AN EXPLORATORY Q-SORT OF CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PERFORMED BY
PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS
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ABSTRACT

THESIS: An Exploratory Q-sort of Crisis Communications Performed by Public Relations Professionals

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This study explored the attitudes of public relations professionals regarding crisis communication strategies and discerned patterns of preferred crisis communication strategies through the use of Q Methodology. Using the strategies proposed by Benoit, Fink, Coombs and Lukaszewski as the basis for the concourse, a group of public relations practitioners with crisis experience were asked which crisis response strategy they preferred. Respondents fell into three factors. “Speedsters” focused on achieving a speedy response and building/maintaining the organization’s reputation during a crisis. “Character Builders” use compassion to build/maintain a favorable image and reputation. “Reactors” are focused not just on speeding up the process of resolving the crisis, but on reacting within one hour of the emergency. Coomb’s compassion strategy was favored by all three groups, but was valued most highly by the “Character Builders.” Implications for future research are discussed.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The evolution of crisis communication has increased in the past several years due to the turbulence of the environments in which business is operating. As the number of crisis situations rose, the severity of these situations deepened, and more media attention was given to them, crisis communications became more relevant. In the 1970s, McDonald’s was accused of using earthworms as an ingredient in its hamburgers. The organization disputed this rumor with facts, causing the problem to disappear (Melillo 2003). In 1983, when the Tylenol crisis took place and seven people died in Chicago, the concept of crisis communication was unique; but today the field has grown to be valued by professionals. Today’s reality is quite different and has turned the focus to crisis communication as a result of situations like Enron, Arthur Andersen, Martha Stewart, the Roman Catholic Church, September 11, Tyco International, and WorldCom (Melillo 2003).

The uncertainty in the world today requires that organizations take into consideration the number of situations that could evolve from events that are under their control or events that are out of their control. Wendy Melillo (2003) quotes Helio Fred Garcia, a professor of management and communication at New York University as saying, “What we have found in the last two years is an unprecedented convergence of
factors that have driven public confidence down.” Garcia continues by saying, “I call them the Four Hoursemen of the Apocalypse--war, recession, corporate corruption, and the sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church (Melillo 2003, 1).” The reality of corporate corruption can undermine the reputation and image the organization has set forth through years of work. The management of these crisis situations is imperative to maintaining the organizational image because the mismanagement of a crisis can be more deadly to the organization than the crisis itself. “The traditional scenario-based plans, with prewritten press releases and predesignated spokespeople, must give way to process- and philosophy-driven protocols that can be easily applied and adapted to various scenarios and account for the ever-evolving climate or mood of the company’s constituencies (Winters 2005, 8).” Therefore, crisis communication is growing as a field as an increasing number of organizations and their leaders are finding room at the boardroom table for individuals who specialize in managing crisis situations and discussing in professional settings what crisis communication means for their organization.

A study conducted by KRC Research for Weber Shandwick reinforced the idea that crisis communications is evolving as an important aspect of business. The study found that over the past year, corporate communication executives dealt with issues associated with management and corporate governance with greater frequency than with issues such as labor disputes, product recalls or environmental infractions. More than eight in ten (81 percent) addressed issues regarding government regulation in the last year while more than two-thirds dealt with issues associated with a lawsuit against their company (69 percent). Also, more than one in five (22 percent) of corporate
communications executives had to publicly address allegations of improper behavior by a senior manager. At the same time, one in ten (11 percent) addressed a consumer boycott, and nearly a third of the executives addressed a strike or labor dispute (32 percent) or allegations of an environmental problem (32 percent) in the last year. (Corporate Communications 2003, 1).

Crisis situations, like the ones mentioned above, are increasingly more evident in business today but also more unpredictable and frequent. A crisis, by its very nature, is not a situation or event that can be predicted or planned for; but considering the possibility of crisis situations is one step towards managing a crisis. In today’s age, many crisis’ have taken place that no one would have fathomed but by accepting that they do happen and discussing options for dealing with a crisis, the organization will be more prepared. The initial research in the field of crisis communication began in a time when crisis situations were scarce and the approach wasn’t considered important; the only important aspect of the crisis was to make it go away. Therefore, crisis communication literature dealt with the list of “how to’s” or “do’s and don’ts” on the topic. However, as more and more businesses encountered crisis situations, the approach and tactics to handling a crisis began to become more sophisticated. With a deeper purpose on the mind of researchers the crisis literature began analyzing organizations that had endured crisis situations and used their experiences as models to expand the literature.

However, Albert Tortorella, managing director of the global corporate practice at Ogilvy Public Relations, thinks crisis counselors should throw out the textbooks. “The case history, which is used so often to teach in this area, is virtually useless in modern crisis management,” says Tortorella, who worked on the Tylenol scandal. “The idea that
Tylenol, where seven people died, can be compared to the Exxon Valdez, where no one died, is an indication that the case history can’t be used (Melillo 2003, 1).” The problem of using case history as a methodology for crisis communication is the generalizability of that research to other contexts. Matthew Seeger, Timothy Sellnow, and Robert Ulmer (1998) state the problem in this way:

Practitioners interested in managing crisis through communication take a microscopic approach, usually focusing on a relatively narrow segment of the crisis, its impact on the organization, and steps to reduce or control that impact in postcrisis conditions. Theorists interested in understanding crisis as a social force usually take a macroscopic perspective, and do so over a relatively expansive time frame that includes precrisis events. This broader perspective may help researchers to identify heretofore unidentified patterns in crisis. Researchers using both perspectives should work to bridge the gap between these two branches as they expand the crisis communication literature. (p. 268)

“The increased risk of crisis and the central role of communication in crisis sensing, avoidance, development, and resolution suggest that communication researchers should view this area of investigation as an opportunity for the development of both theory and practice. Although researchers are often reticent to sift through the artifacts of organizational crises, such research may ultimately help to ensure that these crises remain relatively rare events (Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer 1998, 269).”

Many scholars insist that for the field of crisis communication to advance, it must step outside the comfort zone of case studies. “Thus, to propel crisis management into a new stage, studies that assess and evaluate the more abstract facets of the field must be undertaken to compliment the existing research that still focuses on the more fundamental crisis management activities (Penrose 2000, 168).” “Public relations practitioners therefore need to expand their technical communication mindset to consider variables that appear to predict excellent crisis public relations practice more accurately than the
mere presence of a crisis public relations plan (Marra 1998, 463).” This focus on future research in crisis communication will advance the field of study by verifying existing research through other means, researching the number of variables involved in crisis communication, and addressing areas in the field that have not yet been explored.

This study will attempt to add to the body of literature by taking a step outside of the standard methodology of case study research to perform a study that will gather the opinions of crisis managers to determine where they place their importance when communicating during a crisis.

The foundation for the body of literature within crisis communication rest on four main approaches presented in the research of William Benoit, Steven Fink, James Lukaszewski and Timothy Coombs. These researchers presented information that has laid the groundwork for subsequent studies, strategies and theories within crisis communication literature. William Benoit presented the theory of image restoration and the tactics used during a crisis to damage, maintain or improve an organizations image. Several researchers focused on those image restoration tactics presented by Benoit to add to the research in crisis communication. Timothy Coombs focused much of his research on exploring the image restoration tactics presented by Benoit to gain further insights into the consequences and benefits of each tactic. In addition, Steven Fink presented his theory of stage analysis to assist researchers in taking a more macroscopic view of crisis situations. James Lukaszewski presents standards, principles and protocols for addressing crisis situations that promotes the research completed in the field of crisis communication.
The prevalence of these researchers and their volumes of research in crisis communication literature establish them as “thought leaders” within crisis communication. The ideas, theories, studies and findings of these four researchers have been the underpinning for additional research and the educational foundation for those studying the topic.

However, when discussing the application of these tactics and theories among those currently in the field of crisis communication, no one universal strategy has been accepted as the best strategy. This study presents the strategies of Benoit, Fink, Lukaszewski and Coombs to the crisis managers who actually use them to try and determine what strategies are actually preferred and whether a “best strategy” exists among professionals.

This study pulls information from current literature to develop a concourse based on the research of these four “thought leaders” that represents the opinions of crisis managers. Q-sort analysis was used to determine managers’ perceptions of the importance of various crisis communication management strategies.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis communications as a topic began to evolve initially in business management journals, slowly becoming a topic for business communication and eventually finding itself among communication and public relations journals. In the early 1970’s crisis communication literature began to arise in these journals with an emphasis on the basics of a crisis, instead of the overarching concept of a crisis. In the first ten years of crisis development, the topic was identified as a business problem, but slowly was acknowledged as an appropriate topic for the field of public relations in the late 1980’s. In the beginning, crisis communication research consisted of theory application from other disciplines to known crisis situations. The research then began to analyze crisis situations and pull pieces of truth from those situations through case studies. Case study research is where the bulk of crisis communication research resides with additional information being pulled from these case studies to propose survey research and models for crisis communication.

The research originated with authors like William Benoit, Steven Fink, and Thomas Birkland dissecting a crisis into manageable parts. These manageable parts allowed other researchers to expand the literature through use of their framework for case studies or models of crisis communication. The literature was expanded upon by authors
like Timothy Sellnow, Matthew Seeger, and Robert Ulmer as they approached crisis communication through theory application and creation. This information was then explored by authors like Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay through application and theory testing.

The literature in crisis communication has been organized by the key authors for this research, William Benoit, Steven Fink, James Lukaszewski and Timothy Coombs. Each authors’ research category will include studies performed by other authors that contributed to the initial research of the key authors or explored further the findings of those authors.

**Research of William Benoit**

William Benoit (1997) built a foundation for crisis communication research through his application of the theory of image restoration discourse to crisis communication responses. Benoit discussed the importance of an organization’s image and how that image is often under attack in crisis situations. Therefore, it is important to find a response that addresses the crisis situation but also maintains the reputation of the organization’s image. In order to understand the type of responses that can repair an organization’s image one must understand what brought about the problem. The type of problems or issues that effect an organizations image have “. . . two components:

1. The accused is held responsible for an action.
2. The act is considered offensive (Benoit 1997, 178).”

Benoit found that in a crisis situation if the accused was being held responsible or the situation was viewed as being offensive, often times the organizations image was in
jeopardy. Additionally, if members of the relevant audience held the organization responsible or were offended by the act than the threat on the organizations’ image was compounded. Communicators must deal with the root of the problem as well as the perception held by their relevant audiences. Therefore, it is important for crisis communicators to prioritize the audiences they need to communicate to in order to address their concerns.

The theory of image restoration discourse assists in communication by focusing on message options for communicators during a crisis situation.

This theory offers five broad categories of image repair strategies, some with variants, that respond to such threats. Denial and evasion of responsibility address the first component of persuasive attack, rejecting or reducing the accused’s responsibility for the act in question. Reducing offensiveness and corrective action, the third and fourth broad category of image restoration, concern the second component of persuasive attack: reducing offensiveness of the act attributed to the accused. The last general strategy, mortification, tries to restore an image by asking forgiveness. (Benoit 1997, 178-179)

Each one of these categories contains several options to communicate innocence of the actions or reduce the offensiveness of the act. Under the broad category of denial are two strategies. The first is simple denial where the organization claims that they did not perform the act. The second strategy is shifting the blame, which places the responsibility for the action on someone else’s shoulders.

The category of evasion of responsibility has four strategies. The first strategy is provocation, a claim that an action is a reaction to another situation, therefore making it acceptable. The second strategy is defeasibility, which uses the deficit of information/ability as an excuse for the crisis situation. The third strategy is accident, which focuses on the unintentional cause of the situation. The fourth strategy is good
intentions. This strategy draws the attention to the purpose of their actions being pure despite the crisis their actions caused in the end.

The next broad category of reducing offensiveness of the event has six strategies. The first strategy is bolstering which focuses on communicating the positive attributes of the organization under attack. The second strategy is minimization where the organization downplays the extent of the situation. The next strategy is known as differentiation where the organization compares their situation to another common situation to show that their situation wasn’t as offensive as it could have been. The fourth strategy is transcendence, which places the situation in a bigger scheme to show how it, though apparently negative on the surface, contributes to the common good in the end. The next strategy is attacking the accuser by tearing aware at their credibility. The final strategy relies on compensation of the victims to overcome the crisis situation.

The final two categories of corrective action and mortification do not have numerous strategies to achieve the goal. The category of corrective action simply focuses on taking steps to bring closure to the current situation or avoid a similar situation in the future. Mortification on the other hand is a strategy that is focused on apologizing for the situation.

These image restoration strategies assist in preparing a crisis communication plan. An organization should have a plan that directs who is responsible for responding to a crisis and identifies possible crisis situations that may arise for their particular organization. In addition to this preparation, when a crisis hits, the organization should know the circumstances surrounding the crisis and the public perception of the crisis. This information should feed directly into tailoring a message to respond to the unique
situation. Once a message has been tailored to fit the situation, audiences need to be identified and communicated to appropriately. This may mean targeting particular audiences in a particular order and crafting messages specifically for those audiences. These steps will help in dealing with a crisis situation, but dealing specifically with a tarnished image is a little different.

The organization must realize that it cannot change the nature of the accusation made against their organization but they can choose to attempt to focus attention elsewhere. This tactic may work if the audience is not particularly troubled by the situation. However, if the audience cares or hears about it enough the likelihood of being able to avoid the accusations dwindles severely. With that said, Benoit points out suggestions for successfully managing image restoration efforts. One of the most important things to remember is to be honest and be able to back up any arguments that are presented publicly.

The second tip is to admit fault sooner than later if the organization is truly responsible for the situation. However, don’t admit fault just because there are accusations because not everyone that is blamed for something is actually responsible.

The third tip is to know that shifting the blame can be successful if it is a valid claim that is backed with facts. In addition, if the organization can prove that the situation was caused by conditions out of their control they may be able to save the face of the organization. Furthermore, if an organization can offer corrective actions or preventative measures to avoid a similar situation in the future they may improve their chances of repairing their image.
However, this tactic is not fool proof. Minimization is another tactic that isn’t fool proof. The use of this strategy needs to be carefully used and must not try to downplay a vital situation in an attempt to repair the image. However, a number of these strategies can be effectively used together to create a strong defense for the organization and their image. Yet sometimes the nature of the crisis is so severe that the only strategy that will repair the organization’s image is time (Benoit 1997).

Susan Brinson and William Benoit (1999) continued the research on crisis response strategies through a case study of Texaco during their racism crisis. The New York Times ran a story in November 1996 about secret taped conversations of Texaco executives exploiting their racial and religious insensitivity and their plot to destroy evidence. Once the story broke, the media ran with the information and criticism of Texaco flourished. The authors performed a rhetorical analysis of Peter Bijur’s responses to the crisis and applied the theory of image repair discourse to determine the effects of his messages.

The first message the authors looked at was the initial news release, which used bolstering and corrective action. The bolstering technique was used to reinforce Texaco as an organization that did not discriminate or destroy evidence. The corrective action technique was used to reassure the public that Texaco would investigate the allegations held against them.

The second message that was analyzed was Bijur’s letter to employees. This message also contains bolstering and corrective action but adds shifting the blame. The bolstering technique was used again to reinforce the policies Texaco has against discrimination. The corrective action component affirms that an investigation has begun
and that if any wrongdoing is found it will be handled appropriately. The final strategy of shifting the blame begins to separate the company from the bad employees. Bijur reinforces that Texaco has policies in place to avoid discrimination but claims that if people decide to go outside of the policies the company cannot be held responsible.

