

Crisis communication strategies: a case of British Petroleum

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Abstract

Purpose – Every unexpected and sudden event (crisis) operates as a threat for an organization's reputation. British Petroleum (BP) came face to face with a crisis on 20 April 2010 when an explosion in the Deepwater Horizon oil drilling rig caused a huge oil spillage in the Gulf of Mexico. The present case study aims to describe BP's serious communication mistakes with its stakeholders managing a serious hit to BP's reputation.

Design/methodology/approach – The present case study attempts to provide a detailed outline of BP's communication failures by conducting in-depth investigation of secondary data (newspapers, audiovisual material, social network sites).

Findings – BP's crisis communication was a weak link in its crisis management strategy. The lessons to learn are various, both for practitioners and researchers. Practitioners should learn from the leadership, culture and public relations (PR) mistakes made by BP and avoid them in a crisis of their organisation. They should select those strategies that foster their organization's strengths and correct its weaknesses in order to take advantage of external opportunities and counter external threats.

Originality/value – This study could be a valuable asset in communication literature, since BP's PR strategies during this oil spill have not been studied extensively. The communications solutions BP took during the crisis were examined and certain strategies BP should have followed in order to avoid its failed PR plan are suggested, which can help both practitioners and researchers to learn from BP's mistakes and give more attention to communication strategies, which are of critical essence to all crises.

Keywords Leadership, Social media, British Petroleum, Crisis communication, Public relations, Reputation

Paper type Case study

1. Introduction

90 percent of a crisis response is communications, Barbara Reynolds, Center for Disease Control, USA ("Quotations", 2010).

British Petroleum Plc (BP) is the world's third-largest oil and gas company headquartered in London, UK. Its mission is to be "innovative, progressive, safe and friendly for both its employees and the environment". BP tries to increase its profitability, aiming to achieve and sustain competitive advantage, through various routes, including the creation of a reputation which generates value (Porter, 1985/2004).

However, BP is responsible for several oil spills since 2005 (e.g. 23 March 2005 in Texas and 2 March 2006 in Alaska) causing a number of deaths and injuries among its employees and incalculable disaster to the environment. The biggest environmental disaster in the history of the USA and the largest marine oil spill in the history of the oil industry took place on 20 April 2010, when an explosion occurred in the Deepwater Horizon oil drilling rig leased by BP in the Gulf of Mexico. The result of this tragedy was the death of 11 workers and the injury of 17 out of 126 workers who were on board (Robertson and Kaufman, 2010; Chakraborty, 2011).

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“Companies have to develop effective and efficient crisis communication strategies dealing with the complexity of the crisis, because of potential severe loss and damage in corporate value.”

After the tragedy in the Gulf of Mexico, BP's efforts to regain superior performance have been unsuccessful, leading to a drastic decline in its financial profitability by the end of 2010. Along with BP's history of crises, many reasons led to the Gulf of Mexico disaster, including neglected safety issues and management failures (Qumer and Purkayastha, 2010). During this crisis another weak point in BP's management became obvious: that of effective crisis communication for the protection of its corporate image and reputation among its stakeholders.

Crisis communication is a significant issue in oil industries disasters. “Companies have to develop effective and efficient crisis communication strategies dealing with the complexity of the crisis, because of potential severe loss and damage in corporate value” (Maresh and Williams, 2010). These strategies are directed towards stakeholders (the public and government, employees, shareholders) who want to know: what happened? Who did it happen to? When? Where? How? Why? (Dowling, 2002).

Rham Emanuel, President Obama's Chief of Staff, described BP's crisis communication strategy as “a long line of PR gaffes and mistakes”(BBC News, 2010) and he was not the only person sharing this opinion. The purpose of the present case study is to provide a detailed outline of BP's communication failures by conducting in-depth investigation of secondary data (newspapers, audiovisual material, social network sites). This study could be a valuable asset in communication literature, since BP's public relations (PR) strategies during this oil spill have not been studied extensively yet. We will base our analysis on Coomb's (2007) situational crisis communication theory (SCCT)[1]. Our research questions (RQ) are:

- RQ1.* What crisis communication measures did BP take during the Gulf of Mexico spill? Were they successful?
- RQ2.* What changes should BP employ in its management, in order to lead successful communication strategies during a crisis?

2. BP's crisis communication problems during the spill

It takes 20 years to build a reputation and 5 minutes to ruin it, Warren Buffet (“Quotations”, 2010).

