positive and negative ones, with each comment having an equal chance of being selected. For example, if a selected post had more than 1,500 comments, the study sample (n) would include 150 to 500, because this sample size can better represent the population. This technique has been used by several researchers in qualitative and quantitative studies. Even if a post has a large number of comments, this can measure how many are positivefor instance, if 6 out of every 10 are positive, the percentage of satisfied customers can be estimated to be 60%.

This technique was not applied to posts with 200 or fewer comments. Those comments were thoroughly reviewed, and each comment was assessed using set criteria for distinguishing positive and negative comments.

For each post by the organization, a numerical code was recorded on a coding sheet with six columns. The first column represented the position of the post in the list, and the second represented its purpose. At the beginning of the research, we anticipated three possible purposes: passing along information about an event involving one of the company's ships, making an inquiry, and spreading rumors or unconfirmed information. The coding scheme for this column is as follows:

Category	Coding Scheme
Passing information	1
Inquiry	2
Rumors	3

The third column showed the time when the posts and replies by the company were made. This revealed the amount of time the company took to respond to comments and inquiries, which helped us determine whether the company's social media strategy is effective. The fourth column indicated whether customers were satisfied or dissatisfied with the posts the company made, as determined by the positivity, negativity, or neutrality of their comments, which we measured using the aforementioned keywords. Importantly, a positive response indicated that the customer was satisfied, but continued inquiries implied the customer had not been satisfied.

The fifth column showed the total customer responses to the post. The last represented the company's response to its followers.

This column was important because it indicated whether the company addressed its customers and the public in a bid to rectify its image. Instances of a company's management issuing a response were taken to reveal an effort by the organization to reach out to its customers, so this column helps us determine the

effectiveness of the company's communication through social media. The following is the coding scheme for this category:

Timing of Reply	Coding Scheme
Within an hour	3
Within one to three hours	2
After three hours	1

After recording the coding of the statements with respect to customers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction, post type, and company reply, the percentage of each column will be calculated in relation to its specific category.

Research Findings

Carnival encountered three consecutive crises in a period of only three years. On November 8, 2010, the Splendor cruise ship experienced a fire in its engine. As a result of the incident, passengers were stuck in the middle of the ocean for nearly four days. The incident generated a chaotic media situation, especially on social media. In a similar situation, Carnival's Costa Concordia cruise ship collapsed near the coast of Italy. In this incident, passengers had to board lifeboats, and several jumped directly into the water. The company was still mitigating the impact of the first two crises when the engine of its cruise ship Triumph caught fire in February 2013. This incident prompted the passengers to share pictures and videos of the situation on social media. Instead of relying on traditional media, Carnival Cruise Line used social media to reduce the impact of the crisis and related rumors on its image and market share.

Two social media outlets, Facebook and Twitter, were selected to assess the public relations practices and crisis communication of Carnival Cruise Line. A sample of 13 different posts was selected from Facebook, and 4 posts were selected from Twitter. Although the company made several other posts during the crises, they were not relevant to the crises. The selected posts were published

during the first two weeks of each crisis. The rationale for selecting posts from this two-week period is that criticism and projections about the severity of the crisis would be most likely to occur during this early phase of the crisis. Thus, the crisis communication conducted during the first phase of the crisis can better reveal the effectiveness of the public relations strategy and the impact of social media on eliminating the influence of crises on the company and cruise industry.

Findings

The posts on Facebook and Twitter published by Carnival Cruise Line were selected on the basis of the following four criteria:

- **Published during the initial days of the crisis.** The company would be more likely to encounter criticism and projections about the severity of the crisis in the days directly following the emergence of the crisis.

- **Relevant to the crisis.** Only those posts that directly discuss the crisis under consideration were selected.

- **The absence of repetition.** Posts that repeated the material found in other posts would not be selected because considering them could bias the findings.

- **Revealing information, showing sympathy, or responding to questions.** Posts made for these purposes would reveal the company's crisis response strategy.

Although Carnival Cruise Line used social media on an hourly basis, most of the posts were irrelevant to the crisis or focused on repeated statements. The only statements selected were unique ones that might help to minimize the impact of the crises on the company's image and the cruise industry as a whole. The statements that made uncertainties clear and had the potential to prompt discussion among customers and followers were highly focused. The following are some of the selected statements issued during each crisis:

Table 1.