The third message is the video message to employees from Bijur that incorporates bolstering, corrective action, mortification, and shifting the blame. The bolstering strategy is employed like it was previously but in this message Bijur claims that the organization is offended by the discrimination. The corrective action strategy once again discusses the investigation and the disciplinary action that will follow the investigation. In addition, this strategy discusses the review of diversity programs and the creation of programs to reconnect the people of Texaco. The mortification technique was used to reach out to the public and the individuals affected by the actions of discrimination. The final strategy of shifting the blame was used to differentiate the employees that took part in the discrimination from all other Texaco employees.

The next message that was analyzed was Bijur’s interview on Nightline. In this message he used bolstering, corrective action, mortification, and shifting the blame. The bolstering technique was used to highlight the good deeds of employees to take the focus off the negative images. The corrective action in the message sets out to bring closure and healing to the situation, to assist African American employees, to make sure prejudice doesn’t exist at Texaco, and expresses the desire to settle the lawsuit. The mortification is simple; Bijur apologizes for the prejudicial statements that were made. The final strategy of shifting the blame focused on alienating the bad employees from the rest of the organization in an attempt to rebuild the image of Texaco.
The fifth message is Bijur’s response to allegations of employee misconduct. In this message bolstering, corrective action, mortification, and shifting blame were used. When bolstering was used in this message Bijur sites policy to show Texaco is against discrimination and additionally states it is against the law to shred evidence. The corrective action strategy reinforces the swift action Texaco took to investigate and punish the racial transgressions. In addition, Bijur proclaims six ways in which Texaco will continue their corrective action. The first step consisted of senior executives visiting employees to apologize for the crisis situation. The second step consisted of bringing employee’s together to expose them to Texaco’s values and to discuss how to be accepting of diversity. The next step included exposing all employees to the diversity learning program that Texaco had in place for its top executives. The fourth step was to reintroduce the Ethics Hotline as a resource for employees to report inappropriate behavior. The next step consisted of Bijur consulting with a judge to ensure that the company was adhering to the highest human relations. The final step was creating a board to review every diversity program within the company. Then the mortification strategy was used to accept the accusations and apologize for the wrongdoing. The final strategy of shifting the blame asserts that the offenders have been removed from Texaco and reinforces that their actions don’t represent the Texaco organization.

The final message was a statement made after a meeting with African American leaders. This message uses bolstering, corrective action, and shifting the blame. The bolstering tactic was used in this message to proclaim Texaco as a place of opportunity for all people and for the minority business community. The corrective action tactic was simply used as a reminder of all the actions that have been mentioned in previous
messages. The final strategy of shifting the blame was used to separate the offenders from the rest of the organization by specifically citing the total number of employees and the number of offenders.

Through analysis of Bijur’s messages the authors determined that the image restoration strategies that were used progressed appropriately with the evolution of the crisis. In addition, the messages for employees and the public were found to be consistent with one another. That doesn’t mean that all the private messages are free of racism but it does lead a reader to believe that. However, the strategies used by Bijur in responding to the crisis succeeded in decreasing media attention and the negative reaction of the public. Bijur achieved this through the image restoration strategies he used but mainly through discussing the allegations without automatically denying the claims.

Bijur also introduced a new version of shifting blame that the authors identified as separation. The separation strategy attempts to alienate individuals within the organization and connected to the organization as the target group to blame. However, the strategy can be difficult to use because the target group that the blame is being shifted to is part of the organization that is attempting to shift the blame. Therefore, the authors determined three statues that are necessary for the successful implementation of separation. The first statue is that the company must display how the offenders went against company policy. The second condition is that the offenders are removed from the organization in every way possible. The third condition is that the organization establishes a system for preventing/discouraging similar behavior by other employees.

However, even this strategy comes with consequences. The use of separation means the admission of guilt, which legally exposes the organization to trouble. In
addition, without insuring that the third condition is met, situations in the future that are similar to the current problem could cause more severe repercussions.

The authors determined from their analysis that Texaco effectively used the separation strategy to alienate the offenders from association with their organization. Furthermore, the analysis proved the importance of using mortification and corrective action strategies when faced with a crisis situation. However, the authors point out that Texaco was able to effectively use these strategies because of their willingness to handle the situation legally. The final lesson gathered from the analysis was that in a crisis situation it is important to respond quickly and firmly to the accusations against your organization.

**Research further exploring William Benoit’s image restoration strategies**

Timothy Coombs and Lainen Schmidt (2000) continued the research on Texaco through a case study of their racism crisis. In order to respond to this crisis Texaco used bolstering, corrective action, shifting blame, mortification, and separation.

Coombs and Schmidt set up four hypotheses focusing on the use of mortification and separation compared to shifting blame, corrective action, or bolstering. They tested the perceived image of the organization, the likelihood of honoring the organizations accounts, and the degree of supportive behavior displayed to the organization. The final hypothesis set out to establish the relationship between reputation, account honoring, potential supportive behavior, personal control, and crisis responsibility.

They conducted a survey of students and the surrounding community about their reactions to five scenarios derived from Texaco’s responses. The results of the study contradict previous case studies because neither mortification or separation were found to
be better strategies in improving image, honoring accounts, or providing supportive behavior. Coombs and Schmidt determined from this evaluation that the five strategies of mortification, separation, shifting blame, corrective action, and bolstering are effective in displaying that an organization has learned from its mistakes. This revelation allows organizations to admit their transgressions through bolstering or corrective action and still avoid legal implications.

Oyvind Ihlen (2002) reviewed the crisis of Mercedes and their use of combining and changing crisis response strategies. The public began questioning the safety of the Mercedes A-Class after they overturned in test drives. Analysis of company bulletins and Reuters materials found that Mercedes used denial and attack initially and then moved to excuse and justification and then to ingratiating, corrective action, and apology.

Ihlen compared their responses to the three objectives of apologia and found that they succeeded in telling the initial story in a positive light, but failed when pictures surfaced proving that the A-Class rolled over. They completed the second objective by apologizing, but the apology came too late. In addition, they employed the use of dissociations from the beginning, but none of them were strong enough or coherent enough to have a significant impact.

Mercedes also combined strategies, which Ihlen determines is not always the best thing to do because not all crisis response strategies are complimentary. Mercedes used denial with corrective action and if they were denying a problem, then there would be nothing to fix. In addition, they denied and employed excuses for the action they were denying, which isn’t logical. The final strategy they used was denial and apology, which also doesn’t make sense because the two strategies contradict each other. Furthermore,
Mercedes changed strategies throughout their crisis but were not as effective at it as they should have been because the messages they alternated between were not forms of consistent communication. The concept behind changing strategies is to evolve with the crisis situation in such a way that makes sense to the public and company. Through this analysis and these conclusions the typology of Coombs was supported, but the use of multiple strategies needs to be further explored.

Timothy Sellnow and Robert Ulmer (1995) research crisis response strategies through an examination of Jack in the Box’s crisis communication responses to the E.coli outbreak that was attributed to their hamburgers. Jack in the Box responded by blaming and suing their beef supplier, Von’s. In addition, through other forms of communication Jack in the Box used denial, shifting the blame, and bolstering to raise doubt about their responsibility for the crisis and their dedication to the public. Furthermore, the organization introduced defeasibility when they spoke of the cooking temperatures that they were using. They claimed they didn’t know about the new state regulation. Yet, they introduced corrective action when they detailed five changes in communication processes to ensure that information about regulations didn’t get lost again. The company then employed strategies of compensation through donations to foundations and towards hospital costs in an attempt to resolve the crisis. Yet, they also used minimization of the crisis in the same message claiming that they were not responsible for all of the sicknesses and stating that contamination was not a new problem.

Sellnow and Ulmer determined that Jack in the Box was attempting to address the public and its stakeholders with an awareness of the pending legal issues that would arise. In regards to this, Sellnow and Ulmer recommend interjecting ambiguity into the crisis
response strategy as Jack in the Box did by constantly questioning their role and not accepting the blame for every case of E.coli poisoning. They also discuss how ambiguity can make the crisis response strategies of denial and bolstering work because the uncertainty of the situation allows for denial and calls for bolstering. The case study provides proof that using ambiguity in a crisis situation in which the organization must respond to many audiences is an effective strategy in crisis communication.

Robert Ulmer and Timothy Sellnow (1997) discuss the ethics of using strategic ambiguity as part of a crisis response by using the standards of significant choice in a case study of the tobacco industry. For a number of years the tobacco industry has been under fire regarding the use of nicotine in its products because of the effect it has had regarding health and addiction. This crisis has caused society to question if the industry is truly looking out for consumers or if they are conducting business solely to create a profit without concern for their publics. In defending their positions they have often times introduced ambiguity to muddle the issue for the audience in hopes that they question the facts. The authors therefore focus on the ethics of strategic ambiguity by considering significant choice. “Nilsen (1974) reasons that free and informed choice is the fundamental component of a healthy democracy. Hence, there exists an ethical obligation for those in positions of influence to provide the information to their constituencies that is necessary for making well-reasoned decisions. Nilsen labels this process ‘significant choice’ (Ulmer and Sellnow 1997, 216).”

Therefore, strategic ambiguity is unethical if the information provided to the audience is biased or misrepresented and has the purpose of deceiving that audience. However, if strategic ambiguity is used to represent another opinion with valid
information with the purpose of causing the audience to question the situation; it is ethical.

The authors use this line between ethical and unethical to assist in analyzing the case study. In addition, they reference the fact that many organizations when denying responsibility for a situation will rely on three forms of defense, which are: evidence, intent, and locus. The first defense form is evidence which focuses on scientific and legal debates and reasoning to defend a particular position in a crisis. The second line of defense is intent, which focuses on the discourse of the parties involved to conclude their motive for the situation. The final line of defense is locus, which focuses on determining the parties that are to be blamed for the situation. The authors used these categories of ambiguity in which the ethics of significant choice will be applied to determine if the strategic ambiguity used by the tobacco industry was ethical use these lines of defense.

The tobacco industry has experienced great regulatory changes throughout history, but the authors focus on the second and third phase of regulation. These phases of regulation concentrated on the health concerns for smokers and the effects of second-hand smoke. The study particularly deliberates on the decision of the FDA to publicly present findings that stated that nicotine is addictive. The result of making these findings public meant an investigation by Congress. This investigation brought the leaders of seven large tobacco organizations to congressional hearings to respond to the report made to Congress by Dr. David Kessler.

Kessler stated that the tobacco industry has managed the nicotine levels in cigarettes in such a way that customers don’t have a choice to purchase the cigarettes like the industry claimed but need it due to the level of addictive nicotine. He further
supported his claim that nicotine was an addictive drug by providing survey data and a
definition of what constituted an addictive drug. In addition, he provided tobacco
industry patents that seemed to be geared to increase the nicotine in cigarettes; which
presented an argument that the tobacco industry was intentionally attempting to make
cigarettes more addictive. This argument was strengthened when Kessler presented
ingredients that were not addictive like nicotine but provided a similar taste. These
arguments presented the tobacco industry with serious allegations regarding their level of
honest communication with customers.

In response to these allegations of evidence and reasoning, the tobacco industry
stated that the addictive nature of tobacco wasn’t an exact science as stated by Kessler.
Each leader reinforced this statement by claiming, individually, that they didn’t believe
that nicotine was addictive. They countered the claim that nicotine was addictive by
focusing on the small population of smokers whose behavior contradicted that presented
by Kessler. The tobacco leaders also contradicted the allegations by presenting the
difference between nicotine and other drugs monitored by the FDA. The ambiguity they
introduced focused on the idea of intoxication and the comparison of the use of the word
addiction and the variety of situations it has been used for in the past. These defenses to
the allegations did not directly address the arguments/facts that were presented and
therefore did not contribute to significant choice making the ambiguity unethical.

The tobacco leaders defended their position by citing the same report that Kessler
used in his argument to point out that it did not conclusively find nicotine to be addictive.
However, the representation of the information was hidden behind jargon that made it
difficult to understand. The leaders then suggested that if people were capable of quitting
without assistance then nicotine isn’t addictive. These arguments were biased and used language to hide facts therefore making them unethical.

The next allegation dealt with questions of intent and motive. The tobacco leaders addressed their intentions on making cigarettes addictive. The industry claimed that they did not intentionally make their cigarettes addictive. They supported this claim by detailing the tobacco-processing procedures and explaining the patents as part of the research and development to improve their product. However, they never directly addressed the language used in the patents that Kessler reported. They also claimed that some of their processes effected nicotine levels but made it lower in the end. However, none of these arguments addressed Kessler’s question of why levels of nicotine remained the same while tar levels decreased even though there are procedures to reduce both. The defense provided by the tobacco industry did not contribute to informed decision making.

In regards to the questions of locus and responsibility, the industry claimed that they made a product that consumers wanted and purchased and that was not their fault. However, what they failed to address was that their consumers have not always been presented with the facts or effects of the product they were purchasing. This detail makes it difficult to put the blame on the consumer when they were not well informed about the product. This defense is considered unethical because it places unfounded responsibility on the part of the consumer.

However, the tobacco leaders not only attempted to place responsibility on the consumers but tried to destroy the credibility of Kessler by focusing on the desire of anti-smoking campaigns to bring the age of prohibition back. These claims were not factual but emotional. Kessler’s claims were founded in research and facts. This attack was a
ploy away from the situation at hand and therefore did not provide information for significant choice.

This study assisted in determining if strategic ambiguity can hinder significant choice in a crisis situation. Strategic ambiguity can be deemed ethical if it contributes to the understanding of the situation. However, it becomes an unethical strategy when it introduces biased, incomplete, and irrelevant information that only clouds the understanding of the situation. The use of the significant choice criteria allows for organizations to determine the clarity and contribution of their messages to the understanding of a crisis situation or any communication situation. However, when handling a high risk situation no ambiguity in communication tactics should be allowed or accepted. Introducing ambiguity through the use of jargon or convoluted reasoning will make it more difficult for the audience to comprehend and understand; which hinders the ability for them to participate in significant choice. The overall contribution of this research to crisis communication is the value of considering ethics in the strategies that are often discovered and discussed through research studies.

Arpan and Pompper (2003) analyze and propose an additional crisis response strategy known as “stealing thunder.” Crisis communication depends on three variables; risk, timing, and control. Risk addresses the issues of repairing a crisis to dealing with the legality issues of a crisis. Timing addresses the issue of when the crisis information hits the public. The control issue addresses who the first one is to give the information, the media or the organization.

The concept of “stealing thunder” emphasizes the organization’s ability to present the apology or negative situation to the public before anyone else does. Previous studies
claim that “stealing thunder” could alleviate the harshness of the media coverage on the crisis situation. Arpan and Pompper propose that “stealing thunder” will create less interest in the story and be perceived as a smaller crisis when the organization steals thunder than when it does not. It is also proposed that the strategy will give the leaders of the organization more credibility when they steal thunder than when they don’t.

The research surveyed journalists and students regarding the “stealing thunder” tactics through several crisis scenarios. The findings of the study indicated that the “stealing thunder” technique created increased interest in the story and did not affect crisis severity, but did provide more credibility for the organizational leadership. However, as a crisis response strategy it needs to be tested on other crisis types before any final decisions are made. The results of this study indicate that “stealing thunder” doesn’t affect the framing of the story, but it does improve credibility and therefore could be used as a crisis response strategy because it doesn’t bring any further negative repercussions.

Timothy Sellnow and Jeffrey Brand (2001) detail a different response strategy to an organization’s high perception of crisis responsibility through a case study of Nike’s global manufacturing crisis. The new crisis response strategy revolves around the concept that an organization in crisis over social responsibility issues, as Nike was, needs to direct the public’s attention to changes in the industry and not just the company. The strategy is labeled the model and anti-model arguments and Nike employed them throughout their crisis situation. Nike employed this strategy by challenging the entire industry to follow six initiatives to prove their social responsibility. The six initiatives dealt with air quality, minimum age of workers, independent monitoring, expansion of
worker education programs, increased support to micro-enterprise loan program, and independent research.