BP's initial communication response

Over the years, BP had managed to increase its reputation through successful sustainable strategies, despite its history of oil spillage crises. According to SCCT, the threat posed by the Gulf of Mexico crisis was large because it was something between an accident and an intentional event (with moderate to strong responsibility) intensified by a history of similar crises. During these crises, Coombs (2007) suggests apologetic communication strategies accepting responsibility. So, very soon after the Gulf of Mexico disaster, BP accepted full responsibility when CEO Tony Hayward said:

[. . .] we are determined to do everything in our power to contain this leak and resolve the situation as quickly as possible [. . .] BP assumes full responsibility for the oil spill (Hichri, 2010).

BP seemed to grasp the importance of the internet by quickly setting up a special website in order to stay in touch with its stakeholders (www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com), while Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr accounts were swiftly created in order to function as

reminders and ingratiation strategies supplementing its operational response, engaging the public as well in the communication process[2] (Figure 1).

BP's communication failure with the public, the US Government and its employees

In spite of BP's seemingly initial effective crisis communication strategies, it did not maintain its credibility, establishing a dishonest, unreliable and inconsistent profile towards its stakeholders in more than one occasions. They used denial, scapegoat and diminishing of the disaster communication strategies in order to lessen their responsibility in the crisis[3]. Many statements made by Tony Hayward and BP's Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg were contradictory to their initial statements and may have created the impression among stakeholders that they were not taking things seriously. They were noted saying: "everything is under control [...] the overall environmental impact of this will be very, very modest" (Milam, 2010), "only 1,000 barrels per day of oil were spilling into the Gulf of Mexico" (Brennan and Polson, 2010):

[...] the Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume (Webb, 2010).

Also, Hayward's scapegoat strategies appeared too obvious and seemed as denying responsibility when he said on 25 May 2010: "I understand people want a simple answer about why this happened and who is to blame. The honest truth is that this is a complex accident, caused by an unprecedented combination of failures. A number of companies are involved, including BP, and it is simply too early – and not up to us – to say who is at fault", adding that "The spill wasn't really BP's fault, since another company entirely owned and staffed the rig. Transocean, the operator of the rig, has the blame for the mess" (Reguly, 2010). Ironically though he concluded: "This is not our accident, but it's our responsibility" (Adubato, 2010). Stakeholders were left with the question: how can BP assume responsibility of an accident not theirs? Clearly their statements did not show a serious approach and were not treated with a planned PR strategy. Svanberg's mistakes were not less important, especially when he said: "I hear comments sometimes that large oil industries are greedy companies and don't care, but that is not the case with BP. We care about the *small* people" (Clark, 2010).

Five major gaffes were identified in Hayward's communication with the media, the US government and the public:

Figure 1 BP's first Twitter (up) and Facebook (below) post after the Gulf of Mexico disaster

The image shows two social media posts from BP. The top post is a tweet from BP America, dated 5:26 AM Apr 28th, 2010. The tweet text reads: "BP PLEDGES FULL SUPPORT FOR DEEPWATER HORIZON PROBES: http://bit.ly/bo4twN". It includes the BP logo, the Twitter logo, and a "Login Join Twitter!" link. Below the tweet is a Facebook post from BP America, dated May 2 at 4:07pm. The Facebook post text reads: "BP America The BP Community Support Team has set up a hotline for those who would like to help with the gulf coast recovery efforts: 866-448-5816". It includes the BP logo and a "View Feedback (2)" link.

1. *The fake image.* Although BP was promoting its intense operational responses, everything collapsed when BP supplied fake images to the press. Scott Dean, a spokesman for BP, responded: "There was nothing sinister in the photo. A photographer working for the company had inserted the three images in spots where the video screens were blank" (Mufson, 2010). BP quickly supplied the original image, but this was the first serious crack in BP's image.
2. *Hayward "wants his life back".* The second communication mistake came from Hayward on 31 May 2010 when he said on live TV "I want my life back". Many journalists, PR consultants and even President Obama himself mocked this statement, delivering a significant hit to the company's reputation (BBC News US and Canada, 2010).
3. The incident with the yacht. Oil was still gushing into the Gulf when Hayward took time off so he could watch his yacht "Bob" compete in J.P. Morgan's Asset Management Round the Island Race at the Isle of Wight, England (Loki, 2011).
4. *BP had not been fully prepared for a deep-water oil leak.* When speaking to the Financial Times in Houston, Hayward said: "What is undoubtedly true is that we did not have the tools you would want in your toolkit" (Crooks, 2010), creating a sense of insecurity to the public and doubts for BP's performance to deal with the oil spill.
5. *Hayward's self-interest.* Hayward showed that he was only concerned for his position during the hearing with US Cabinet members, saying that: "I haven't watched the television or read a newspaper for two weeks because I don't want my judgment clouded by what's being written about either me or the company" (Quinn, 2010), adding that "I don't feel my job to be under threat at the moment. That of course may change. I will be judged by the nature of the response" (Webb, 2010).