Crisis	Outlet	No. of Posts
Splendor Fire	Facebook	2
	Twitter	1
Costa Concordia	Facebook	6
	Twitter	0
Triumph	Facebook	5
	Twitter	3

Carnival Cruise Lines has moved ahead of its competitors in handling crises by turning to social media and avoiding the use of conventional communication media such as TV and newspapers. The company has frequently used social media directly after the emergence of a crisis. When the Splendor ship caught on fire in November 2010, threatening the lives of passengers and crew members, rumors regarding the death toll began to emerge on social media, which generated aggression against the company and cruise industry. Instead of avoiding communicating with the stakeholders, Carnival started posting updates about the current situation. The rumored messages were declared invalid. The frequent updates and the two-way communication process between the company and the public convinced initially aggressive stakeholders that the rumors were false.

The Splendor Fire Tragedy

The first Facebook post, issued on November 9 at 7:45 a.m., disseminated the latest updates and described the current situation at Splendor. It was intended to make people aware of what was happening in real time, so they would not have to rely on the rumors. No less than 53 users negatively replied to the post, and 87 users' statements revealed their satisfaction with the post and the company. Carnival posted a link to the latest updates on Twitter. This tweet garnered 302 positive and 218 negative replies.

On November 12, 2010, Carnival made a post to boost the public's access to information about the crisis. Seventy-seven of the replies to the post were positive, containing words such as "appreciate," "thank you," "fantastic," "agree," "love," and "expert." The post triggered just 18 negative and 6 neutral responses as well. The responses to the post showed that 76.24% of respondents were satisfied with Carnival's social media crisis communication and only 17.82% were dissatisfied.

Table 2. The Splendor fire tragedy social media response

Outlet	Purpose	Date	Time EST	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Total
Facebook	1	11/09/10	7:45 a.m.	53	87	9	149
	1	11/12/10	4:08 p.m.	18	77	6	101
Twitter	1	9/11/10	7:45 a.m.	218	302	0	520

Costa Concordia Collision Incident

The second event took place on January 13, 2012, when Costa Concordia, Carnival's giant ship, collided with an underwater rock. This collision caused the ship's engine to shut down, which led one side of the ship to sink into the water within minutes. Carnival neither communicated with Facebook users and Twitter followers nor with the general public through traditional media channels for almost 24 hours after the crisis. Later, however, when the situation grew worse and seemed to be mushrooming out of Carnival's control, the company began frequently posting updates on Facebook about the incident. On January 14, 2012, at 5:27 p.m., the company stated, *"It is a tragedy that deeply affects our company. Our first thoughts go to the victims, and we would like to express our condolences and our closeness to their families and friends."* This statement garnered 306 likes, as people appreciated an apologetic response from Carnival Cruise Line. The message gained 104 positive comments from customers and 67 negative comments.

On January 15, 2012, Carnival made another post at 11:21 p.m. This post did not gain much attention; only one customer was satisfied with it. On January 16, Carnival expressed its condolences to the victims. The percentage of satisfaction tended to be higher in this post. On the same day, another post also revealed customer satisfaction, as it received positive comments. Posts made on January 18, and 19 did not receive any positive comments. Overall, the majority of the posts garnered positive responses as customers revealed their satisfaction with how the situation was progressing and shared their appreciation for Carnival's efforts. The data collected are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Social media comments about the Costa Concordia collision incident

Outlet	Purpose	Date	Time EST	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Total
Facebook	1	1/14/2012	5:27 p.m.	67	104	22	193
	1	1/15/2012	11:21 a.m.	0	1	2	3
	1	1/16/2012	2:00 p.m.	28	41	19	88
	1	1/16/2012	2:00 p.m.	0	3	0	3
	1	1/18/2012	8:29 a.m.	0	1	0	1
	1	1/19/2012	1:28 a.m.	0	0	1	1

The Triumph Fire Tragedy Crisis

The Triumph's engine caught fire on February 10, 2013, which forced thousands of passengers to stay in the middle of the ocean without food and supplies for no less than five days. The Triumph's passengers started posting pictures and videos of the miserable conditions and worn-out ship's interior on Facebook and Twitter with the hashtag "cruise from hell." This situation led to a frenzy of two-way communication between passengers and the public on social media, which had the potential to exert a profoundly negative impact on Carnival's image. However, on February 10, 2013, Carnival began using social media as a public relations platform by posting its first statement informing

people about the incident. It stated that passengers were being provided with the necessary supplies and food. Moreover, it gave numbers to which families could contact their family members or loved ones on Triumph. This first statement garnered 361 negative and 1,066 positive comments.