“In crises of social responsibility, then, organizations that structure reality with model and anti-model arguments seek imitation. In constructing such arguments, a crisis provides the known case, and the expectations of social responsibility infer a principle of regularity (Sellnow and Brand 2001, 283).”

Sellnow and Brand concluded that Nike handled the crisis situation appropriately by employing corrective action and shifting the attention to industry standards. However, not every organization would be able to use the model and anti-model strategy when dealing with a crisis. Nike was able to use this method because the crisis dealt with their policies and they could afford the changes they proposed. The intensity of the crisis evolved slowly over time, but it grabbed the public attention needed for an industry change. These elements allowed Nike to switch the focus to the industry, while making them the “model” for the industry and turning their crisis into a positive experience.

Seeger and Ulmer (2002) discovered a new crisis response strategy through their examination of two case studies. These case studies revolved around a textile firm called Malden Mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts and a hardwood lumber company called Cole Hardwoods in Logansport, Indiana. Each organization suffered fires that nearly destroyed their facilities and put their people out of work. In order to study these situations the authors performed interviews with the C.E.O.’s of both organizations and members of the community. They also collected information from media sources to obtain information about the fires (Seeger and Ulmer 2002).
The fire at Malden Mills occurred on December 11, 1995 and resulted in 36 injuries and left 2,700 people without jobs. Almost immediately the C.E.O. reassured the public that the organization would rebuild in Lawrence and that those out of work would receive pay and benefits. The C.E.O., Aaron Feuerstein, continued to extend his offer of pay and benefits to those employees that were still out of work as the plant was reconstructed (Seeger and Ulmer 2002).

The fire at Cole Hardwoods happened on June 13, 1998 taking out ten buildings and the organization’s entire stock of inventory. The fire was massive and as it burned the C.E.O., Milt Cole, announced his dedication to rebuild the facility and pay the workers while it was being rebuilt (Seeger and Ulmer 2002).

The authors point out that these organizations survived their crisis because they focused on the opportunity and renewal of the crisis. They took hold of their crisis from the very beginning and the cause of the fire was never the focus of news reports. “Three themes emerge from this crisis discourse that illustrate a constructive post-crisis response. The organizing principles of this discourse include Feuerstein’s and Cole’s long standing and continuing commitment to stakeholders, an immediate and unequivocal commitment to rebuild their facilities, and a focus on long-term organizational renewal (Seeger and Ulmer 2002, 132).”

The authors suggest that developing strong relationships with stakeholders is essential to effective crisis preparation. In the cases of these two organizations, both C.E.O.’s felt a commitment to their community and their workers and were highly involved, which guided their response after the fires and made it effective (Seeger and Ulmer 2002).
In addition, both organizations made an immediate commitment to rebuild, which replaced the uncertainty and devastation that is caused by crisis situations. The C.E.O.’s of both organizations avoided the blame game and denial that normally accompanies a crisis and made a commitment to focus on rebuilding the facility. This response to the crisis reassured stakeholders and gave them hope and motivation to focus on the renewal of the facility instead of questioning what the next steps would be (Seeger and Ulmer 2002).

This focus on organizational renewal from the very beginning allowed everyone to spend their time on rebuilding instead of blaming. This renewed focus brought about new technology, more efficient operations, and positive publicity (Seeger and Ulmer 2002).

These case studies lead the authors to suggest four theoretical implications for post-crisis discourse. The first implication focuses on the idea that most crisis situations focus on the past and apologies for the current situation. The case studies presented in this research show how a focus on renewal and opportunity can reinvent the situation and allow everyone the time to focus on the future. The second implication discusses that most media attention in a crisis situation focuses on cause and accountability but these case studies showed that focus on renewal and rebuilding was a more interesting and powerful story. The third implication discussed how the response strategy of the C.E.O.’s wasn’t part of a plan or strategy that was well thought out, but that it worked because it blossomed from their values, beliefs, and commitment to the community which made them valuable to the publics they were reaching. The final implication results from the uncertainty and the information seeking that surround most crises. These case studies
serve as an example of how organizational discourse and crisis situations can be shaped when powerful statements are given by credible sources because it eases the uncertainty of the crisis (Seeger and Ulmer 2002).

In addition, the authors reveal two implications made for enactment and image restoration. The first implication is for the public commitment component of enactment. This component helps individuals make sense of situations by providing a solid ground from which to gather information and construct the reality of what is taking place, otherwise known as sensemaking. These case studies prove that the declaration of a public commitment can aid in restoring the original sensemaking. The final implication focuses on the idea of image restoration. The authors argue that many crisis situations focus on the crisis response strategies to rebuild or restore an image but they believe, supported by the case studies, that some situations and organizations may respond to a crisis not based on image protecting crisis response strategies but on the relationships and values of the organization (Seeger and Ulmer 2002).

Seeger and Ulmer (2002) discovered four practical implications for organizational crisis responses. The first practical implication is grounded in establishing strong stakeholder relationships before a crisis ever hits. The second implication focuses on the fact that the type of immediate and strong response that took place in the case studies may not be realistic for most organizations so it is important to know what range of responses an individual organization has at its disposal. The third implication zero’s in on the importance of responding quickly and how that can allow the organization to frame the stories and avoid rumors or fabricated truths. The final implication is the discovery that crisis situations have the ability, if handled correctly, to provide
opportunities and renewal for an organization instead of closed doors and doom (Seeger and Ulmer 2002).

Kimberly Cowden and Timothy Sellnow (2002) conducted research to determine if issues advertising is effective in persuading publics’ perception of image and reputation during a crisis situation. The authors used the 1998 Northwest Airlines pilot’s strike as a case study to determine the effectiveness of issues advertising during a crisis.

Northwest Airlines (NWA) had been battling with the Airline Pilots Association (ALPA) over wages. The pilots argued that they had contributed to saving the business from bankruptcy by donating part of their wages, but now that Northwest had experienced several successful years, they were not receiving their fair share of the profits. NWA and ALPA made several attempts to come to an agreement, but after all attempts failed the pilots went on strike. The crisis caused by the pilots’ strike put into question the social legitimacy and financial stability of NWA.

NWA chose to respond to this crisis through advertising factual information about the event taking place, otherwise known as issues advertising. The researchers focused on 13 print advertisements placed in the Minneapolis Star Tribune throughout the crisis. They analyzed each advertisement by classifying which of Benoit’s image restoration tactics was used; denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness of the event, corrective action, or mortification.

They discovered that many of the advertisements used multiple tactics to communicate NWA’s message. Five of the thirteen articles used denial, one used evading responsibility, eight used reducing offensiveness, three used corrective action,
and one used mortification. After the use of these tactics, the strike eventually ended with NWA giving in to a majority of ALPA’s demands.

This analysis gave insight into NWA’s attempt at issue advertising and a general lesson for the use of issue advertising during a crisis. Through this analysis and the end result of the crisis the authors determined that NWA’s use of issue advertising was not effective in restoring their image. Even though NWA didn’t lose a considerable number of clients, they didn’t frame their position on the issue in a way that shaped public perception enough to help them win the fight. Through this case analysis the authors determined that past reputation will shape audience perception during a crisis no matter what the chosen response. Authors concluded that issues advertising could be a useful crisis communication response but needs to be further explored.

**Research of Steven Fink**

Donald Fishman (1999) explores the selection of crisis responses through a case study of ValuJet Flight 592. He analyzed the crisis of ValuJet Flight 592 in light of three theoretical approaches to crisis communication. The three theoretical approaches according to Fishman are Steven Fink’s stage analysis, William Benoit’s strategies approach, and Thomas Birkland’s focusing events perspective.

Steven Fink’s stage analysis (as cited in Fishman, 1999) breaks a crisis into the prodromal phase, acute crisis phase, chronic crisis, and crisis resolution stage. The prodromal phase seeks to avoid a crisis by determining issues that are heightened in the public arena. The acute crisis phase is when the crisis comes to the surface and begins to evolve. The third phase is the chronic crisis stage where the organization attempts to recover from the crisis situation through communication with key publics. The final
phase is the crisis resolution stage where the organization is fully recovering from the

William Benoit’s strategies approach (as cited in Fishman, 1999) is based on the
idea that an organization’s image is extremely important to them and when a crisis hits
and is considered offensive and they are held responsible for it, then the organization
must take action. Benoit’s strategies are placed into five categories: denial (simple
denial & shifting blame), evasion of responsibility (defeasibility, provocation, accidental,
& good intentions), reduction of offensiveness (bolstering, minimization, differentiation,
transcendence, attacking one’s accuser, & compensation), corrective action, and
mortification.

Thomas Birkland’s focusing events approach (as cited in Fishman, 1999) discusses how certain events gather attention to a particular area of society initiating
policies or changes in that area. Birkland labels two types of focusing events, the natural
focusing event (hurricanes, tornadoes, or earthquakes) or a “new” event (an occurrence
that is out of the ordinary). Fishman states that ValuJet ignored the warning sign of
their high accident rate in the prodromal stage of the crisis and chose to use denial as
their response strategy. During the acute stage of the crisis, which took place right after
the crash, ValuJet used apologies, mortification, and compensation. Their next step in
this phase was to improve their reputation of safety by ensuring the public that they were
committed to following FAA standards. They approached this goal through bolstering,
denial, and minimization. However, the media’s focus on them was high and the fact
that ValuJet officials wouldn’t comment on some questioning or appear on television
didn’t help them in their crisis. However, when word got out that ValuJet 592 was
carrying 50 to 60 mislabeled oxygen generators it gave them an opportunity to take a little less blame. Yet, the crisis still effected the organization in the ways Fink determined. The crisis brought with it government investigations, media attention, credibility issues, disruption of business, and financial instability.

In the chronic stage, ValuJet was grounded and began using victimage and minimization as crisis response strategies by claiming that the accident could have happened to any airline. In addition, ValuJet began implementing corrective actions that included revamping top management, assigning seats, entering into an agreement with the FAA to review all aircrafts and their airline for problems, and changing their name to AirTran Airways.

The final stage of crisis resolution was not a quick one for ValuJet and the process of rejuvenation is still ongoing. The corrective action they took was helpful in improving their image but still did not ensure the public of their safety. However, the appeal of their low cost flights to consumers is estimated to aid in eventually overcoming the safety issue.

Fishman (1999) used ValuJet’s crisis situation to show that the combination of Fink, Benoit, and Birkland’s work assist in more fully understanding the nature, timeliness, and importance of crisis situations to an organizations livelihood. Yet, he contends that this combination may not be effective for all situations, but the use of other existing theories and the combination of those theories may be useful in more effectively evaluating crisis situations.

Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer (1998) organize and review the body of literature in crisis communication to aid in understanding what has been discovered through the
research in the field and areas that still need further investigation. The researchers reference Fink’s work as a developmental approach to crisis communication. Fink’s four stage approach to crisis involves the prodromal, acute, chronic and crisis resolution stages. The threat of a crisis truly begins in the prodromal phase, where there could be an opportunity to notice signs of the impending problem and mitigate those issues. However, often these issues go unnoticed or addressed and move into the acute stage as a crisis. Once in this stage, affects on the organization are inevitable and appropriate management is the tool to succeeding to the chronic stage. The chronic stage is the review stage of a crisis where an organization should answer the who, what, when, where, and why of the crisis situation. Fink views this time as an opportunity to view the environment and discover what other topics/issues may be in the prodromal phase of a crisis. Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) conclude:

Crisis, according to this view, is cyclical, with repeated prodromal, acute, chronic, and resolution stages. Fink’s model is also prescriptive in the sense that effective sensing during the prodromal stage allows the organization to move directly to resolution. Often, the signs of impending disaster are obscure and unstructured, so as to preclude sensing. It is only in hindsight that complex interactions, beliefs, and structures related to a crisis are revealed, and even then they may be subject to a variety of competing interpretations. (237)

John Penrose (2000) in his discussion of the role of perception in crisis planning references the work of Fink as one of the major models in crisis management. Penrose covers Fink’s concept of a comprehensive audit. The goal of the audit is to assist an organization in identifying trigger events for possible crisis situations. By identifying these events the team could develop the crisis plan for each trigger event including details of the situation from beginning to end.
David Wahlberg (2004) used Fink’s framework of crisis stage analysis when he looked at the controversy surrounding the University of North Dakota and their use of “Fighting Sioux” as their team name and logo. The controversy over the use of Native American people as mascots has been an issue of discussion because some people believe it is offensive, while others associate it with pride and honor. The controversy was evident enough that in January 2000 Charles Kupchella, university president, comprised a committee to review the issue and provide a recommendation regarding the use of “Fighting Sioux.”

Wahlberg, using Fink’s stage analysis, identified a triggering event in December 2000 that moved the issue from the prodromal phase to the acute phase. The event was a letter to President Kupchella from Ralph Engelstad. The letter was also distributed to the State Board of Higher Education via e-mail. Engelstad was an alumnus of the university that had promised $100 million to UND. A portion of his donation was to be used for the construction of a new hockey arena. The letter from Engelstad stated that he would withdraw his contributions if the name and logo were removed from association with the university. The members of the board ordered Kupchella to keep the name of the “Fighting Sioux.” In January 2001, The Associated Press reported on the letter sent by Engelstad. The letter had not been discussed or made public prior to the story. The media coverage flourished and it was suggested that the board was willing to give in to Engelstad because of what they were getting out of it.

Wahlberg cites the university president’s promise to investigate the “Fighting Sioux” name and logo and his creation of a committee to review the issue as events in the prodromal phase. The letter from the alumni and the decision by the board of directors to
keep the name were all part of the acute phase of the crisis. The chronic stage consisted of the media attention given to the university surrounding the topic of a Native American mascot. Wahlberg points out that the issue has continued as a topic of local and national debate despite the decision of the board in December of 2000 to keep the name. Fink’s fourth stage is supposed to be a stage of resolution but the author points out that the decision hasn’t brought about the resolution of the crisis because stakeholders disagree if the crisis is actually resolved. Wahlberg, through his analysis, concludes that Fink’s four stages help in understanding a crisis situation but more research is needed for when stakeholders believe they are at different crisis stages.

Research of Timothy Coombs

Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay (1996) discussed the need to connect the number of strategies in the field of crisis to specific crisis types. In order to set up their approach the authors discuss neoinstitutionalism and attribution theories as two theories that attempt to make the connection between crisis response strategies and crisis types.

According to the authors, neoinstitutionalism focused on the concept of corporate legitimacy and how crisis communication should work towards repairing the social norms that were violated in order to maintain their legitimacy.

Coombs and Holladay state that attribution theory is based on the idea that an organization will be more affected by a crisis through the publics’ perception of the crisis or what they attribute to them. The four attributes used in decision-making are stability (frequency), external control (preventable), personal control (preventable by organization), and locus (cause). The idea behind this theory is that in a crisis situation, if the organization is aware of what is being attributed to them, then they can
communicate in a way that effects those attributions. “Neoinstitutionalism and attribution theory suggest three means by which crisis strategies might affect an organizational image:

1. Convince stakeholders there is no crisis.
2. Have stakeholders see the crisis as less negative.
3. Have stakeholders see the organization more positively (Coombs and Holladay 1996, 283).”

Coombs and Holladay suggest combining neoinstitutionalism and attribution theory into a symbolic approach to crisis management. They point out that crisis response strategies consist of denial, distancing, ingratiation, mortification, and suffering, while the crisis types are accidents, transgressions, faux pas, and terrorism. Coombs and Holladay designed a study to test the accident and transgression portion of the symbolic approach theory in combination with crisis history and response strategy’s effect on the organizations’ image.

