Understanding Image Restoration Strategies from a Stakeholder Approach

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ABSTRACT
This article focuses on image restoration strategies, a practice in public relations. Specifically, this article proposes two major theoretical frameworks; theory of social construction of reality and stakeholder analysis approach in studying image restoration in parallel with Benoit’s image restoration theory (1995). Besides focusing to the limited message strategies of Benoit’s image restoration from the traditional perspective, as providing the practitioners merely ‘what’ strategies to be selected as to respond to the crisis, it is possible that deeper understanding on ‘how’ image restoration messages works and to design message tailored each group of stakeholders should be obtained. Most importantly, this article provides both scholars and practitioners an understanding and fine-tuning restoration messages with specific group of stakeholder in order to regain positive organization image.

Keywords: Image Restoration Strategies, Social Construction of Reality, A Stakeholder Approach, Multiple Interpretations and Organization Image

Introduction
The research of image restoration is scarce (Benoit, 2001), and, moreover, most of the image restoration studies are based on western theory, which may be or may be not wholly applicable to Thai context, particularly the current topic of political crisis. This is mainly due to the cultural differences between western and eastern contexts which influence the practice of image restoration. Thai culture, as a context, influences different beliefs, values, attitudes, and creates potentially different expectations among stakeholders in Thailand. The theory might need to be adapted to applicable in Thai context. Moreover, the theory allows merely the identification of typology, not the process of how the strategy is communicated. By incorporating the theory of social construction of reality in understanding the image restoration message, it is hoped that it will offer a more complete picture. That is, it helps explain how an organization’s image restoration strategies function in constructing its image, as social reality, for people. In addition, it will provide an understanding
of how the social interaction encourages people to enact with each particular reality.

Most importantly, since most of the image restoration studies rarely incorporated the stakeholder theory, this limits the growth of the field. This article, as highlighting the significance of stakeholders in designing image restoration message, should extend the body of knowledge of the image restoration. That is, the article goes beyond describing general strategies as, in particular, the content management of the image restoration strategy tailoring different group of stakeholders effectively will be discussed. Realizing of the situation, it is hoped that new insights into both theoretical and practical level regarding studying image restoration in Thai context should be obtained.

Crisis Communication and Organization Image

Crisis communication is regarded as an important area in the study of corporate communication. It is possible to say that every public and private organization has been encountered with a crisis. Crisis is typically viewed as a threat to an organizational image and an organization attempts to find ways to respond to the crisis and to regain public trust. Corporate communication, therefore, is considered as a significant means to communicate organizational crisis response strategies to its various publics.

Concern with the importance of organizational crisis has developed various studies for organization crisis management. These studies provide different perspectives on managing organizational crisis. The corporate communication field also has developed organizational crisis studies and various definitions of organizational crisis based on the role of communication in crisis. For organizational communication study, an inclusive definition of organizational crisis is “a specific, unexpected and nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization’s high-priority goal” (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998, 233).

Crisis can be viewed through its shared variables that are normally found in the examination of a crisis and the organization’s response. These variables are threat, short response time and surprise (Hermann, 1963). These three components also appeared in most organizational crisis definitions, such as Kathleen Fearn-Banks (2001); Williams and Olaniran (2002); Pauchant and Mitroff (1992); Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer; Weick (1988); Gouran (1982); Billing et al. (1980); Seeger and Bolz (1996) and Sellnow and Ulmer (1995).

Threat arises from the extreme discrepancy between the desired status of an organization, and the status under which it is being, or potentially will be, viewed. Most of the time, managers are notified of some trigger events that might lead to crisis by subordinates or someone outside the organization. A crisis manager, thus, needs to monitor various possible outcomes and responses before having a chance to assess the severity of the problem.

The second characteristic of crisis is short response time. When a crisis occurs, the availability and efficacy of an organization’s response is needed. Time constraint is the critical factor in dealing with crisis. The crisis manager should provide a complete and honest explanation of the crisis to media and third party in time so that it will not create additional threat and uncertainty that damages the organization’s credibility and image.

