ETHICAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA:
COMBINING SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY,
STAKEHOLDER THEORY & KANT’S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVES

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We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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Abstract

This guide was created to serve as a tool for crisis communications to assist in crafting ethical responses to crises using social media as the primary communications channel. The guide combines Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984)—a management theory that focuses on the importance of different groups of people, not just shareholders—with Situational Crisis Communication (Coombs, 2007). The guide also adheres to two of Kant’s Categorical Imperatives as the ethical basis and marker. To create the guide, the author relied on archival, or documentary, research to provide the background information and theory to inform the creation of the guide. The guide is broken up into four parts—an overview of crisis communication, pre-crisis planning, active crisis communication, and post-crisis communication/reputation rebuilding. The guide is meant to be used as a tool, and is not an exhaustive how-to for handling a crisis.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Crisis communication is a critical area of communications. Most organizations (hopefully) rarely find themselves in a crisis, and perhaps have not found cause for crisis communication tactics to be implemented since the advent of social media. With today’s trends of instant access to news and information, particularly in a crisis, it is important for communications managers to develop ways to communicate effectively during a crisis using social media as the primary communications channel. Too often, organizations allow ethics to disappear as they deal with the emerging crisis; the perception of cover-ups have become all too common. For this reason, the guide created as a result of this project has a special focus on ethics-centric Stakeholder Theory and relies heavily on Kant’s Categorical Imperatives.

Importance of the Study

During a crisis, timely communication is key to help alleviate fear and provide the facts of the incident. Before social media’s rise to prominence, the best way for companies and organizations in crisis to release updated information was to hold a press conference or release a statement to the traditional media in the form of a press release. While these press conferences and press releases are still important tools, perhaps the most important tool in the modern crisis communicator’s kit is social media. As an owned media outlet, social media allows companies and organizations to speak directly to their stakeholders, without having to go through a secondary communication channel.

Social media also allows for immediate interaction between the organization and the publics or stakeholders it depends on to continue. Companies can answer questions directly, with exactly the response that the organization has prepared to release. Social media has become so integrated into the way people communicate that it is not uncommon for organizational social media outlets see a dramatic spike in traffic, follows, and engagement during a crisis. For these
reasons, it is imperative for organizations to have ethical crisis communications plans with social media components in place. The best crisis communications plans are shaped and implemented by ethical leaders who take the initiative and create a proactive response to crisis, as opposed to a reactive or defensive position.

**Statement of the Problem**

For small- to medium-sized businesses, there is often not a full communications team on staff. It is entirely plausible that the person in charge of communications (whether they are a formally trained communicator or not) has not had in-depth crisis communication training recently. The guide presented in Chapter 4 serves as a tool for crisis managers and communicators in that it provides solid theoretical basis for crisis communication decision making and walks the communications manager through the process of fact gathering, posting, and follow ups.

**Definitions of Terms Used**

Categorical Imperatives: There are two of Kant’s Categorical Imperatives frequently referenced throughout. They are: “Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to become universal law” (Kant, 1964, p. 88) and “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time an end” (Kant, 1964, p. 96).

Communications Manager: The communications manager referenced throughout this project is not necessarily someone trained in the art of communication, but instead the person within the organization who is responsible for communicating with the public during a crisis.
Situational Crisis Communications Theory (SCCT): First introduced by W. Timothy Coombs, SCCT is a crisis communication theory developed to assist crisis managers with reputation management for an organization (Coombs, 2007). SCCT “provides an evidence-based framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication” (Coombs, 2007, p. 163).

Social media: Defined as “forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and micro-blogging) through which user create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)” (Merriam-Webster).

Stakeholder: “A stakeholder in an organization is (by definition) any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46).

Stakeholder Theory: A management theory proposed by R. Edward Freeman in Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach, first published in 1984. With a heavy focus on considering all stakeholders when making decisions, stakeholder theory diverged from many management theories that focused solely on what was best for the shareholders (Xu and Li, 2012; Clarkson, 1995; Philips, 1997; Mitchell, Agle, Wood, 1997; Freeman, 1984).