The respondents were undergraduate students reacting to one of twelve crisis scenarios in which the manipulation of crisis type, performance history, and crisis response strategy were used. The findings of the study determined that transgressions were viewed to have a higher internal locus than accidents, which aids in associating a response strategy to those types of crisis situations. In addition, transgressions caused greater image damage than accidents because of their association with crisis responsibility. The study also found that the crisis response strategies recommended for the crisis situations were more effective in achieving a better organizational image than the no response situations or the mismatched response. Finally, the study determined that
an organization with a history of crisis situations had more problems with their image than those that didn’t have a history of such situations.

Timothy Coombs (1998) clarified a system to analyze crisis situations. Coombs determined from a review of the literature that the best categorization of crisis response strategies is a continuum ranging from accepting responsibility to denial. This categorization allows for connections to be made between crisis response strategies and crisis situations. Coombs states that a link exists between crisis responsibility, crisis situations and crisis response strategies. He also determined that these elements should act as the grounding factor for the analytical framework. In regards to this, the elements that seem to effect the attribution of crisis responsibility are crisis attributions, organizational performance, and severity of the crisis.

In order to test these elements, student’s responses to one of eight scenarios were evaluated and compiled. The study re-affirmed the assumption that the attributions of crisis responsibility causes negative perceptions of organizational image, which means that crisis types can be grouped according to their level of perceived crisis responsibility. This discovery allows for crisis types to be charted on a continuum of crisis responsibility, which allows for cross-referencing between the crisis types continuum and crisis response continuum. The relationship between crisis responsibility and crisis response strategies shows that defensive strategies are best when perception of responsibility is low, while accommodative strategies are useful when perceived responsibility is high. This study provides a quick guide to crisis response strategies during a crisis situation.
Coombs (1999) examined the uses of information and compassion through crisis response strategies and their effects on the reputation of the organization, the effectiveness of the strategy according to the public, and the likelihood of the public giving the organization support in the future.

The study by Coombs was different from studies completed in the past because he was studying the response of 114 crisis managers instead of students in accident crisis scenarios. The study found support for the idea that the use of compassion in a crisis response strategy was effective in boosting reputation, the believability of the response, and the potential for future supportive behavior. Compassion was also found to have a significant effect on the perception of the amount of control the organization had throughout the crisis, which could be linked to the action taken as part of compassion.

However, the study did not support the significant effect of information on reputation, believability of response, and potential for future supportive behavior. Yet, when compassion was not employed, providing information did affect the believability of the response. In addition, the use of specific information as part of the crisis response gave the public the perception that the situation could have been avoided. This study allowed evaluation of the use of compassion and information in crisis response strategies, raising further questions about the use of information in a crisis event. However, it also provided support for the important use and value of compassion in a crisis response strategy.

Coombs and Holladay (2001) studied variables of crisis response strategies when they conducted a study to determine the relationship between performance history and
crisis responsibility, performance history and reputation, and the differences between crisis history and relationship history.

The study was conducted on students gauging their response to one of nine accident scenarios. The scenarios were based on the explosion at the Ford Kentucky Truck Plant in Jefferson County. The results indicate relationship history does have an effect on how the public reflects a crisis upon the organization. However, when the public has neither a relationship nor crisis history with an organization they view the organization more positively, which proves the negative effects of a negative reputation. Coombs and Holladay term this effect the velcro effect. In addition, a relationship history tends to be more influential on a reputation than a crisis history.

Through these findings, Coombs and Holladay were able to effectively combine ideas from relational management perspective and the symbolic approach to aid in contributions of how performance history effects organizations in crisis, selection of crisis response, and the crisis situation dynamic. These findings aided in determining that, for the case study, bolstering was not an effective response strategy and that being involved in a situation in which responsibility is assigned to the organization makes improving the reputation more difficult.

Timothy Coombs (2002) defines a crisis as having “. . . the potential to disrupt operations . . .” and “. . . threaten the organization’s reputation . . .” (Coombs 2002, 340). In light of these two definitions Coombs presents the Threat Grid, which helps to define the type and severity of an event. The two types of threats are operational and reputational, while severity is based on a continuum of thriving and surviving. The
Threat Grid allows professionals to determine the difference between a problem and a crisis based on the severity of the incident.

The Threat Grid is split into four Quadrants. Quadrant 1 (thrive reputational and operational) would only be referred to as a problem. However, Quadrant 2 (survive reputation and thrive operational), Quadrant 3 (survive operational and thrive reputation), and Quadrant 4 (survive operational and survive reputational) would all be labeled as crisis situations. Coombs also considers the Threat Grid’s implications for selecting a crisis response strategy and decides that accommodative strategies are not effective selections for situations in which the operational survival is in question, due to the expensive nature of accommodative strategies. On the other hand if the situation is only a problem the strategies suggested by Benoit’s image restoration strategies are applicable. In addition, accommodative responses can be used for situations in which the operational threat is thriving, but they should be used cautiously when the situation is threatening an organization’s survival. This research added to the field of study by establishing a definition for crisis and providing the Threat Grid for crisis managers to determine the severity of a crisis and an appropriate response.

Coombs and Holladay (2002) extend the focus of research from crisis types to use of the quick guide in combination with other work to establish the situational crisis communication theory. The situational crisis communication theory focuses on handling the reputation of the organization through appropriate crisis response strategies.

The study uses an expanded list of thirteen crisis types in order to account for variations between accidents and product recalls and misdeeds involving injury, not involving injury, and legal battles. The study questioned the difference between personal
control and crisis responsibility, the similarity of crisis types based on crisis responsibility, and tested the belief that attributions of crisis responsibility will lead to a more negative reputation of the organization.

The study found that personal control and crisis responsibility essentially study the same factor. In addition, the study determined that of the thirteen crisis types three crisis clusters exist; the victim cluster, the accidental cluster, and the preventable cluster. Furthermore, the study supported the assumption that attributions of crisis responsibility lead to a more negative organizational reputation.

The study advanced the field of crisis communication by developing three crisis clusters that allow organizations to prepare for a range of crisis types through similar responses. In addition, the research allows personal control and crisis responsibility to be lumped under the term crisis responsibility in the situational crisis communication theory. Finally, the study added to research by determining that crisis responsibility leads to a more negative organizational reputation, which allowed for the combination of the thirteen crisis types into three crisis clusters by proving that they can be responded to in similar ways.

**Coombs Related Literature**

Burnett (1998) addressed the need for literature to aid in a strategic approach to crisis management. The current literature approaches crisis through case analyses, crisis prescriptions, and models of crisis management process. The author draws six conclusions from the case analyses which include; likelihood and severity vary by industry and function, solutions have short and long term effects, gain and losses occur, no widely accepted approach to crisis management exists, common difficulties exist
when managing a crisis, and no calculations of the financial benefits of crisis resolution have been conducted.

Crisis prescriptions deal with steps in identifying and solving crisis situations. The author determines five components within the literature on crisis models which include; internal/external conditions that determine control and susceptibility, typology of crisis, assessment tool, organizational plan for crisis management, and tools to evaluate solution effectiveness.

The author then suggests that crisis management should be viewed as a strategic problem where managers address six issues of goal formulation, environmental analysis, strategy formulation, strategy evaluation, strategy implementation, and strategic control. However, a crisis situation presents elements in this process that complicate the evolution of steps such as time pressure, control, level of threat, and solution options.

The essential steps for crisis management include identification of crisis through goal formulation and environmental analysis. This step would be followed by confronting the crisis situation through the creation and evaluation of strategic options. This step leads to the reconfiguration of the organization through the use of resources during strategy implementation and strategic control.

These steps led the author to develop a sixteen cell matrix for classifying crisis situations through evaluation of threat-level (high or low), response-options (few or many), time pressure (intense or minimal) and degree of control (high or low). “... the crisis classification matrix improves decision making by: (1) displaying in one location the array of strategic problems that must be (or might need to be) confronted; (2) providing a basis for the establishment of priorities; and (3) aiding in the deployment of
managerial and financial resources (Burnett 1998, 482).” Through this system managers are able to be proactive in identifying problems and the discussion of categorization improves managers strategic problem solving.

The author then discusses ways in which this system could be integrated into public relations. The focus is based on the development of an information system that is stable enough to handle crisis situations. This can be achieved through integrating questions concerning crisis identification into marketing research or through a “vulnerability audit.” Once crisis situations are identified the focus becomes responding through the use of contingency plans. The author suggests that the audience be divided into segments of information importance to assist in communication distribution. The final stage of reconfiguration allows for learning opportunities and time to communicate to employees for implementation of the chosen action. This approach introduces an initial phase of handling crisis management through a classification matrix that provides a proactive approach.

Horsley and Barker (2002) suggest a synthesis model of crisis communication that envelopes five interconnected stages which include; ongoing public relations efforts, identification and preparation for potential crises, internal training and rehearsal, the crisis event, and evaluation and revision of public relations efforts. The authors conducted research to answer three research questions. The first question focused on the model accuracy when compared to the way actual government agencies handle crisis communication issues. The second question focused on the themes that may arise to assist in explaining the way government agencies deal with crisis. The final question
dealt with the changes that needed to take place in the synthesis model to better assist the public sector.

In pursuit of these answers the authors sent out survey questionnaires to one senior-level employee from the 107 agencies listed in the mid-Atlantic personnel and training organization publication. Thirty two of the 107 surveys were returned, a return rate of 30%. The results found support for the synthesis model’s accuracy in structure and information for crisis communication. The data provided answers to the authors’ second question through the realization of themes that supported the model. However, changes in the model were found to be needed to more accurately fit the public sector. “Problems unique to government agencies include inconsistent leadership because political appointments are subject to change after an election year. Prevailing politics and ever-present budgetary concerns guide public affairs policy just as much as, if not more than, does agency strategic planning (Horsley and Barker 2002, 426).” For this reason the authors suggest that the revised model must include interagency coordination and political analysis. This research has provided the start for a model of crisis communication for the public sector but should be expanded for the purpose of generalization.

Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1996) researched the possibility of combining issues management, which acts as a detection of public opinion, and crisis communication into a comprehensive theory. Most research in the field of crisis communication focuses on one of four elements: responsibility of managers, crisis communication checklists, situational crisis solutions, and non-theory based research.
Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt propose a model that attempts to combine the previous mentioned elements, issue management, planning-prevention, and implementation into a comprehensive plan. All these elements foster the idea that crisis has a life cycle that can be manipulated and that the most successful way to avoid negative media coverage is to act responsibly.

The model that Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt proposed has four stages: issues management, planning-prevention, crisis, and post crisis. The issues management component looks for any potential problems and the planning-prevention stage creates plans to manage those problems and prevent them from becoming a crisis. The crisis stage is when the problem becomes the center of media and public attention and the organization uses one of the plans created or reacts to the situation. Finally the post crisis stage continues to monitor and communicate with the public concerning the crisis, but also evaluates the situation and makes the necessary revisions.

**Research of James Lukaszewski**

Lukaszewski (1997) set out to provide communicators with a plan for dealing with crisis communication. This plan is based on standards, principles, and protocols. The author explains that standards are ideas that are upheld by individuals and used to analyze a situation. During a crisis situation these individuals are the audiences of the organization that are going through the crisis. Principles are the essential elements that feed into the development of a standard such as the law. The protocols bring these two elements together to form a plan for response. The suggestions that the author makes are based on 20 years of experience in dealing with crisis situations and knowing what audiences expect and how to fulfill that need. Therefore the author opines that to be
effective, an organization must work within your audience’s expectations. In order to achieve this goal the organization must abide by the following four strategic communication standards: openness/accessibility, truthfulness, responsiveness, and no secrets. Next the author provides audiences that must be a communication priority in every crisis situation. These priority audiences are, in order of importance, the victims of the crisis, the employees, everyone indirectly affected, and the media. The author points out that though time may demand that everyone be contacted simultaneously the priority order is important so that the organization controls the information being provided and therefore controls the direction of the crisis (Lukaszewski 1997).

The author then provides eight communication principles that should guide communicators through a crisis situation. The first principle is to make communication to the individuals that are directly affected the first priority. The second is to let the individuals close to the situation handle the communication. The third principle is to deliver a consistent message to the public at all times. The fourth principle is to communicate an incident quickly in order to avoid rumors or false information. The fifth principle is to work with the media in order to help them do their job. The sixth principle is to contemplate and evaluate decisions to ensure that they are good decisions that a majority of your audience would understand or agree with. The seventh principle involves a crisis that brings the organization under scrutiny regarding their ethics, integrity, and morality. The author advises that in these types of situations the organization must ask themselves all the tough questions quickly to discover the options for the crisis situation (Lukaszewski 1997). The eighth principle states:

Use problem-solving based decision-making processes management can support
and use. A strategic management decision-making framework management can support involves:

Step 1. **Description:** Describe the nature of the issue, problem, or situation.
Step 2. **Analysis:** Analyze what the situation means, what its implications are, and how it threatens the organization.
Step 3. **Options:** Develop at least three response options for the situation presented from which management can choose. More can be suggested, but three is optimal.
Step 4. **Recommendation:** Make a recommendation. Is this what you would do if you were in the boss’ shoes, and why?
Step 5. **Unintended Consequences:** Anticipate negative unintended consequences. Your most useful options will be the ones that cause the fewest negative unintended consequences. (Lukaszewski 1997, 10)

The author then provides protocols, otherwise known as actions that will be adhered to by the organization during a crisis situation in order to bridge the gap between the organizations actions and the audience’s expectations. The author lists thirteen protocols that include; responsiveness, openness, concern, respect, cooperation, responsibility, sensitivity, integrity, compassion, consent (understanding the perspective of the audiences), accountability (achieved through candor, explanation, declaration, contrition, consultation, commitment, and restitution), generosity, and honesty (Lukaszewski 1997).

The author then advises organizations that in order to build a sense of trust among audiences through communication they must think ahead and be ready for the questions for which their audiences will want answers. Thinking ahead means getting the audiences involved, building a relationship with them, and adhering to the values of a good neighbor. Then be prepared to answer the questions that step on the toes of the values of being a good neighbor (Lukaszewski 1997).

Next the author provides twelve protocols to avoid because they are trust-busting behaviors. These twelve protocols include: aloofness, no commitment, delay, disdain,
irritation, stonewall, hunker down (refuse to share any information), arrogance, reticence, avoidance, abstention, and defensive threats (Lukaszewski 1997).

These standards, principles, and protocols laid out by the author serve to help organizations provide a strong communication base that is implemented as a policy that management follows and is used to manage a crisis situation that meets the expectations of its audiences (Lukaszewski 1997).
SUMMARY

Crisis communication research has progressed from elementary discussion of step-by-step “how to’s” to scholarly research on the topic and implementation of crisis communication for successful recovery of an organization and its image. A majority of the research performed in crisis communications has focused on case studies that helped in developing the concepts that built the framework for crisis communication theories.

William Benoit (1997), the man considered the father of crisis communication research, presented his theory of image restoration discourse because of his awareness of the importance an organization’s image has to its livelihood. Benoit realized that during crisis situations an organization’s image is under attack and communicators need to be able to respond in a way that will protect or repair their image. Benoit (1997) established a framework for recovering an organizational image that was based on denial, evasion of responsibility, lessening the impact of the event, correcting the situation, or apologizing for the action. These response strategies presented by Benoit provided a framework for other researchers to work from to examine further the components of each strategy.