BP's general communication also with the US government was not as good as BP would have wanted. Hayward was criticised by President Obama for spending \$50 million on radio, TV and online advertising campaigns, stating that BP should spend its money on resolving the crisis rather than on financing advertisements (Sherwell, 2010). BP later clarified by ironically saying "not a cent" had been diverted from the oil spill response to pay for the advertising campaign (Pitney, 2010). The importance of monitoring media contents and avoiding advertising campaigns during a crisis is discussed in the recommendations section.

BP also failed to communicate effectively with their employees when Hayward was noted diminishing oil-related health symptoms among employees working in the oil spillage cleanup, despite stressing how safe they should feel working at BP (Korosec, 2010). During their effort to clean up the Gulf, many employees had to be hospitalized for dizziness, headaches, nasal irritation and other respiratory symptoms. Hayward's obvious disinterest for his employees became apparent when he said:

I'm sure they were genuinely ill, but [I don't know] whether it had anything to do with dispersants and oil. You know, food poisoning is a really big issue when you've got a concentration of this many people (Martel, 2010).

A journalist sarcastically commented on this saying: "Apparently in Tony Hayward Land, food poisoning of cleanup crews is a big issue just like the Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean" (Martel, 2010).

BP's communication with shareholders: an opposite strategy

BP's communication strategies with its shareholders were completely different from its communication with the public and employees. The obvious reasons are financial interests intertwining BP with its shareholders and BP's constant desire to keep a competitive advantage through stable investors. Remarkably, BP's response strategy was to remind them the past good deeds of the company. This was a crucial tactic from BP because shareholders can be affected by the organization's reputational change (Agle *et al.*, 1999). Also, BP's strategy to blame other companies for the disaster was essential for ingratiating communication with its shareholders, since they would only become more dissatisfied if BP

was deemed fully responsible.(Coombs, 2007). On June 4, Svanberg said to BP's shareholders: "I am keenly aware of the gravity of the disaster in which 11 people died [...] We deeply regret, and are sorry, for this tragic accident and the aftermath". He also ensured BP's long-term presence in the business world, commenting on the matter of dividend: "We know how important the dividend to shareholders is [...] We will meet our obligations to[ward them]" (Wearden, 2010).

3. Causes of BP's crisis communication failure

The root cause in the Gulf of Mexico oil spill was "management failure". Cherry Murray, Harvard School of Engineering (Ireland, 2013)

Bad communication leadership

Hayward's failure in leadership started with his delay during the initial weeks of the spill to address the severity of the problem (Chen, 2010). Although BP had issued a crisis response strategy involving a public information officer who would be responsible for developing and releasing information about the incident and managing personnel issues due to accidents/injuries, in practice things took a different path:

Research shows that in crises the most important publics to be addressed are employees/members of the company followed by the mass media and the most effective PR tools to do so are personal media interviews (Nikolaev, 2010).

Trained spokesmen and authority figures (e.g. CEO or Chairman) usually undertake these tasks. In BP's case, it was clear that Hayward was not only trained, but in many instances cynical and passed the opposite messages across.

Culture

BP's mechanistic corporate culture – a result of BP's previous CEO John Browne – did not allow employees lower in hierarchy to express their concerns, suggestions, and even medical symptoms. Although Hayward promised to provide a more organic culture with his appointment, things proved different:

When Tony Hayward came in as CEO, improving the health and safety record was [promoted as a value] but so was rooting out inefficiency, which rooted out a lot of costs that were related to improving the safety culture says Wayne Cascio of the University of Colorado-Denver (Ciccarelli, 2011).

BP's consideration of national culture matters was also defective. Sharon Francis, Chief Executive of communication training firm Media First, stressed the difference between British and American culture observing that:

BP's communication over the oil spill [...] has been done in a very British way; Americans don't deal in such language, they don't see themselves as 'little people' – they are a can-do culture (Winterman, 2010).

US Congressman Anthony Weiner's view was similar: "Whenever you hear someone with a British accent talking about this on behalf of British Petroleum they are not telling you the truth" (Heaven, 2010). Hence, BP suffered hugely because it had too few Americans leading its communication strategy, signifying the importance to employ more Americans into PR for damage control.