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**
There are five total chapters in this project. This chapter introduces the topic and defines the terms used.
Chapter two provides an in-depth review of the literature. It touches on the philosophical and ethical assumptions of this work, and introduces stakeholder theory, situational crisis communication theory, the RDAP scale, and Kant’s Categorical Imperatives.

Chapter three outlines the scope and methodology of this project, highlighting the areas of focus and how the project has been prepared.

Chapter four contains an overview of the guide, and then the full crisis communications guide. The guide itself is broken down into four parts—an overview of crisis communication, pre-crisis planning, active crisis communication, and post-crisis reputation management.

The fifth and final chapter covers conclusions, limitations of the project, and ideas for further study.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions

A commonly accepted scale for measuring the reaction and responsiveness of corporations is the Reactive-Defensive-Accommodative-Proactive (RDAP) scale, based on work from many communication theorists, including Wartick, Cochran, Carroll, Clarkson, Starick, and Pinkston. The RDAP scale illustrated by Clarkson (1995) reads as such:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Posture or Strategy</th>
<th>Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Reactive</td>
<td>Deny responsibility</td>
<td>Doing less than required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Defensive</td>
<td>Admit responsibility but fight it</td>
<td>Doing the least that is required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Accommodative</td>
<td>Accept responsibility</td>
<td>Doing all that is required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Proactive</td>
<td>Anticipate responsibility</td>
<td>Doing more than is required</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The RDAP scale allows organizational response to be measured in clearly defined terms against the standard of a proactive response, where an organization not only accepts responsibility and does what is required, but goes above and beyond to accept any potential responsibility and does more than is strictly required. Ideally, organizations will fall into the Accommodative or Proactive slots on the RDAP scale. The goal of this project is to have organizations performing as accommodative at a minimum, preferably as proactive. These forward-thinking, responsibility-bearing positions are the most ethically acceptable places to operate. An ethical organization does not do the bare minimum required; it goes above and beyond to make sure all stakeholders are cared for in an appropriate manner. Therefore, this project will focus on getting organizations into a proactive state. This position is supported by
another important basis for this project: two formulations of Kant’s Categorical Imperatives (Kant, 1964).

The first, “Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to become universal law” (Kant, 1964, p. 88), means that whatever principle one uses to make a decision, one must be ready to have everyone behave in that manner. For example, if one chose to use ethical egoism as the rationale for making a decision, and make that decision on what is best for the person’s personal (or organizational) interests, one must be willing for everyone to follow the same principle, making every decision based on ethical egoism. The second categorical imperative is to “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time an end” (Kant, 1964, p. 96). This imperative dictates that everyone must be treated as an equal—no one should be placed above another, and each person deserves equal respect.

**Theoretical Basis**

The goal for any organization in times of crisis is to handle the situation so well as to minimize or negate any negative outcomes. To help work toward that goal, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), as developed by Timothy Coombs, will be implemented to help shape the project. SCCT “is concerned with the public’s perception, and, ultimately, approval of an organization following crises or controversy” (Sellnow and Seeger, 2013, p. 91). SCCT is based in Attribution Theory, and Coombs notes, “Attribution Theory posits that people search for the causes of events (make attributions), especially those that are negative and unexpected.” (Coombs, 2007, p. 165). Furthermore:

A person attributes responsibility for an event and will experience and emotional reaction to the event. Anger and sympathy are the core emotions in Attribution Theory. The attributions of responsibility and emotions can serve as motivations for action. Behavioral
responses are negative when a person is judged responsible and anger is evoked. Behavioral responses are positive when a person is judged not to be responsible and sympathy is evoked. (Coombs, 2007, p. 165-166)

SCCT’s focus on maintaining perception makes it a useful and practical theory for shaping response to crises of public perception. SCCT also “offers a specific set of strategies from which organizations can choose, based on the feedback from the crisis situation, to help maintain a favorable reputation” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 91).

SCCT recognizes that crises can have a strong impact on all stakeholders, not just shareholders (Coombs, 2007), making the two theories complementary. SCCT also has a heavy focus on managing the crisis for stakeholders before working with branding and reputation management, which is the most ethical approach to managing a crisis. Before an organization can focus on repairing its image, the organization must ensure that everyone involved is safe and secure.