As researchers began to use the foundation of Benoit’s work for their own research they not only discovered intricacies of the current response strategies but discovered that other effective and viable strategies existed. Brinson and Benoit (1999) used a rhetorical analysis of Texaco’s chair Peter Bijur’s messages to determine the image restoration strategies used during their racism crisis in 1996. Through this
analysis, they discovered a new form of shifting the blame that they titled separation. The authors took this new strategy and laid out the situational constraints of the strategy for use in future crisis situations. Coombs and Schmidt (2000) discovered that mortification and separation were not better strategies to use than improve image, honoring accounts, or provision of supportive behavior. Ihlen (2002) found that using several strategies or switching strategies is effective only if the changes make logical sense and communicate similar messages. Researchers like Sellnow and Ulmer (1995) tested factors that affect the success of a response strategy. They determined that the use of ambiguity makes the crisis response strategies of bolstering and denial more effective than normal. Ulmer and Sellnow (1997) extended the research on strategic ambiguity when they evaluated the ethical nature of the strategy when applied in a crisis situation. The authors determined that strategic ambiguity is ethical only when it adds to the understanding and knowledge of the public to help them make the right decision in evaluating the crisis situation. Arpan and Pompper (2003) introduced another crisis response strategy called, “stealing thunder,” which draws the interest away from a crisis by eliminating uncertainty. Although this strategy seemed to increase interest in the story and provide more credibility, it didn’t affect crisis severity. Sellnow and Brand (2001) introduced a new response strategy, known as model and anti-model, which takes advantage of crisis situations involving social responsibility. The model and anti-model response strategy turns the focus from the organization to the industry. Seeger and Ulmer (2002) considered an alternative to the mortification strategy through a case study of two organizations that focused on renewal after a fire destroyed them. The authors found that a focus on renewal after the crisis, instead of apologizing and focusing on the past, can
ease the uncertainty for employees and the community while providing the media with a new focus. Cowden and Sellnow (2002) addressed a new crisis response strategy known as “issues advertising,” finding that past reputation shaped audience perception.

The findings of these researchers provide in depth views of several of the response strategies and support the establishment of additional strategies for crisis communicators. However, the research around these strategies only scratches the surface of crisis communication literature. The second thought leader of crisis communication, Steven Fink, takes a more macroscopic view of a crisis by focusing on stage analysis. Fink (as cited in Fishman, 1999) breaks a crisis into stages - the prodromal phase, acute crisis phase, chronic crisis, and crisis resolution stage - and discusses the status of the crisis in each phase. Fishman (1999) used the findings of previous research of Fink, Benoit, and Birkland to help in understanding the complete picture or package of a crisis situation for an organization.

The research from this point forward evolved into the search for a comprehensive approach to crisis communications that wasn’t just focused on the response provided but encompassed the developmental stages of the crisis, the evaluation of the nature of the crisis and the factors outside of the situation that skewed the crisis. Within the research, Timothy Coombs stands out as the researcher who elected to research the outside elements that affected crisis response strategies, who categorized crisis situations, who tested strategies and eventually developed theories resulting from the bodies of research he had contributed to.

Coombs and Holladay (1996) took a holistic approach and proposed the symbolic approach to crisis communication, which operated as a guide in matching crisis types
with crisis responses. Coombs (1998) continued research in this area by establishing a categorization system of crisis types and crisis responses that allowed crisis managers to cross-reference a response for a crisis more quickly.

Coombs (1999) then delved into dissecting crisis response strategies when he evaluated the use of information and compassion in crisis response strategies, finding that compassion was more effective than information. Coombs and Holladay (2001) found that the relationship history of an organization in crisis is more important to a positive outcome than crisis history. Coombs (2002) then presented his definition of a crisis to allow studies to explore the use of strategies to respond to crisis situations. Coombs (2002) introduced the threat grid, which enabled crisis managers to distinguish between a problem and a crisis through suggesting crisis response strategies that would be effective in light of the variables of surviving, thriving, reputational threat, or operational threat.

Coombs and Holladay (2002) then proposed a theory for crisis response strategies. This theory established three crisis clusters, allowing crisis communication response strategies to be applied to a number of crisis types quickly. Burnett (1998) proposed a strategic approach to crisis through the development of a sixteen cell matrix for classifying crisis situations threat level, response options, time pressure, and degree of control. Horsley and Barker (2002) proposed a synthesis model of crisis communication that pulled several elements of research together to develop a plan for public agencies. The authors found the model to be appropriate for government agencies, but suggested that future research include interagency coordination and political analysis. Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1996) extended the development by proposing a four-stage model for crisis communication that established a beginning for crisis communication theory.
Lukaszewski (1997), though he did not create the next crisis communication theory, did provide a contemporary view of crisis communication through the discussion of a plan based on standards, principles and protocols. Through his research and experience, he added to the body of literature lessons for building a strong communication foundation. He suggested this foundation be built through a focus on audiences, eight communication principles, thirteen actions that help bridge the gap between an organizations actions and the audiences expectations and twelve actions to avoid due to their history of destroying trust.

Despite the abundance of research, crisis communication is still a relatively new field of research. As Penrose (2000) states, “. . . to propel crisis management into a new stage, studies that assess and evaluate the more abstract facets of the field must be undertaken to complement the existing research that still focuses on the more fundamental crisis management activities (Penrose 2000, 168).” The field needs to determine how publics choose and seek information during a crisis situation (Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt, 1996). Coombs and Holladay (1996) agree that more research needs to be done on the publics involved in a crisis and more reliable measures for stability of attribution and external control needs to be explored. In addition, testing needs to take place for terrorism and faux pas, not just accidents. Furthermore, more research needs to be completed on crisis response strategies and the public view of image before and after a crisis situation (Coombs, 1999; Coombs and Holladay 2002; Sturges, 1994). Coombs adds to this need by stating that more elements of crisis situations needs to be examined, in addition to different crisis types. He also discusses the need for research in choosing a response strategy that is conscious of financial and legal implications (Coombs 1998).
Coombs and Holladay (2002) also view crisis response strategies as an important element when they call for further research of peoples’ perceptions of the varied crisis response strategies. The move from a focus on planning for communication tactics to preparing management and organizations for the public relations role as communicators is an important thing to investigate and implement (Marra 1998). In addition, new methodologies need to be explored to quantify results and provide hard evidence of progression in the field, as case studies and scenario reactions have provided as much information as they can to propel the field forward. In light of this suggestion, studies that quantify the financial loss or gain of crisis situations could assist in quantifying the importance of crisis communication planning (Burnett 1998). These elements are just the beginning to the research in crisis communication that is still left uncovered. A number of theories have gone untested; even the ones that have been tested have not been tested completely, so the body of research has extensive room to grow.

This growing room gives future researchers a number of different directions to follow in order to add value to the field of crisis communication. The first direction is testing a comprehensive theory on crisis communication. The first step in this process would consist of testing the current theories fully, evaluating those theories, and making changes as necessary. Such research would need to evaluate the variety of response strategies and crisis types across the board. The research would need to test every crisis type and not just accidents. In addition, the research would need to be based on professional or public response, not student-based findings. Furthermore, the studies need to step away from making assumptions or simply analyzing past situations; instead the research needs to explore quantitative means of assessment.
The second stage of research consists of compiling central findings from exploring the case studies research and implications those findings have on the field of crisis communication. The case study research should be continued as it adds value by providing examples of real crisis situations, but the findings need to be implemented into the crisis communication package.

The final direction for crisis communication consists of an exploration of alternative crisis communication mediums and audience analysis. The exploration of the Internet as an efficient communication outlet has only begun; more research needs to be completed in order to determine the effect the Internet will have on the evolution of crisis communication. The Internet has already guided the field to the importance of knowing and identifying the needs of the audience throughout a crisis situation. Researchers need to explore where audiences seek crisis communication to know if our outlets and our messages are effective in achieving their purpose.

By accomplishing these three research goals, the field of crisis communication will become a research area that is well defined, researched, quantifiable, and updated. The progression of the field has brought us to the basic understanding and general theories of crisis communication and it is the job of future research to expand on those ideas.

This study will step outside of the common methodology of case studies to discover the opinions of crisis managers regarding crisis communication through the use of Q Methodology. The research question that will guide this project is: Where do crisis managers place their importance when communicating during a crisis?
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study used Q Methodology to explore the attitudes of public relations professionals regarding crisis communication and discern the patterns of preferred crisis communication strategies. Current research in crisis communication has primarily focused on qualitative research through the use of case studies with a few initial attempts at theory development. According to some scholars the field needs to take a more empirical approach to crisis communication if public relations is to ever be considered a profession (Coombs and Schmidt 2000).

The use of Q methodology can begin the theory development process by helping determine, not general patterns, but the patterns of attitudes and beliefs held by individuals in the field of public relations. “Unlike more common “R” methods, such as traditional ranking opinion surveys that are based on variance analysis and sample averages, Q is less concerned with comparing patterns of opinion between groups than it is with determining what these patterns are to begin with and determining their structure within individual people (Robbins 2005, 209).” This means that the study will provide a picture of an individual’s preferences for crisis response strategies rather than asking them to “select the best” of the most common crisis communication response strategies.
In a sense, they will develop the structure instead of letting the structure inform their response.

The methodology, originally developed by William Stephenson “. . . provides a foundation for the systematic study of subjectivity . . . (Brown 1993, 93).” The crisis communication literature has established a number of strategies that are available to a practitioner to deal effectively with a crisis and the various traits of those strategies. Outside of the literature are individual attitudes among a number of prominent practitioners about the most appropriate way to respond to a crisis situation. The focus of this study is on the attitudes about crisis communication strategies actually held by public relations professionals and what pattern these individual attitudes create, if any. This study will attempt to quantify the qualitative attitudes of public relations professionals in this study in such a way that it will aid in establishing a pattern of strategies that are used in crisis communication, if one exists.

In a typical Q study, a person ranks their level of agreement or disagreement with a set of statements about some topic. This operation is referred to as “Q sorting.” “The statements are matters of opinion only (not fact), and the fact that the Q sorter is ranking the statements from his or her own point of view is what brings subjectivity into the picture (Brown 1993, 93).” The key element of the Q sort is the concourse which is typically made up of a series of opinion statements surrounding the subject area pulled from a number of different resources, typically the related literature. “From the concourse, new meanings arise, bright ideas are hatched, and discoveries are made: it is the wellspring of creativity and identity formation in individuals, groups, organizations,
and nations, and it is Q methodology’s task to reveal the inherent structure of a conourse - - the vectors of thought that sustain it and which, in turn, are sustained by it (Brown 1993, 95).”

The Q methodology has increasingly become a favored methodology among practitioners in the public relations field as they look for research methods to provide quantitative results instead of purely qualitative research. John Guiniven (2003) explains the methods popularity among public relations practitioners in this way, “First, Q research is being taught at a growing number of communications schools, which means more people are entering public relations with knowledge and appreciation of the method. Second, it is seen as a middle-ground approach to research (Guiniven 2003, 20).”

Karen Popovich and Mark Popovich (1994) used Q methodology to show how its use could put public relations practitioners at the boardroom table when creating a strategic plan. They discovered through their study “. . . that Q methodology can be an important tool to public relations practitioners. By learning to use the methodology, practitioners can provide effective and relatively precise strategic planning leadership for their clients (Popovich and Popovich 1994, 53).”

Justin Guild (2008) also explored the use of Q methodology in his research on public relations and its strive to be considered a strategic management function. Guild, using the situational theory as his framework, employed Q methodology to help determine patterns, themes, and beliefs of management regarding their view of communication and strategic management.
The concourse statements of this study were collected from crisis communications literature. Positive and negative statements were classified into one of four categories (five positive and five negative in each category): Benoit’s Image Restoration Theory; Fink’s Crisis Communication Strategies; Coombs Compassion Strategies; and Lukaszewski’s Corporate Crisis Communication Strategies. For a complete list of statements included in the concourse, please see appendix A. The selected 40 statements were then sent on index cards with a response sheet and the following condition of instruction: “If your organization found itself in a crisis situation, which of the following statements would best represent your approach to the situation?” The concourse was distributed via mail to public relations professionals whose organizations have been involved in crisis situations. The individual respondents were selected based on their title as a communications representative of their organization.

This research will assist in answering the research question:

R1: What strategies do public relations professionals favor in a crisis situation?
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

Of the 21 respondents in this exploratory study, 62 percent were women and 33 percent were men, with 5 percent not identifying their gender. Only 10 percent of the respondents worked in an agency setting with the majority of respondents, 62 percent, working in a corporate setting and 24 percent working with a non-profit organization. Only 4 percent chose not to identify the type of organization in which they worked. When asked to provide their years of experience 24 percent of respondents had 0-10 years of experience; 29 percent had 11-20 years of experience; 19 percent had 21-30 years of experience; 24 percent had 30 or more years of experience; and 4 percent did not provide their years of experience. When respondents were asked to provide their years of crisis experience (crisis was defined as a situation that has potential to effect operations or threaten their organization’s reputation), 38 percent had been involved with 1-10 crisis situations; 9 percent were involved with 11-20 crisis situations; 14 percent were involved with 21-30 crisis situations; 4 percent were involved with 31-40 crisis situations; 9 percent were involved with 41-50 crisis situations; 4 percent were involved with 51-60 crisis situations; 4 percent were involved with more than 100 crisis situations; 4 percent were involved with more than 200 crisis situations; and 14 percent did not identify their
criterion. Of the individuals who participated, 43 percent worked at *Fortune 500* organizations.

The data from the 21 respondents was tabulated and the analysis revealed three viable factors. The correlation between these factors is represented in Table 1. Factor 1 represented 43% of respondents. Factor 2 represented 19% of respondents. Factor 3 represented 19% of respondents. Another 19% of respondents did not fall into any of the three factors. Factor 1 was identified as “Speedsters.” Factor 2 was identified as “Character Builders.” Factor 3 was identified as “Reactors.” These identifications will be explained in further detail throughout the paper.

### Table 1. Correlations Between Factor Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0000</td>
<td>0.6618</td>
<td>0.6884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6618</td>
<td>1.0000</td>
<td>0.6221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.6884</td>
<td>0.6221</td>
<td>1.0000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Factor 1 – The Speedsters*

The respondents in Factor 1 have been labeled as “Speedsters” because their statements indicate they are focused on achieving a speedy resolution to a crisis situation that will leave their organization unscathed in terms of reputation. The “Speedsters” place a value on the reputation of the organization and the usefulness of it during a crisis.
situation. They rank both speediness and maintaining/building reputation as their two goals during a crisis situation and therefore use these goals to evaluate other tactics. “Speedsters” are interested in tactics and planning but only as it relates to organizational reputation and crisis resolution. This can be seen in Table 2 where statements ranked positive are focused on staying ahead of the crisis and resolving it quickly while managing the reputation throughout the crisis. The statements that respondents ranked negative in this factor focus on tactics that would slow down the resolution of a crisis or harm the reputation. The statement that “Speedsters” ranked positive that best displays this sentiment is, “The actions and decisions once a crisis occurs should be guided by the ultimate resolution of speeding up the process and resolving the crisis once and for all.” The statement that “Speedsters” disagreed with that shows their dedication to speedy resolutions and reputation is, “Hiring an outside expert to study and to defer responses until a report has been made is a sound crisis response strategy.”