On February 12, 2013, Carnival issued a long statement on Facebook to update users about how the situation was progressing and to inform them about the safety of passengers. Along with an apology, Carnival offered a full refund to the passengers as well as a free future voyage. A full 248 respondents appreciated this statement, and only 22 of the total customers opposed it. On February 13, 2013, Carnival shared a link to the press conference of Garry Cahill, president of Carnival Cruise Line. This post gained more negative comments than positive ones. On the very next day, the company posted a statement about the progress of the recovery by informing the public that Carnival was arranging for water coaches and boats for taking passengers to the ground in Mobile. Of the responses to this statement, 29.8% voiced dissatisfaction and, 66.9% expressed satisfaction. On February 14, 2013, Carnival posted a statement informing people that Triumph was 10 miles away from land and that upon reaching the shore, passengers would be catered to with food, beverages, and mobile phones. The customer dissatisfaction rate revealed by this statement was 26.85%, and the satisfaction rate was 58.5%. Carnival also frequently used Twitter on February 14, 2013. Its tweets garnered 56 negative replies and 119 satisfied replies. Overall, the percentage of satisfied replies tended to be higher than the percentage of dissatisfied replies.

Table 4. Social media comments on the Triumph fire tragedy crisis

Outlet	Purpose	Date	Time EST	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Total
	1	2/10/13	7:30 p.m.	361	1,066	173	1,600
	1	2/11/13	8:30 p.m.	467	2,144	289	2,900
Facebook	1	2/12/13	5:45 p.m.	22	248	20	290
	1	2/13/13	2:30 p.m.	298	669	33	1,000
	1	2/14/13	8:20 p.m.	376	819	205	1,400
Twitter							
	1	2/14/13	7:44 p.m.	6	17	7	30
	1	2/14/13	7:11 p.m.	50	112	11	173
	1	2/15/13	8:46 p.m.	38	30	3	71

Importance of the Findings

The research question could not be responded to with an assessment of Carnival's activities on traditional media channels. Thus, the findings outlined above have the potential to explain the role of social media in maintaining the organization's reputation.

This study is intended to determine the effectiveness of using social media as a public relations platform through an evaluation of the positive responses toward the content of messages posted during organizational crises within the cruise ship industry. The assessment of social media posts published on Facebook and Twitter during crises could aid the study in meeting this objective by assessing the customer satisfaction rate expressed in each of the selected posts. The findings mentioned above reveal the customers' satisfaction and dissatisfaction rate during three consecutive crises.

Assessing the limitations of this study and the possibilities for future research is also crucial. In regard to the role of social media in crisis management, it is also important to make managerial recommendations for both

the small and large players of the cruise industry so that crises like those of the Splendor and Costa Concordia can be better mitigated in the future. Chapter 5 will analyze the findings in the light of past studies. Aside from making managerial recommendations, this chapter will describe areas for future research. Additionally, it will explain why the study's findings cannot be generalized to several other crisis situations.

Discussion

The cruise industry has been quite notorious for crises that have the potential to take the lives of passengers. Carnival Cruise Lines, one of the world's leading cruise companies, continued to undergo crisis situations for three years from 2010 to 2013. This study explored how public relations can aid in maintaining an organization's reputation and image when utilizing social media as a platform during a crisis in the cruise ship industry. It was intended to determine the effectiveness of using social media as a public relations platform and to identify the best public relations practices for enabling control of the message during a crisis. Carnival was selected as the subject company for a case study because instead of using traditional communication channels, it focused on using social media as a public relations platform for conducting crisis communication. The findings have revealed that by using social media as a PR platform, Carnival not only minimized the aggression of stakeholders and the general public but also kept everyone updated about its progress in resolving the crises, which turned the tables in its favor.