The stakeholder theory draws the organization’s attention to the varied and vast groupings of stakeholders that must be addressed—employees, shareholders, local public, family of employees, consumers, competitors, professional or special interest groups, governmental agencies—any group that has an interest in the organization and the outcomes of a crisis (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). While in crisis, organizations often tailor their messages to one group of stakeholders, ignoring the rest (Xu & Li, 2013; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). This tactic results in imbalanced stakeholder relations, with one or more group of stakeholders feeling left out or abandoned.

The Literature
Crises are rare and tend to create a large amount of uncertainty, both internally and externally to the organization. Additionally, they are often difficult to resolve completely
(Johnson, 2012) as there is no one response to fit all types of crisis an organization may encounter. Johnson notes that there are ten commonly accepted types of crisis: public perception, natural disasters, product or service, terrorist attacks, economic, human resources, industrial, oil or chemical spills, transportation, and outside environment (Johnson, 2012). An event becomes a crisis when there is potential for significant damage to people, business, physical objects or places, or reputation. As all types of crisis have the potential to harm an organization’s reputation, we will treat every crisis as though it is a public perception crisis and focus on maintaining reputation throughout.

**The Importance of Pre-Crisis Planning**

Crisis communication or crisis response literature typically breaks down effective crisis communication into three segments: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis (Coombs, 2007, Coombs 2011, Marconi 1997). The key to handling a crisis well is to plan effectively.

Prior to a crisis, Coombs considers four steps essential:

1. Have a crisis management plan and update it at least annually.
2. Have a designated crisis management team that is properly trained.
3. Conduct exercises at least annually to test the crisis management plan and team.
4. Pre-draft select crisis management messages including content for dark websites and templates for crisis statements. Have the legal department review and pre-approve these messages. (Coombs, 2011, p. 3)

Marconi’s pre-crisis list includes a different set of pre-crisis tasks, with a heavier focus on external relationship building:

1. The Basics: Know all you can know about your company, products, market, and competition through attitude and awareness research.
2. Create a reservoir of goodwill.
3. Identify yourself by your good name.

Both of these pre-crisis checklists are important for crisis communicators. Coombs’s focuses on being prepared internally, while Marconi’s emphasizes the importance of building external relationships in order to capitalize on pre-existing trust to help carry your organization through a crisis. When the proper planning is in place, crisis communication managers aren’t completely blindsided by crises and can more quickly adapt and respond when the crisis emerges. After all, the initial response to a crisis relies on three main points: “Be quick, be accurate, and be consistent” (Coombs, 2011, p. 7). If you’re scrambling to gather media lists, communication channels, and approved statements, it’s impossible to hit all three points effectively.

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)**

Situational Crisis Communication Theory, first introduced by W. Timothy Coombs, was developed to assist crisis managers with reputation management for an organization (Coombs, 2007). SCCT “provides an evidence-based framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication” (Coombs, 2007, p. 163). It is considered post-crisis communication in that the primary concern and communication during a crisis must be for public safety, or else the organization’s reputation can be irreparably damaged. By ethical mandate, all communication for the sole and explicit purpose of reputational protection, such as that espoused by SCCT, must occur post-crisis, when public safety has been reasonably ensured.
SCCT is rooted in Attribution Theory—the idea that people will look for a person or organization to hold accountable, especially when dealing with negative events. Coombs notes:

Attribution Theory provides the rationale for the relationship between many of the variables used in SCCT. SCCT extends upon this Attribution Theory base to predict the reputational threat presented by a crisis and to prescribe crisis response strategies designed to protect reputational assets. The crisis is the negative event that leads stakeholders to assess crisis responsibility. (Coombs, 2007, p. 166)

According to Coombs, SCCT recognizes three types of crisis clusters, based on an organization’s perceived responsibility for the crisis (Coombs 2007). The first cluster is the “victim cluster,” in which an organization has (or is perceived to have) little-to-no responsibility for the crisis, such as “natural disasters, workplace violence, product tampering and rumor” (Coombs, 2007, p. 167). The second cluster is called the “accidental cluster,” in which an organization has (or is perceived to have) slight responsibility or attribution for the crisis, including, “technical-error accident, technical-error product harm and challenge” (Coombs, 2007, p. 167). The third cluster is the “intentional cluster,” which includes all crises for which the organization has (or is perceived to have) a strong responsibility and wherein the event is considered purposeful, including “human-error accident, human-error product harm and organizational misdeed” (Coombs, 2007, P. 167).