The third characteristic of crisis is surprise. Surprise is a consequence of being suddenly confronted with circumstances seen as unlikely and inconsistent with routine, familiar activities (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998, 233). Decision makers faced with crisis are confronted with nonroutine decision situations, unanticipated sources of uncertainty, confusing and incomplete message, and participants who do not share the organization’s values and assumptions (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998).

Generally, crisis is categorized in terms of public perception, marketing shift, product failure, top management succession and financial crisis. Recently, another type of crisis was studied. Racially oriented crisis is considered another type of crisis that is not perceived as important in typical studies (Williams & Olaniran, 2002).

Effective crisis management needs to consider the importance of public. Different publics possess different characteristics, then, to manage crisis effectively, different rhetorical strategies to communicate with each public is required. Ice (1991), in his study “Corporate publics and rhetorical strategy: The case of union carbide’s Bhopal crisis” emphasized the managing rhetorical strategy as a determinant to the effectiveness of public relations practitioners to manage crisis. By categorizing public, crisis manager can implement appropriate rhetorical strategy with each public.

Organization can manage crisis by taking both preventive and restorative approaches. In preventive approach, issue management by an organization allows two-way communication between organization and public to create mutual understanding (Heath, 1997). Issue management may help by reducing the potential of any trigger event to become a crisis. Public relations, handling with crisis, are responsible for developing of a crisis management team, identifying the high risk area to be encountered by organization, and structuring, implementation and maintenance of an overall crisis communication plan (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998). Though organizations can take preventive approach to manage crisis, it can be said that they are not able to prevent all issues all the time. When an organization fails to detect some issues and it becomes a crisis, they need the restorative approach to deal with a crisis.
Benoit’s Image Restoration Strategies

Image restoration is considered as a crisis communication approach in recovering an organization’s image. Benoit’s theory of image restoration discourse (1995) explained that “when [a person or organization] image is threatened, it is often considered essential to take action to repair that image” (Benoit & Pang, 2008). Particularly, communication is considered as the essential means to restore a person’s or organization’s image after the crisis. By using communication, an entity allows others to understand and influence its image through the formation of people’s experience leading to their interpretations regarding the organization/corporation.


Denial occurs when an organization flat out denies that the problem exits or that if it does, it not hurting anyone. There are two tactics of denial strategy. These are simple denial and shift the blame. Evasion of responsibility allows an entity to manipulate public perception and relinquish responsibility for their actions. There are four tactics of evasion. These are provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intention. Reduce the offensiveness of the act is the strategy seeking to offer an alternative perspective to the problem. There are six tactics of reduce offensiveness strategy. These are bolster (stress good traits), minimize, differentiate, transcend, attack accuser, and compensate. Corrective action concerns the organization attempts to repair the damage by taking action to solve or prevent recurrence. Mortification, finally, occurs when the offender apologizes and asks for forgiveness (Benoit, Blaney, & Brazeal, 2001).

Since the image restoration strategy focuses primarily on the message factor, as explained by Benoit (1995), it is clear that image restoration deals with the process of communication. Accordingly, communication is considered as the essential means to restore a person’s or organization’s image. By using communication, an entity allows others to understand and influence its image through the formation of people’s experience leading to their interpretations regarding the organization/corporation.

One way to understand the image restoration message as communication process is through the perspective of social construction; particularly, the theory of social construction of reality.

Theory of Social Construction of Reality

Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that “the world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaningful conduct of the lives” (p. 19). From this statement, the fact or truth regarding an entity, except the scientific truth, is socially constructed. As explained by Gordon and Pellegrin (2008), “social reality is not a social fact in its own right, but is something produced and communicated, its meaning derived in and through these systems of communication” (p. 105).

In explaining how language constructs the social reality, reviewing the original concept of social construction of reality would provide a better understanding of how the theory may be applicable to the study of image restoration. Particularly, how communication influences and maintains one’s perception towards a subjective fact towards an organization, socially-created reality, image or how image is considered as socially constructed reality through communication.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), “reality is socially constructed … as a quality pertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own (we cannot “wish them away”) …“knowledge” as the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics” (p. 1).