4. Solutions and strategic recommendations

Although BP swiftly understood the importance of internet crisis communication, and followed compensation, apology and ingratiation response strategies, BP's communication strategies proved insufficient or better inappropriate, resulting in Hayward's replacement by Robert Dudley on 1 October 2010 (The *Guardian*, 2010). This was a positive sign showing that BP cares for having the right people in the right positions. We describe below certain

communication strategies BP should apply to rebuild positive relationships with its stakeholders and execute successful future crisis communication plans.

Pre-crisis strategies

1. *Change in organizational culture.* The notion of culture is a very important source for BP's competitive advantage. This can be done by setting values, norms, and standards that control how employees and managers should cooperate, leaving behind the mechanistic past and moving onto a new organic organisational culture. This can be done through empowerment strategies, teambuilding and team-working workshops within the company.

2. *Creation of a pre-crisis communication plan.* This must be tested at least once a year. Employees and managers should undergo preparedness programmes by weekly training so as to know what to do and say when a crisis hits. Additionally, there should be emergency sample texts and press releases. These should include information such as time, location, and magnitude of the disaster. BP should immediately appoint at least two spokespersons. BP's communication with its stakeholders must be done from experienced and responsible spokespersons, who know the philosophy of communication and how to face facts, present the truth and build appropriate expectations and delivers without denying responsibility by attributing the blame to someone else, as Tony Hayward did (Kanter, 2013).

3. *In a grand-scale disaster, such as the Gulf of Mexico spill, new PR locations could be set separately from the regular PR office.* The PR location should have the necessary office equipment available in order to be able to communicate immediately with its stakeholders in crisis times (e.g. desks, chairs, computers with printers and scanners, internet connection, television, fax machines). The designated PR team should have a list of emergency team members with their personal details (residence address, email address, work, home, and mobile phone numbers), for consultation on crisis response operations so far and a list of media contact details (fax, phone numbers, email addresses) to inform stakeholders promptly (Nikolaev, 2010).

During- and after-crisis strategies

1. *BP should attempt direct and sincere communication with the media.* This could be done through emergency press conferences and immediate set up of a webpage and online social networking accounts. BP should set expectations in the beginning that things will change, creating a positive reaction from stakeholders. Its crisis PR office should have a call centre with at least five free-call lines. The more lines available the more satisfied stakeholders will be, since they can be informed for the crisis without delays. Trying creative approaches such as designing apps for iPhones and asking the public to pass them on, contributing 10 cents for every click, is something both ingratiating and effective. Young people adopt enthusiastically these methods (Spaeth, 2011).

2. *Do not run an advertising campaign; it is not a good time to promote your image.* After the Gulf of Mexico disaster, BP's stakeholders had lost their trust and loyalty towards BP; rebuilding their relationship with customers is impossible through advertising campaigns. Having though a "competitive video" ready to dispatch is a good strategy, since images of the oil spill aftermath lead the news during this crisis.

3. *Close monitoring of media content.* Hayward's statement of not following newsfeeds was a serious mistake, especially if it was true. Monitoring news allows for immediate response and clarification of any unclear point or comment on BP's crisis response operations.

5. Conclusion

It has clearly been shown that BP's crisis communication – especially with the public, the US government and its employees – was a weak link in its crisis management strategy; CEO Tony Hayward was largely responsible for this. There was a slight differentiation in communication with shareholders, most possibly due to financial interests with them, but at the end Hayward's mistakes were too serious for him to remain as CEO. The lessons to learn are various, both for practitioners and researchers. Practitioners should learn from the

leadership, culture and PR mistakes made by BP and avoid them in a crisis of their organisation. They should select those strategies that foster their organization's strengths and correct its weaknesses in order to take advantage of external opportunities and counter external threats (Porter, 1985/2004). For researchers, there is a need to study the role of the company's CEO in crisis communication and the development of theoretical frameworks with philosophies and guidelines for CEOs to effectively address communication without cynicism but with empathy.

Notes

1. SCCT "provides an evidence-based framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication" (Coombs, 2007, p. 163). The core of SCCT is crisis responsibility and understanding the threat posed by a crisis. This is done through two steps: identifying first the frame stakeholders are using to categorize the process (victim, accident or intentional event) and then examining the presence of intensifying factors (crisis history and prior reputation) (Coombs, 2007).
2. Involving the public was also done through employing workers and calling the public to help voluntarily clean up the Gulf of Mexico. Its first tweet on Twitter appeared seven days after the tragic event and after approximately two weeks BP's first message on Facebook came out. The number of tweets after the oil spillage was more than 20 per day reaching ~5,500 today. See Figure 1 for BP's first Twitter and Facebook post after the Gulf of Mexico disaster.
3. Denial: crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis. Scapegoat: crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis. Diminish: crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.

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