**TABLE 2. SIGNIFICANT STATEMENTS WITH RANKS AND Z-SCORES FOR SPEEDSTERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Z-scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+5</td>
<td>Evading responsibility is an effective response to a crisis situation.</td>
<td>1.507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+4</td>
<td>The actions and decisions once a crisis occurs should be guided by the ultimate resolution of speeding up the process and resolving the crisis once and for all.</td>
<td>1.421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+4</td>
<td>It is important for the crisis manager to recognize the events that will occur during each stage of a crisis.</td>
<td>1.387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>I think that past organizational reputation will shape audience perception during a crisis no matter what response strategy is chosen.</td>
<td>1.211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>The key goal of communication in a crisis is to maintain a favorable reputation.</td>
<td>1.146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Z-score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>An organization without a proper crisis management plan will have a longer recovery phase during a crisis than it would if it had a crisis plan.</td>
<td>1.121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Using compassion (addressing the victims needs) in response to a crisis will boost the organization’s reputation and increase the potential for future supportive behavior.</td>
<td>0.997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2</td>
<td>Reducing the offensiveness of the act is an excellent image repair strategy.</td>
<td>-1.057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>Comprehensive and systematic crisis planning is not required to be successful in a crisis.</td>
<td>-1.296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>Our organization’s first obligation is to communicate with those most directly affected first and the media comes last.</td>
<td>-1.504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>Hiring an outside expert to study and to defer responses until a report has been made is a sound crisis response strategy.</td>
<td>-1.524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-4</td>
<td>There is a social-oriented downside to expressing compassion during an accident crisis.</td>
<td>-1.722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-4</td>
<td>In a crisis, the organization should speak with one voice, but not necessarily with a single spokesperson.</td>
<td>-1.885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-5</td>
<td>Outright denial and shifting blame are viable techniques to restore an organization’s image.</td>
<td>-2.317</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, “Speedsters” seem to identify the value of crisis planning as a required tool to effective crisis communication. They view a crisis as a process where certain events will take place that they must be prepared to tackle. These individuals understand both the positive and negative effects of crisis planning and are therefore very orientated to identifying, managing and resolving the problem. However, they seem to be fact seekers and problem solvers, not looking at the bigger picture, such as the social norms that were violated or the problems within the industry. They were neutral to ideas concerning the identification of a four-stage pattern of crisis situations and the concept of a formal planning process. This thought process follows when they identified themselves as neutral to the idea that being able to predict events has little to do with handling a
crisis. “Speedsters” are focused on solving the problem based on the facts and not the perceptions or beliefs held by others. They value portraying one unified message through a single spokesperson throughout the crisis and responding quickly to the situation. They believe in responding to both the media and affected audiences in a timely manner, not valuing one audience over the other, while providing as much information as possible throughout the crisis. However, they were neutral regarding the powerful effects of actions taken within the first hour and the location in which the communication is handled.

These respondents want to avoid responsibility but are very specific in the tactics that are appropriate for both escaping blatant responsibility and solving the situation. “Speedsters” do not believe in avoiding responsibility by reducing offensiveness, suggesting changes in the industry, outright denial or shifting the blame. In addition, they were neutral on the use of ambiguity as a crisis response strategy. The “Speedsters” place an importance on image, reputation and the character of the organization because they realize the effect those elements can have on communication strategies during a crisis and can aid in the organization’s defense. They understand that past organizational reputation can be an important tool in shaping how an organization is viewed in a time of crisis. However, they don’t believe that their message during a crisis can affect their organization’s image. The respondents see the main goal of crisis planning and response as maintaining a favorable reputation. They understand that mortification and the use of compassion can shine a favorable light on the organization but the reality is that these responses are less likely to be feasible due to litigation and the objection of lawyers. In addition, “Speedsters” were neutral in the ability of compassion to increase believability
of a crisis response. Table 3 displays the statements that distinguished the “Speedsters” from the other factors and shows additional support for their crisis management tactic of a swift resolution with a reputation shield.

**TABLE 3. DISTINGUISHING STATEMENTS FOR FACTOR 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>F1</th>
<th>F2</th>
<th>F3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>It is important for the crisis manager to recognize the events that will occur during each stage of a crisis.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The key goal of communication in a crisis is to maintain a favorable reputation.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>When I respond to a crisis, it is important to take into account the perceptions and reactions of minority publics.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Corrective action as a strategy, where the organization promises to solve things by correcting the problem, is the best solution to a crisis.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>The crisis response strategy for an accident is different from that used in response to a transgression or scandal.</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Comprehensive and systematic crisis planning is not required to be successful in a crisis.</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Our organization’s first obligation is to communicate with those most directly affected first and the media comes last.</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>There is a social-oriented downside to expressing compassion during an accident crisis.</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The demographic makeup of the “Speedsters” is largely a female population presenting with six female respondents and three male. Nine respondents fell into Factor 1 with 43% of the total respondents. The “Speedsters” captured a large portion of the male population of this study with three of the seven men who participated in the study. This group largely worked in the corporate environment with five respondents from that
area, two from non-profit organizations, one from an agency and one unidentified. This group also responded with the knowledge of being directly involved in several organizational crisis experiences ranging from a minimum of five to a maximum of 100+ incidences.

**Factor 2 – The Character Builders**

Factor 2 respondents were tagged as the “Character Builders” because their responses indicated a strong desire to build a favorable image and reputation through the compassion they displayed towards others during a crisis situation. Table 4 displays this with the significant positive and negative statements for “Character Builders.” The statements that respondents in this factor ranked as positive tend to use compassion as a tactic to relate to and connect with their audiences in hopes of building onto a historically positive image and reputation. “Character Builders” believe compassion is the key to boosting the reputation, garnering future supportive behavior, appearing in control of the situation and being a believable source of information. The statements that were ranked negative show an understanding for systematic and comprehensive planning while disagreeing with tactics that are damaging to building a rapport with people. They also tend to disagree with statements that identify the key element of a crisis to be anything other than compassion because they view compassion as the key to successful crisis communication.
### TABLE 4. SIGNIFICANT STATEMENTS WITH RANKS AND Z-SCORES FOR CHARACTER BUILDERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Z-score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+5</td>
<td>Using compassion (addressing the victims needs) in response to a crisis will boost the organization’s reputation and increase the potential for future supportive behavior.</td>
<td>1.863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+4</td>
<td>Communication should be handled as close to the site of impact or emergency as possible.</td>
<td>1.705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+4</td>
<td>An organization’s image and reputation can allow the organization to defend itself in times of crisis.</td>
<td>1.501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>The use of compassion (addressing the victims needs) in a crisis response strategy increases the believability of the response.</td>
<td>1.384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>Using compassion (addressing the victims needs) in a crisis response strategy will have a significant effect on the perception of the amount of control the organization has throughout the crisis.</td>
<td>1.281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>An organization without a proper crisis management plan will have a longer recovery phase during a crisis than it would if it had a crisis plan.</td>
<td>1.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2</td>
<td>The first hour of emergency response is critical to establishing a perception of an organization’s ability to manage a crisis.</td>
<td>-0.973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2</td>
<td>There is a social-oriented downside to expressing compassion during an accident crisis.</td>
<td>-1.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>I feel that providing too much detailed information gives the public the perception that the situation could have been avoided.</td>
<td>-1.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>The message an organization displays and produces during a crisis is key to the positive or negative affect it has on the organization’s image.</td>
<td>-1.283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>The key goal of communication in a crisis is to maintain a favorable reputation.</td>
<td>-1.492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-4</td>
<td>Outright denial and shifting blame are viable techniques to restore an organization’s image.</td>
<td>-1.535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-4</td>
<td>In a crisis, the organization should speak with one voice, but not necessarily with a single spokesperson.</td>
<td>-1.537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-5</td>
<td>Comprehensive and systematic crisis planning is not required to be successful in a crisis.</td>
<td>-2.343</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Character Builders” also recognized that a crisis has a four stage pattern and they realized how important it is for a crisis manager to recognize the events that will occur during each stage of a crisis. In their minds the ability to identify trigger events of a crisis and take action to deal with and solve the crisis is important to crisis management. Yet, they were neutral on how the ability to predict certain events during a crisis affected
the successful handling of a crisis. This view aligns itself with their neutral position on what causes a crisis; the respondents didn’t feel strongly that organization’s fail to recognize that a given event is likely to become a problem or that organization’s recognize that something is wrong but refuse to take action. This viewpoint could be supported in the respondent’s identification that within their organization there was a lack of a formal planning process for crisis situations, instead they deal with events as they happen. Yet, despite these practices they acknowledged the importance of comprehensive and systematic crisis planning.

These beliefs on crisis planning lead the “Character Builders” to take actions to resolve a crisis quickly. They were not as concerned with seizing control swiftly and turning the crisis into an opportunity. They view crisis management as a tool to recovering quickly from a crisis. They believe in handling communication as close to the site of impact as possible and speaking not only with one message but with one spokesperson. They believe that providing detailed information is important and don’t believe it gives the public the perception that the situation could have been avoided. They use the media to distribute their message by placing priority in communicating to them above those directly affected by the crisis. However, they didn’t have a strong opinion on restricting information to the media. In addition, “Character Builders” don’t think it is important to take into account the perceptions and reactions of minority publics. This follows their belief system of not placing value on perceptions and beliefs of audiences. They do not view perceptions and beliefs as being more important than reality. They understand the importance of communicating during a crisis and therefore don’t want to defer responding until an outside expert produces a report. Likewise, they
don’t believe that the communication or action taken within the first hour of a crisis is critical to establishing a perception of an organization’s ability to manage a crisis. They also don’t view the primary goal of communicating during a crisis to be the maintenance of a favorable reputation.

This viewpoint can best be explained by the “Character Builders’” strong alignment with the compassion response strategy. To them, compassion is the most favorable response strategy because during a crisis it is about righting the wrong that is done. They represented themselves with a strong understanding of compassion as a positive crisis response strategy. “Character Builders” believe in compassion because of the multiple benefits resulting from the compassion response. These benefits include boosting the organization’s reputation, the positive effects it has on garnering supportive behavior in future crisis situations and the perception of control the audience holds about the organization throughout the crisis. Yet they also understand there is no social downside for expressing compassion during an accident crisis. They also choose compassion because they believe it increases the believability of the response.

However, “Character Builders” realize that the fear of litigation and the objection of lawyers makes expressing compassion during a crisis difficult. However, they believe the use of ambiguity to be the perfect tool to use when the cause of the crisis has not been determined. In addition, they believe evading responsibility to be an effective response to a crisis situation. However, they don’t see reducing the offensiveness of the act as an excellent image repair strategy and don’t believe in outright denial or shifting the blame to restore an organization’s image. “Character Builders” also didn’t value corrective action as the best solution to a crisis situation and they didn’t believe in directing their
crisis response to changes in the industry during a crisis of social responsibility. In regards to mortification, they didn’t have a strong opinion on its use as the best crisis communication strategy. They view the response strategies used during an accident to be the same as those used during a transgression or scandal.

This viewpoint supports the “Character Builders” belief in the strong power of past organizational reputation in shaping audience perception during a crisis no matter what response strategy is chosen. In addition, they don’t believe the message the organization gives is key to the positive or negative affect it has on the organization’s image. This opinion lends itself to the stress the “Character Builders” placed on image and reputation because of the belief that it helps in future situations and in defending itself in a time of crisis. In regards to social legitimacy the “Character Builders” didn’t value repairing social norms that were violated as a key to maintaining their social legitimacy. They placed value on image, reputation and perceived character when choosing and crafting communication strategies and crisis response messages. Table 5 displays the statements that set the “Character Builders” apart from the other factors. The statements listed in this table are also focused on building a shield of compassion that is the key to supporting and building a reputation and image that will assist in successfully handling a crisis situation.

### TABLE 5. DISTINGUISHING STATEMENTS FOR FACTOR 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>F1</th>
<th>F2</th>
<th>F3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Using compassion (addressing the victims needs) in response to a crisis will boost the organization’s reputation and increase the potential for future supportive behavior.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The demographic makeup of the “Character Builders” is mostly female with three female respondents and one male. Only four respondents fit into Factor 2 which represents 19% of the total respondents. The “Character Builders” were from a corporate background for the most part with one respondent representing a non-profit organization. Their years of experience were captured in the 11-20 years of experience range with one respondent with 30+ years of experience. This group, for the most part, responded with

Table 5-Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>F1</th>
<th>F2</th>
<th>F3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Communication should be handled as close to the site of impact or emergency as possible.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>An organization’s image and reputation can allow the organization to defend itself in times of crisis.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>The actions and decisions once a crisis occurs should be guided by the ultimate resolution of speeding up the process and resolving the crisis once and for all.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>It is important for the crisis manager to recognize the events that will occur during each stage of a crisis.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Evading responsibility is an effective response to a crisis situation.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>The crisis response strategy for an accident is different from that used in response to a transgression or scandal.</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The first hour of emergency response is critical to establishing a perception of an organization’s ability to manage a crisis.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>There is a social-oriented downside to expressing compassion during an accident crisis.</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The key goal of communication in a crisis is to maintain a favorable reputation.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Outright denial and shifting blame are viable techniques to restore an organization’s image.</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Comprehensive and systematic crisis planning is not required to be successful in a crisis.</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the knowledge of being directly involved in three to less than fifty organizational crisis experiences throughout their career.

Factor 3 – The Reactors

The respondents in Factor 3 were categorized as the “Reactors” because they were not only focused on speeding up the process of resolving the crisis but also on reacting within the first hour of the emergency. The statements ranked as positive in Table 6 revolve around responding to the crisis in a timely manner and differentiating tactics by where the use of those tactics would place the blame. They are concerned with the perception of the situation which is why they believe in both evading responsibility and compassion as good tactics. Evading responsibility avoids taking the blame for the situation and compassion increases the believability of the response. Also, as a “Reactor” they want to act quickly to gain and maintain control or perceived control of the situation. The statements that “Reactors” ranked as negative show that they don’t believe in tactics that provide definitive statements of responsibility whether it involves them or not. They add to those feelings by disagreeing with statements that not only accept responsibility but also those that admit a loss or lack of control at any point during the crisis situation.

TABLE 6. SIGNIFICANT STATEMENTS WITH RANKS AND Z-SCORES FOR REACTORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Z-score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+5</td>
<td>The actions and decisions once a crisis occurs should be guided by the ultimate resolution of speeding up the process and resolving the crisis once and for all.</td>
<td>1.808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+4</td>
<td>Evading responsibility is an effective response to a crisis situation.</td>
<td>1.798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Z-score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+4</td>
<td>The first hour of emergency response is critical to establishing a perception of an organization’s ability to manage a crisis.</td>
<td>1.320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>The crisis response strategy for an accident is different from that used in response to a transgression or scandal.</td>
<td>1.110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>The use of compassion (addressing the victims needs) in a crisis response strategy increases the believability of the response.</td>
<td>1.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>Restricting the information we give to the media is a sound crisis management strategy.</td>
<td>1.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Using compassion (addressing the victims needs) in response to a crisis will boost the organization’s reputation and increase the potential for future supportive behavior.</td>
<td>1.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2</td>
<td>Hiring an outside expert to study and to defer responses until a report has been made is a sound crisis response strategy.</td>
<td>-1.118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>The message an organization displays and produces during a crisis is key to the positive or negative affect it has on the organization’s image.</td>
<td>-1.202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>Reducing the offensiveness of the act is an excellent image repair strategy.</td>
<td>-1.322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>I feel that working to repair the social norms that were violated is key to maintaining corporate legitimacy.</td>
<td>-1.455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-4</td>
<td>I feel that providing too much detailed information gives the public the perception that the situation could have been avoided.</td>
<td>-1.676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-4</td>
<td>In a crisis, the organization should speak with one voice, but not necessarily with a single spokesperson.</td>
<td>-2.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-5</td>
<td>Outright denial and shifting blame are viable techniques to restore an organization’s image.</td>
<td>-2.387</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The “Reactors” maintain a strategy driven vision of crisis communication. They don’t believe the key goal of communication is to maintain a favorable reputation but they do believe in communicating during a crisis. They understand that an organization’s image and reputation can allow the organization to defend itself in times of crisis but they don’t believe the message an organization displays and produces during a crisis is key to the positive or negative affect it has on the organization’s image. “Reactors” didn’t have a strong opinion on the effects of image, reputation and perceived character in terms of communication strategies during a crisis. They also didn’t have a strong opinion on the
ability of organization’s reputation to shape the audiences perception during a crisis no matter what crisis response strategy is chosen.