From the statement, it is appropriate to consider reality as socially constructed through knowledge what we generally take for granted as a priori or objective fact. As Gergen (1991) notes, truth or fact is socially constructed, not essentially existing. Accordingly, the truth about the essence of an organization’s image is socially constructed.

Moreover, Berger and Luckmann further explain how language is used to influence one’s understanding and perception towards an organization’s image. They asserted that “Language is capable of transcending the reality of everyday life altogether. It can refer to experiences pertaining to finite provinces of meaning, and it can span discrete sphere of reality” (p. 40).

In understanding social reality as constructed through social interaction, Berger and Luckmann (1966) explained three central tenets of social constructionism. As highlighted in Gordon and Pellegrin (2008), “One tenet is that conceptions of reality (including of ourselves) are created through social interaction. A second tenet is that human institutions are created through social interactions and cannot exist independently of human agreement. Finally, a third tenet, the constructed world of everyday life is itself an important element in the maintenance and reconstruction of social reality, human institutions and ourselves” (p. 105). Through interaction, communication plays an important role in assigning, reinforcing and maintaining the social meaning for each individual based on common knowledge.

Moreover, Gordon and Pellegrin (2008) also highlight the significance of social interaction in producing and reproducing meaning as reality which rests on four basic assumptions:
1) Reality "does not present itself objectively" to the viewer, it is understood through human experience;
2) Categories of language are determined by "social interactions" in force at a particular time;
3) How reality is defined is determined by the "conventions of communication";
4) Communication behavior constitutes the social construction of reality

To this point, based on the theory of social construction of reality, it is possible to link the theory of social construction of reality to the study of image restoration. Image is socially constructed through communication. Also, in restoring the image, it needs communication in to construct another set of social reality among different groups of stakeholders. That is, the theory of social construction of reality will provide a clear understanding of how strategic image restoration messages are communicated to different group of stakeholder as to restore its image. Particularly, how language was produced and communicated as the image restoration message to construct/reconstruct the image.

**Image as socially constructed: A stakeholder’s interpretation**

Benoit and Pang (2008) defined image as “a subjective impression of an organization formed through one’s experience with that organization and interpretation is based on other past experiences” (p. 245). Based on this description, it reflects the significance of communication as influencing one’s perception towards an organization/institution. A person will develop his or her understanding towards an organization through interaction with direct experience of corporate information and/or socially interact with others in society.

The above statement implicated that an image is formed or constructed through any form of communication. This is also applicable to the image restoration. That is, image can be constructed and/or reconstructed through communication. An organization can influence a person’s perception towards an organization after the crisis by using communication. To be more precise, the image restoration message can influence one’s perception towards an organization. This resonates with the Benoit and Pang (2008)’s description of significance of communication in managing image; “so image and image repair both arise from reality but must be shaped through communication. Reality clearly influences images, but rarely do people have a complete knowledge of the facts, and what they do know is filtered or interpreted by their personal attitudes and experiences” (p. 245). It can be said that when people interact, they do so with the understanding that their respective perceptions of reality are related, and as they act upon this understanding their common knowledge of reality becomes reinforced.

At this point, the theory of social construction of reality as the theory can provide a clear understanding of how communication influences and maintains one’s perception towards a subjective fact towards an organization, socially-created reality, image or how image is considered as socially constructed reality through communication.

According to Berger and Luckmann’s three tenets, it can be said that the way an organization communicates its restoring image represents the reconstruction of reality. By communicating information regarding an organization’s practice to handle the situation through various media, different groups of stakeholder start to learn new reality involving the recovering. In attempting to understand an organization’s image restoration message, it is also important to recognize the existence of multiple stakeholders in this issue. Since an organization’s image restoration message is constructed with an aim to communicate its new image to public and each message is tailored to different public groups to persuade them to accept its new image, by focusing only on the ‘sender’ side, it might now allow better understanding. To better provide a deep understanding on this issue, the recognition of various stakeholders of the issue also needs to be addressed. Accordingly, to obtain a deep understanding towards how significant of image restoration message in constructing and/or reconstruct the organization image, the stakeholder theory will be incorporated.