The findings are supported by the studies reviewed in Chapter 2. Although rumors had the potential to cause irreparable damage to Carnival, social media saved it from encountering any long-term negative impacts from the series of crises by allowing the company to continually respond to customers' urgent questions. In short, using social media helped Carnival to avoid any unnecessary delays. In the case of the Splendor crisis, customers and stakeholders forwarded rumored messages of ship destruction and Carnival's

technical failures to others, generating a negative perception of Carnival. Social media mediation used in the crisis communication helped Carnival to turn the negative perceptions into positive ones by consistently updating customers and the public and responding to rumors. This practice of mitigating negative reactions has been advocated by Coombs (2007a) and Spence, Lachlan, and Griffin (2007).

Limitation of the Study

This study has considered the impact of utilizing social media as a public relations platform during an organizational crisis within the cruise ship industry. However, the findings of this research cannot be generalized to other industries, as it focuses only on the cruise industry. One cannot claim on the basis of this study's findings that if a manufacturing company were to use social media, it would get the same results attained by Carnival Cruise, as other factors may impact the customers or stakeholders. Further, the scope of the study is limited to an assessment of the use of social media in crisis mitigation. Thus, the study cannot help researchers understand the impact of using conventional PR platforms in minimizing potential reputation damage.

Additionally, the psychology and culture of Western people are different from those of Eastern individuals. This study has focused only on crises that have occurred in the West and how western passengers reacted to social media used in mitigating these crises.

Moreover, while collecting data, it was impossible to identify whether the comments were fake or original; therefore, some of the comments could be biased, which could limit the relevance of the results to forthcoming situations of uncertainty in the cruise industry. Finally, this study has considered only two social media outlets: Facebook and Twitter.

Future Research

Despite its limitations, this study has opened different pathways for future research. By following the same methodological framework, future researchers could investigate the impact of utilizing YouTube and community forums as PR platforms during an organizational crisis within different industries such as auto manufacturing, construction, and textiles. In the future, research could be conducted to compare the effectiveness of using different social media outlets in minimizing the impact of a crisis on an organization's image. A longitudinal study could be conducted to assess how using social media gradually reduces stakeholders' aggression, helps a company to regain their trust, and improves its market image. A researcher could also conduct the same type of study for a crisis that emerged in another industry.

Recommendations

This study has revealed that crisis-related social media messages should employ active sentences instead of unassertive ones. The messages should not focus only on the crisis updates but should adequately reveal the company's degree of responsibility toward the crisis. It is recommended that organizations experiencing a crisis should frequently communicate with their customers and other stakeholders through social media as well, as a delayed response tends to trigger the proliferation of rumors.

Additionally, messages with a non-empathetic tone, slang words, or lack of clarity generate confusion among social media users. Thus, a company should develop empathetic messages with a humble tone. Carnival has strategically used social media outlets for not only updating customers and other stakeholders about the crisis but for increasing their engagement with the company by stimulating two-way communication. Thus, it is suggested that companies encountering crises should make posts that could stimulate discussion among customers and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

The content analysis conducted in this study has revealed the benefits of utilizing social media as a public relations platform. This case study has presented social media as an unavoidable and vital part of a crisis communication strategy because it enables a company to better handle customers' reactions to a crisis than other crisis-communication tools do. A comprehensive review of the literature has supported the study's findings. It has been found that the more a company communicates about a crisis with its stakeholders through social media, the more it reduces their negative perceptions and produces positives ones instead. An important factor in determining the success of social media utilization is customer engagement. Regardless of its type and size, a company cannot engage customers in crisis communication through the conventional PR platforms. Rather, a company must employ social media because it stimulates two-way communication and aids in responding to the confusion and concerns of stakeholders in a timely manner before they turn into negative perceptions.

In sum, this study has made a contribution to the crisis communication and public relations literature. Its findings add value to the crisis management field by demonstrating the effectiveness of using social media as a PR platform in crisis communication. Moreover, it provides a valuable addition to the literature in that it explains how social media can help a cruise line reduce the impact of a crisis and replace negative perceptions with positives ones while generating increased support for the company.

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