“Reactors” understand that most crises result from organization’s failing to recognize that a given event or issue is likely to become a problem. This belief plays into the fact that they recognized that many crises are caused because an organization ignores a problem by not taking prompt and decisive action therefore letting it get to the crisis stage. This understanding leads them to see a crisis as a four-stage pattern where each phase contains characteristics that lead into the next. However, they held a neutral opinion about the predictability of certain events happening during certain stages of a crisis and the effect it has on handling that crisis. “Reactors” also viewed a crisis management plan as key to a shorter recovery phase during a crisis. Therefore, they place high priority on resolving the crisis quickly by directing all actions and decisions once a crisis occurs to the ultimate resolution of the crisis situation. They believe in comprehensive and systematic planning for success in a crisis situation. The “Reactors” even stress the importance of the first hour in establishing a perception of an organization’s ability to manage a crisis. They believe in handling the communication during a crisis as close to the site of impact as possible and speaking with one voice and one spokesperson. However, they don’t feel strongly about their own organization’s crisis planning or their ability to recognize trigger events, deal with and conclude the crisis. In addition, “Reactors” didn’t place a strong opinion on the need for a crisis manager to recognize the events that will occur during each stage of the crisis.

In responding to a crisis “Reactors” believe in providing detailed information because they don’t feel it will lead to the perception that the situation could have been
avoided. This may explain why they didn’t place a score on identifying a crisis and making it their objective to seize control swiftly and turning it into an opportunity for the organization. However, “Reactors” believe in restricting information provided to the media as a sound crisis management strategy but they don’t believe the media should come last in receiving information. They also don’t agree that the organization’s first obligation is to communicate with those most directly affected. Yet, “Reactors” still wouldn’t rely on a crisis strategy that included waiting for an outside expert to study and respond to the crisis.

“Reactors” understand the use of crisis response strategies in dealing with a crisis situation because they recognized that the crisis response strategy for an accident is different from that used in response to a transgression or scandal. The crisis response strategy that they were most comfortable with was the use of compassion during a crisis situation. They viewed compassion as a strategy that increases the believability of the response, boosts the organization’s reputation, increases the potential for supportive behavior and significantly effects the perception of the amount of control the organization has throughout the crisis. “Reactors” believe in the use of compassion and don’t believe it is impossible to use despite the potential for litigation and the objection of lawyers. They didn’t have an opinion on the social-oriented downside to expressing compassion during an accident crisis.

In addition, they believed that mortification, as a crisis response strategy, was the best strategy to use in a crisis situation. However, they also believed in evading responsibility as an effective response to a crisis situation and ambiguity when the cause of the crisis is uncertain. They do understand that outright denial and shifting the blame
are not viable techniques in restoring an organization’s image. “Reactors” didn’t see the value in reducing the offensiveness of the act as an image repair strategy or that working to repair the social norms that were violated was key to maintaining corporate legitimacy. Also, “Reactors” didn’t believe corrective action to be the best solution to a crisis situation. They didn’t believe the perceptions and beliefs of the audience are more important than the reality of the action and whether it is offensive or not and they didn’t take into account the perceptions and reactions of minority publics when crafting a response. They also don’t believe that in a crisis of organizational social responsibility that an organization should direct responses to changes in the industry, instead the organization should focus on itself. This belief is supported by the statements in Table 7 that distinguished Factor 3 from the other two factors. These collection of statements portray the “Reactors” desire to react quickly and establish themselves as the gatekeepers that use tactics based on the crisis type and the usefulness of speeding up the resolution of the crisis.

### TABLE 7. DISTINGUISHING STATEMENTS FOR FACTOR 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>F1</th>
<th>F2</th>
<th>F3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The first hour of emergency response is critical to establishing a perception of an organization’s ability to manage a crisis.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>The crisis response strategy for an accident is different from that used in response to a transgression or scandal.</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Restricting the information we give to the media is a sound crisis management strategy.</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The demographic makeup of the “Reactors” is mostly female with three female respondents and one male. Only four respondents fit into Factor 3, which represents 19% of the total respondents. The “Reactors” were split with an even number of respondents with a corporate background and a non-profit background. Two respondents had 0-10 years of experience and the other two had 21-30 years of experience. The “Reactors” seem to have the least amount of crisis experience with a range of two to over 20 times where they were directly involved in the crisis situation.

The research question was answered:

R1: What strategies do public relations professionals favor in a crisis situation?

The compassion strategy was favored by all factors with respondents in Factor 2 showing the most favor to that strategy. However, in contrast to that strategy was evading responsibility, which was favored as a positive strategy by both Factors 1 and 3. All factors agreed that outright denial and shifting the blame were not viable crisis response strategies. The other crisis response strategies received mixed reviews with no strong response from any factor. The reducing the offensiveness strategy was ranked as a
negative strategy by all three factors. Factors 1 and 3 favored mortification as a crisis response strategy while Factor 2 ranked it as a neutral strategy. Factors 2 and 3 favored ambiguity as a crisis response strategy while Factor 1 ranked it as a neutral strategy. Corrective action, the final strategy, was favored by Factor 1 but ranked as a negative strategy by Factors 2 and 3.
The topic of crisis communication in today’s business environment has become a point of discussion because of the volatility crisis situations present to a business’ livelihood. In addition, the media attention drawn by these crisis events puts any organization in crisis under a microscope as they work to manage the situation. Enron, Arthur Andersen, Martha Stewart, the Roman Catholic Church, September 11, Tyco International, and WorldCom are a small list of organizations that have endured public scrutiny as they managed their crisis situations (Melillo 2003).

A review of the literature in crisis communication reveals a meager beginning with lists of “how to’s” or “do’s and don’ts.” As crisis situations became more prevalent the literature turned to case studies of organizations that had endured a crisis situation. Researchers used these case studies to reveal insights, strategies and theories, evolving the literature to a point when they began to realize they needed more. Case history methodology and its discoveries can’t be generalized across the topic of crisis communication and therefore has its limitations in furthering research in the field. The research in crisis communications needs to merge the microscopic and macroscopic approach to crisis communication to add to the body of literature (Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer 1998).
This need to further the body of literature in crisis communication past the use of the case study methodology provided the basis for the use of Q methodology in this study. Q methodology is used to determine patterns of attitudes and beliefs that are not anchored to the individuals providing the responses but analyzed to provide a perspective of attitudes and beliefs (Robbins 2005). Q methodology has garnered attention as a research tool in several disciplines and has seen a surge of popularity in the public relations field. It has been introduced in schools and viewed as a research tool that combines the best of both worlds from a qualitative and quantitative perspective (Guiniven 2003).

The exploratory Q-sort study on the strategies favored by crisis communications managers in a crisis situation used the crisis response strategies discussed and explored by researchers like William Benoit, Steven Fink, Timothy Coombs and James Lukaszewski. This exploratory study set out to find a trend among public relations professionals regarding the favored response or group of responses to use during a crisis situation and provides future researchers with an inside look into the approaches and strategies of professionals in the industry.

The researcher was surprised to find that the expectations going into the study were completely off base when compared to the reality of the actions professionals actually considered. The expectations the researcher had of respondents’ statements involving conservative “safe” strategies along with a fear of litigation were contradicted with statements strong with compassion and little fear of litigation. In addition, the researcher expected to find respondents that were consumed with being proactive and sharing all the necessary information with multiple audiences but instead found a group
of respondents in a hurry to simply react and solve the situation. Furthermore, the researcher expected to find communicators concerned with the victim, community and employees using the media as a vehicle for that communication. However, the respondents showed little concern for responding to those directly affected and didn’t prioritize the media as first, though they did not place them last.

The analyzed data provided three factors with differing viewpoints on the strategies used during a crisis situation. Factor 1 respondents, also known as the “Speedsters,” are the professionals focused on speeding up the resolution of the crisis with a concern for the reputation of the organization along the way. Factor 2 respondents, also known as the “Character Builders,” relied on the use of compassion to build an image and reputation to defend themselves during a crisis situation. Factor 3, the “Reactors,” were the professionals focused on reacting quickly to the crisis situation using various strategies to bring an end to the crisis.

The significant statements that make up Factor 1 don’t seem to favor particular researchers’ strategies. Respondents agreed with three statements aligned with Benoit’s strategies but respondents agreed with two of Fink’s, Lukaszewski’s and Coombs’ strategies as well. Factor 1 also didn’t strongly disagree with any one researchers’ strategies, finding only two disagreements with Lukaszewski’s strategies and one with all the other researchers. Factor 1’s alignment with Benoit rested in the agreement that outright denial, shifting blame and reducing the offensiveness of the act were not good strategies to use to restore/repair the organization’s image. Like Benoit, Factor 1 professionals value both image and reputation and the usefulness of both to defend the organization in times of crisis. The one deviation that Factor 1 has with Benoit is its
value of evading responsibility as an effective response to a crisis situation. This statement seems to contradict the previous points of agreement with Benoit which can only be explained with the consideration of Factor 1’s focus on a quick and painless recovery from the crisis. “Speedsters” want to end the crisis and walk away with an unscathed reputation so accepting responsibility for a crisis to them means enduring extended crisis stages and scarring the organization’s reputation.

Factor 1 respondents seem to be on the fence with Lukaszewski, agreeing that crisis planning and responding quickly is important but disagreeing how those two things should be carried out. Lukaszewski believes planning is required to be successful and that delaying the response during a crisis in order to work with an outside expert is not a sound crisis response strategy. Factor 1 respondents agree that planning and responsiveness are important but they differ in opinion regarding the people who should communicate and who their message should be communicated to. Lukaszewski does not believe in assigning a single spokesperson for the organization but does believe that victims of the crisis situation should be the priority audience (1997). However, “Speedsters” do believe in a single spokesperson and don’t believe the victims of the crisis are the priority audience. Factor 1 respondents don’t show favor by responding to a particular audience over another. Therefore, the statement “Our organization’s first obligation is to communicate with those most directly affected first and the media comes last,” may have seemed too priority driven as opposed to simply being responsive.

“Speedsters” seem to affiliate themselves with both Fink and Coombs when the statements support their desire to respond quickly or boost their organization’s reputation. Fink’s research is based on stage analysis of a crisis situation (Fishman 1999); however
the statements chosen by Factor 1 respondents don’t seem concerned with all phases of a crisis or identifying crisis stages. “Speedsters” are most concerned with the acute phase when the crisis comes to the surface and getting to the fourth stage of crisis resolution. They are only interested in Fink’s statements that involve speeding up the resolution of the crisis and identifying events during different stages of a crisis only as it relates to staying ahead of the game to allow them to act quickly. In regards to Coombs, Factor 1 respondents are only interested in the use of compassion as a strategy when it is used to boost the reputation and increase the potential for future supportive behavior. Factor 1 respondents prove this by agreeing with the following Coombs’ negative statement, “I think that past organizational reputation will shape audience perception during a crisis no matter what response strategy is chosen.” “Speedsters” only relate with Coombs when the use of compassion is universally acceptable, like during an accident crisis, or when it affects the organization’s’ reputation.

The significant statements that make up Factor 2 seem to align themselves closely with Coombs as five of their 14 statements are in agreement with him. “Character Builders” hold both Benoit and Lukaszewski on the fence both agreeing and disagreeing with two statements respectively. The Factor 2 respondents don’t even seem to acknowledge Fink’s strategies by not only not agreeing with any of the statements but only disagreeing with one of his statements.

As previously discussed the “Character Builders” favored the compassion response strategy to a crisis situation and all the good things that are reported to come from the use of that strategy. Factor 2 respondents preferred compassion as a strategy with the belief that it boosted the organization’s reputation, increased the potential for
future supportive behavior, had an affect on the perception of control the organization had and increased the believability of the response. Factor 2 aligned itself with the results of Coombs 1999 study of the use of compassion and information as a crisis response strategy where compassion was found to be beneficial as a response in regards to reputation, believability, future supportive behavior and the perceived amount of control an organization has throughout the crisis. However, Factor 2 doesn’t believe that providing too much detailed information gives the perception that the situation could have been avoided like Coombs discovered was the case in his 1999 study. This statement was categorized in this study as a negative statement and strategy from Coombs’ research because it suggest restricting information and that directly contradicts the way in which the “Character Builders” believe in responding to a strategy. Factor 2 respondents align themselves with Coombs because they believe the use of compassion can have a positive impact during a crisis situation and in the future.

In regards to their future, Factor 2 selected statements from Benoit and Lukaszewski that support the use of compassion and reputation as a quality response strategy. Factor 2 selected Benoits’ statements that bolstered image and reputation as a defense mechanism during a crisis and discouraged the use of outright denial and shifting blame as techniques to restore an organization’s image. These statements support Factor 2’s use of compassion as a positive strategy to use during a crisis to build a strong reputation and image that will defend them against future crisis situations. The “Character Builders” disagreed with Benoit in regards to the message being the key to the positive or negative affect a crisis has on the organization’s image and the key goal of communication in a crisis being to maintain a favorable reputation. The respondents in
Factor 2 disagreed with these statements, not because they are fundamentally inaccurate, but because they believe that the use of compassion is the key to the affect the crisis will have on the organization’s image and should be the goal of communicating. “Character Builders” believe compassion is the key to a positive image and reputation.

The “Character Builders” focus on reputation makes Lukaszewski’s statements about planning and the handling of the crisis as close to the site of impact as possible important statements for this factor. The idea of planning for a crisis is a tactic Factor 2 believes in. The idea of handling the crisis as close to the site of impact as possible fits in with Factor 2’s desire to be responsive and compassionate towards those involved with the crisis situation. However, Factor 2 found disagreement with Lukaszewski regarding the number of spokespeople and the critical importance of the first hour to the perception of the organization’s ability to manage a crisis. Factor 2 wants to build a rapport with their audience to encourage trust, which is why they chose the compassion strategy, so by identifying one spokesperson the audience comes to identify with and trust that person instead of several people representing the same company. Also, Factor 2 isn’t focused on speeding up the crisis resolution process so to them establishing a rapport with their audience through the use of compassion and their reputation is more important than the first hour of an emergency.

Factor 2’s affiliation for compassion, image and reputation could correlate to the strong female population represented and the corporate background of the respondents in this factor. Stereotypically females are more compassionate than males which could explain why this factor had such a strong affiliation with compassion as a crisis strategy. However, even stronger than the respondents being female is their orientation to a
corporate environment that would traditionally be concerned with reputation and image. Corporations survive based on public perception of their organization and therefore organizations would place a high priority on protecting their reputation and image as the focal point of representation to the public.

The significant statements that make up Factor 3 seem to align themselves closely with Coombs as five of their 14 statements are in agreement with him. The “Reactors” hold both Benoit and Lukaszewski on the fence both agreeing and disagreeing with two statements respectively. The Factor 3 respondents don’t find Fink’s strategies significant by only agreeing with one statement and not disagreeing with any.