This article goes beyond merely identifying ‘what strategies’ an organization employed to restore image. Based on Benoit’s image restoration’s strategies, this study aiming at providing deeper insight regarding ‘which strategy’ is tailored/directed to which stakeholders. Due to the fact that individual’s perception is different depending upon their background and experiences, it is also important for an organization to concern that each group of stake will also interpret and its restoration message differently.

**Stakeholder Theory: Following the Stakeholder Grid to discover how image restoration messages are directed to specific groups of stakeholders**

Understanding stakeholders’ interpretations in constructing their reality towards the image restoration message is important. However, most of the crisis communication studies provide merely general knowledge demonstrating their significance Gand, Acquier & Szpirglas (2005); Carpenter, Holt, & Ware (2006).

The final theory providing a complete picture of literature review for studying how image restoration strategic message are designed and directed to different stakeholders is Stakeholder theory. One of the most widely studied definitions of stakeholder is Freeman’s (1984) definition of a stakeholder as “any group or individual who is affected by the
achievement of the organization’s objectives” (as cited in Phillips, Robert & Freeman, 2003, p.46). Based on this definition, Illia and Laurati (2005) describe three perspectives in studying stakeholder including: broad, narrow a priori and narrow situational approach.

The main characteristics of each group of stakeholder are worth discussion here. Broad perspective focuses on the stakeholder in terms of the mass of public opinion. According to Windsor (1992) and Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) as cited in Illia and Laurati (2005), broad stakeholder is “almost anyone can be a stakeholder since every entity with a stake in the organization may be considered relevant” (p.9). This view includes all stakeholders to be relevant independently of the relationship they have with the organization. The second perspective, a narrow a priori, also view the stakeholder as objective, or predetermined set of stakeholders categories. That is, this view regarded the stakeholders mainly as primary and secondary stakeholder. While the first two perspectives of stakeholder regard the stakeholder as based on reason not relevant to the situational context, the final perspective, the narrow situational approach emphasizes that stakeholders cannot be pre-determined, or classified prior to the situation. The stakeholders are contingent to the situational context or subject to the issue. Moreover, the stakeholder from this perspective as being more fluid and flexible not fixed, depending on the situation.

Many scholars identify stakeholders from a narrow a priori approach; for example, M.B.E. Clarkson (1995); Bendheim, Waddock and Graves (1997); Davenport (2000); Hillman, Keim and Luce (2001); and Jawahar and Mclaughlin (2001) (as cited in Illia & Laurati, 2005, p.10). According to them, stakeholders are precisely predefined as employees, shareholders, communities, customers and suppliers, consumer, investors, stockholders, creditors, trade associations, government and public. These stakeholders identified their relevancy in terms of their “continuing participation in the organization’s activities”; “the interdependence of the quality management of primary stakeholder” and “the quality of performance”; “the commitment and their legitimate claims on organizational corporate citizenship behavior”; “the power exert of the stakeholder in controlling the organization’s critical resources to the basic needs of the organization” (Illia & Laurati, 2005, pp. 10-11).

Implications

This article allows both communication scholars and public relations practitioners to develop a deeper understanding on image restoration. In addition to apply the five existing Benoit’s image restoration strategies in repairing image after the crisis, scholars will be able to understand ‘how’ the image restoration message function. That is how communication is used to create reality. That is language as reality–image–construction. Also, the knowledge of stakeholder approach when incorporating with the image restoration strategies enables the practitioners in being aware of the existence of multiple interpretations influencing an individual perception regarding an organization’s image. Therefore, practitioners should be strategically design the restoration message based upon the framework of socially construction of reality and the multireinterpretations to successfully communicate with its stakeholders.

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