Factor 3’s alignment with Coombs was not initially apparent due to the respondents focus on reacting quickly to the crisis situation; however the “Reactors” seem to value the benefits of using compassion more so than compassion as a crisis response strategy. It is not surprising that “Reactors” agree with Coombs that strategies are different for an accident and a transgression or scandal. “Reactors” are looking to resolve the crisis situation without having to accept responsibility, which is why they disagree with the statement, “Evading responsibility is an effective response to a crisis situation.” They do value Coombs use of compassion to boost the organization’s reputation, increase the potential for future supportive behavior and increase the believability of the response. However, it is clear from the analysis of Factor 3’s statements that their use of compassion may be an emotionally empty attempt to win favor of the audience as opposed to an honest approach to resolving a crisis. Contrary to Coombs research findings, Factor 3 doesn’t believe that providing too much detailed information makes it appear that the crisis could have been avoided or that repairing
social norms that were violated is the key to maintaining corporate legitimacy. This sentiment could be explained by the fact that the “Reactors” focus on reacting quickly enough that large amounts of information won’t be available all at once and their quick reactions will avoid any questioning about whether the crisis could have been averted. In addition, Factor 3 is reliant on its quick response and its use of compassion and reputation to maintain its corporate legitimacy.

“Reactors” agreed with Benoit on statements regarding crisis response strategies and there ineffectiveness on image. “Reactors” don’t like outright denial, shifting blame or reducing the offensiveness of the act because not only are the tactics proven by Benoit to be unsuccessful, they also provide definitive statements of guilt that Factor 3 respondents want to avoid. However, they disagree with Benoit that the message is the key to the positive or negative affect the crisis has on the organization’s image. This can be explained by the “Reactors” reliance on compassion to build image and reputation and the lack of time they provide themselves by reacting quickly to craft a message to use.

Factor 3 respondents agree with Lukaszewski when it comes to quick responsiveness during a crisis situation. “Reactors” agree that the first hour of a crisis is critical in showing the organization’s ability to manage the crisis and that deferring responses until an outside expert completes a study of the situation is a bad idea. However, the “Reactors” aren’t completely onboard with Lukaszewski as they agreed with a statement categorized as negative for this study. Factor 3 respondents believed it was a good idea to restrict the information given to the media, which is obviously against the philosophies of Lukaszewski’s work. They also disagreed with a Lukaszewski statement categorized for this study as positive, which states that, “In a crisis, the
organization should speak with one voice, but not necessarily with a single spokesperson.” Factor 3’s goal of responding quickly would make it difficult to have more than one spokesperson which explains why they disagreed with Lukaszewski’s approach of not assigning a single spokesperson. The “Reactors” are led by their superseding goal of being responsive. This need to be responsive and act quickly in a crisis situation could result from the amount of crisis experience held by the respondents for this factor. Out of all the factors, the “Reactors” had the least amount of crisis experience with only being involved in two to 20 crisis situations. This lack of experience in crisis situations could explain the sense of urgency to resolve the crisis that these respondents favored.

Overall, the strategies that respondents selected match them with Coombs Compassion Strategies group of both positive and negative statements. Respondents, across all three factors, agreed with Coombs statements that were categorized as positive for this study and disagreed with the statements that were categorized as negative. At least one of the three factors agreed with 4 of the 5 positive statements listed for Coombs and disagreed with 3 of the 5 negative statements. All three factors agreed with Coombs’ statement, “Using compassion (addressing the victims needs) in response to a crisis will boost the organization’s reputation and increase the potential for future supportive behavior.” This approach seemed to be the most popular and even though each factor was using Coombs tactics for different reasons they all seemed to align themselves with compassion as a favorable strategy.

However, it wasn’t a clean sweep for Coombs as respondents also selected strategies that favored Benoit and Lukaszewski. Respondents seemed to waiver with
their loyalty to the statements in these groups, agreeing with close to as many as they disagreed with. It seems that the respondents picked and chose statements from Benoit and Lukaszewski that fit within the framework of that particular factor. Benoit’s statements seemed to strike a cord with respondents regarding the image and reputation of an organization; which probably explains why all three factors agreed with Benoit’s statement, “Outright denial and shifting blame are viable techniques to restore an organization’s image.” Yet, none of the three factors took on the entirety of his image restoration theory.

With regard to Lukaszewski, the respondents agreed with him in terms of crisis planning and responsiveness but he also never grabbed a factor that seemed locked into his strategies. In fact, all three factors disagreed with Lukaszewski’s positive statement, “In a crisis, the organization should speak with one voice, but not necessarily with a single spokesperson.”

Fink, the final researcher, didn’t even seem to hit the radar of the respondents in any of the three factors in this study. Only three of the 10 statements that represented Fink’s strategies appeared in the significant statements of factors. Factor 1 respondents, also known as the “Speedsters,” had the strongest connection to statements from Fink but only chose statements relating to speeding up the resolution of the crisis situation. This was the element of Fink’s strategies that respondents selected thus statements that did appear only focused on speeding up the process of a crisis situation. This could be explained by the fact that Fink’s strategies involve crisis identification and planning which is more about being proactive than actually dealing with the crisis on hand. It
seems the respondents of this study, while they did identify the need for a crisis plan, weren’t focused on being proactive to avoid the crisis situation before it starts.

Factor 1’s affinity for Benoit’s strategies set it apart from both Factor 2 and Factor 3, who favored Coombs strategies. However, Factor 1’s favor of Benoit wasn’t as strong as Factors 2 and 3’s favor of Coombs. Factor 1 seemed to respect statements from all four researchers therefore representing itself as a well-rounded factor. This could be explained in the demographics of Factor 1 being the most diverse and experienced factor out of the group.

Though Factor 2 and Factor 3 favored Coombs, the motivation behind Factor 3’s use of Coombs’ statements could be held suspect. Factor 3’s other significant statements show that the favor of Coombs statements may be rooted in the benefits rather than the actual value of compassion. The same could be said of the statements from Coombs that Factor 1 listed in their significant statements. Factor 1 seemed to select Coombs statements based on the respondents focus on reputation as a defense mechanism and not for the use of compassion as a strategy.

The statements that support Factor 3’s unattached use of Coombs, characterize the factor as being consumed with an urgency to solve the crisis. Though both Factor 1 and Factor 3 have this sense of urgency in common, it is Factor 3 that seems more concerned with being in control and acting as the gatekeeper of information throughout the crisis situation. This could be explained by Factor 3’s demographics being a less experienced group of professionals in terms of years in the industry and crisis communication experience.
Though Factor 1 and Factor 3 initially represent themselves as similar factors because of their sense of urgency to solve the crisis it appears that they only have one other point of commonality. The other point of commonality for Factor 1 and Factor 3 was their agreement that evading responsibility is an effective response to a crisis situation. It seems that this favor for evading responsibility is only a stall tactic for both factors, yet it is here where they deviate. Factor 1 chooses evading responsibility as their most significant statement to stall accepting responsibility until they figure out where they are in the crisis. Factor 1 also hopes to rely on their reputation to protect them during the crisis and as something they need to maintain throughout the crisis. On the other hand, Factor 3 is focused first on the speedy resolution and then brings in the evading responsibility strategy because they want to seem in control of the situation at hand. Therefore, even though Factor’s 1 and 3 agree that a speedy resolution is the goal and evading responsibility is a good strategy they don’t fundamentally follow the same road. Factor 1 is very focused on their reputation while Factor 3 focuses on being in control.

The difference between Factor 2 and both Factor 1 and 3 is that Factor 2 is focused on strategy orientated statements as opposed to placing time restrictions on responding to a crisis. Factor 2 directly disagrees with Factor 3 about the importance of the first hour of a crisis being critical. In addition, Factor 2 only ranks time in significant statements when discussing the need for a proper crisis management plan. This statement was ranked by Factor 1 as well but additional analysis of the factors shows that Factor 2’s focus with this statement is on the need for a plan while Factor 1’s focus is on the
avoidance of a longer recovery phase. Interestingly enough, Factor 3 doesn’t discuss the need for a crisis management plan in any of its’ significant statements.

Though the factors all take different approaches to a crisis they found agreement in the fact that an organization should speak with one voice and one spokesperson and that outright denial and shifting the blame are not viable techniques in restoring an organization’s image.

The factors of this study don’t show a strong and united affiliation with any of the “thought leaders” strategies presented in this research. It appears that public relations practitioners are solely concerned with resolving the crisis and using whatever tools it takes to manage the situation. Though the tools they use are often affiliated with the findings of researchers in crisis communication their cognitive ability to identify those theories as tools is lacking. That is evident in their ability to select and identify the statements that would best represent their approach to the crisis situation and why the analysis of their responses found no true “thought leaders” as imperial strategies. Through the analysis of these factors it doesn’t appear that practitioners apply or consider theory in crisis communication application.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study had some limitations. First, the nature of the study and the aspiration to involve professionals in large organizations yielded a smaller response than was originally planned because of time constraints on the part of many of the approximately 77 contacts that were made. Secondly, the use of the Q-sort method only allows for the results to be attributed to the individuals that responded in this study therefore preventing the generalization of results to any other audience.
**Suggestions for Further Research**

In terms of future research, the contradictions between expectations and the reality of the responses leads to questions for further exploration. For instance, it was assumed that practitioners would choose conservative “safe” strategies and fear litigation. Yet that was contradicted by the selection of strategies strong in compassion and little fear of litigation. In addition, the researcher expected to find respondents that were consumed with being proactive and sharing all the necessary information with multiple audiences but instead found a group of respondents in a hurry to simply react and solve the situation. Finally, the researcher expected to find communicators concerned with the victim, community and employees using the media as a vehicle for that communication. However, the respondents showed little concern for responding to those directly affected and didn’t prioritize the media as first, though they did not place them last. Understanding these contradictions may help better inform strategy selection and could possibly create avenues to new theories.

As a result of this study further research should investigate the role planning now plays in the crisis communicator’s position. Is a plan created, referenced and followed during a crisis or is it a plan that sits on a shelf to fulfill a requirement and never used again? This study would indicate that being proactive about crisis planning isn’t a priority in today’s organizations as two of the three factors recognized the need for a plan but didn’t recognize a process to follow.

In addition, further research should isolate the use of compassion strategies to determine the motive behind the use of these strategies in a crisis situation. It seems from this study that compassion was used as a means to an end instead of a truly valued crisis
strategy. Additionally in regards to crisis response strategies, further research should look into the use of evading responsibility as a stall tactic and the implications it has on reputation and crisis resolution.

Furthermore, research examining the effects a communicator’s sense of urgency or priority time has on the strategies they use and the crisis plan they follow may provide professionals a glimpse into the affects pushing for a resolution may cause in the end.

It is clear from this study that no one universal crisis response strategy has been accepted as the “best practice” solution to crisis communication. Yet with the growing certainty that a practitioner will have to respond sooner, rather than later, to a crisis, finding this best practice is more important than ever. At the same time, we must continue to build and test crisis communication theory with which to underpin these best practices if our profession expects to gain and then maintain its seat at the decision-making table.
Appendix A – Concourse Statements

**Benoit’s Image Restoration Theory**

**Positive**

1. An organization’s image and reputation can allow the organization to defend itself in times of crisis. (Statement 1)
2. The message an organization displays and produces during a crisis is key to the positive or negative affect it has on the organization’s image. (Statement 32)
3. Perceptions and beliefs of the audience are more important than the reality of the action and whether it is offensive or not. (Statement 19)
4. The key goal of communication in a crisis is to maintain a favorable reputation. (Statement 12)
5. Image, reputation and perceived character are extremely important in terms of communication strategies during a crisis. (Statement 24)

**Negative**

1. Outright denial and shifting blame are viable techniques to restore an organization’s image. (Statement 6)
2. Evading responsibility is an effective response to a crisis situation. (Statement 37)
3. Reducing the offensiveness of the act is an excellent image repair strategy. (Statement 20)
4. Corrective action as a strategy, where the organization promises to solve things by correcting the problem, is the best solution to a crisis. (Statement 29)
5. Mortification (admitting that something happened and taking responsibility for it) is the best strategy to use in a crisis. (Statement 8)

**Fink’s Crisis Communication Strategies**

**Positive**

1. I believe there is a four stage pattern to any crisis communications event: A prodromal phase with warning signs; an acute crisis stage when the crisis actually erupts; a chronic stage or clean-up stage; and the crisis resolution stage, where the organization is repaired. (Statement 15)
2. When I spot a crisis, my objective is to seize control swiftly and turn the situation into an opportunity for the organization. (Statement 7)
3. The actions and decisions once a crisis occurs should be guided by the ultimate resolution of speeding up the process and resolving the crisis once and for all. (Statement 31)
4. I believe that I recognize the trigger event of a crisis, move to extended efforts to deal with the crisis and conclude with a clear ending or resolution. (Statement 16)
5. It is important for the crisis manager to recognize the events that will occur during each stage of a crisis. (Statement 23)
Negative
1. An organization without a proper crisis management plan will have a longer recovery phase during a crisis than it would if it had a crisis plan. (Statement 5)
2. I feel that my organization doesn’t go through a formal crisis planning process and simply deals with potentially negative events as they happen. (Statement 40)
3. I believe that certain events can be predicted during certain crisis stages but that has little to do with effectively handling a crisis. (Statement 11)
4. Most crisis result not out of malice aforethought, but because organizations simply fail to recognize that a given event or issue is likely to become a problem. (Statement 28)
5. Many crises are caused because an organization recognizes that something is wrong, but refuses, for whatever reason, to take prompt and decisive action. (Statement 9)

Coombs’ Compassion Strategies

Positive
1. Using compassion (addressing the victims needs) in response to a crisis will boost the organization’s reputation and increase the potential for future supportive behavior. (Statement 17)
2. The use of compassion (addressing the victims needs) in a crisis response strategy increases the believability of the response. (Statement 35)
3. Using compassion (addressing the victims needs) in a crisis response strategy will have a significant effect on the perception of the amount of control the organization has throughout the crisis. (Statement 10)
4. The crisis response strategy for an accident is different from that used in response to a transgression or scandal. (Statement 30)
5. When I respond to a crisis, it is important to take into account the perceptions and reactions of minority publics. (Statement 25)

Negative
1. I feel that providing too much detailed information gives the public the perception that the situation could have been avoided. (Statement 2)
2. I think that past organizational reputation will shape audience perception during a crisis no matter what response strategy is chosen. (Statement 34)
3. There is a social-oriented downside to expressing compassion during an accident crisis. (Statement 13)
4. I feel that working to repair the social norms that were violated is key to maintaining corporate legitimacy. (Statement 39)
5. Expressing compassion as a part of any crisis response is impossible because of the potential for litigation and the objections of the organization’s lawyers. (Statement 22)
Lukaszewski’s Corporate Crisis Communication Strategies

Positive
1. Our organization’s first obligation is to communicate with those most directly affected first and the media comes last. (Statement 26)
2. Communication should be handled as close to the site of impact or emergency as possible. (Statement 4)
3. In a crisis, the organization should speak with one voice, but not necessarily with a single spokesperson. (Statement 36)
4. The first hour of emergency response is critical to establishing a perception of an organization’s ability to manage a crisis. (Statement 18)
5. A crisis communicator should make every effort to respond promptly to press inquiries and provide appropriate assistance, after having dealt first with those most directly affected. (Statement 38)

Negative
1. Comprehensive and systematic crisis planning is not required to be successful in a crisis. (Statement 3)
2. Restricting the information we give to the media is a sound crisis management strategy. (Statement 33)
3. Ambiguity is the perfect tool to use when the cause of the crisis is uncertain. (Statement 27)
4. Hiring an outside expert to study and to defer responses until a report has been made is a sound crisis response strategy. (Statement 21)
5. When faced with a crisis of organizational social responsibility, it is best to direct responses to changes in the industry and not focus on one’s own organization. (Statement 14)
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