There are three objectives regarding reputation protection in crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007). They include “(1) shape attributions of the crisis, (2) change perceptions of the organization in crisis and (3) reduce the negative affect generated by the crisis” (Coombs, 2007, p. 171).
To achieve those three objectives in a perception crisis under SCCT’s victim cluster, the main strategy for crisis response is denial. “Deny strategies seek to establish a crisis frame. Deny strategies attempt to remove any connection between the organization and the crisis” (Coombs, 2007, p. 171). If the connection between the organization and the crisis can be removed, there can be no reputational harm to the organization. However, crises are not usually so clear, and, “in rumor and challenge crises, managers need to argue that there is no ‘real’ crisis. Managers deny the truth to the rumor or refute the charges of immoral conduct” (Coombs, 2007, p. 171). Managers who successfully frame the crisis in this manner will allow the organization to leave the crisis with their reputation intact.

Coombs outlines three crisis response strategies under the denial strategy: attack the accuser, denial, and scapegoat (Coombs, 2007). Scapegoating is not an option that will be entertained in this guide, as it fails Kant’s second categorical imperative, and therefore, must be dismissed. Coombs explains the remaining strategies as such:

*Confront the accuser:* Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization

*Denial:* Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis. (Coombs, 2007, p. 170)

These strategies may seem harsh, and seemingly at odds with the aforementioned ethical principles. However, if an organization is truly not at fault, they can unequivocally deny their involvement with the crisis. During a crisis where the organization is not at fault, being overly accommodating can backfire on the crisis managers—stakeholders often wonder if the crisis is actually more serious than originally thought if an organization responds in a disproportionate way, hence the strategies for a victim cluster are much less accommodating than the strategies used in an intentional cluster.
Strategies for addressing a crisis that falls into the accidental cluster fall under the “diminish” category. Coombs notes two main strategies for accidental clusters:

**Excuse:** Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.

**Justification:** Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.

(Coombs, 2007, p. 170)

When dealing with a crisis that falls into the accidental cluster, once the potential for ongoing harm has been stopped and the immediate needs of all stakeholders have been addressed, the crisis manager needs to communicate using Coombs’ diminish strategies—excuse and justification. The organization should clearly state what happened, why it happened, why it was an accident, and why the organization is not at fault.

Perhaps the most challenging time to try to salvage an organization’s reputation is during and after a crisis that falls into the intentional cluster. Organizations facing a crisis in this cluster have a high attribution for responsibility, and therefore must become extremely accommodating. As with all crises, the first task is to stop any more harm from occurring, but then, when it is time to salvage reputation, Coombs recommends a series of rebuilding strategies. The rebuild strategies include:

**Compensation:** Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to the victims

**Apology:** Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness. (Coombs, 2007, p. 170)

When employing this approach, Coombs notes, “the crisis managers say and do things to benefit stakeholders and thereby take positive actions to offset the crisis” (Coombs, 2007, p. 172).
**Stakeholder Theory**

Stakeholder Theory is a management theory proposed by R. Edward Freeman in *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, first published in 1984. With a heavy focus on considering all stakeholders when making decisions, Stakeholder Theory diverged from many management theories that focused solely on what was best for the shareholders (Xu and Li, 2012; Clarkson, 1995; Philips, 1997; Mitchell, Agle, Wood, 1997; Freeman, 1984). This focus has helped managers and organizations to operate on more ethical principles (Clarkson, 1995).

Clarkson notes,

> The moment that corporations and their managers define and accept responsibilities and obligations to primary stakeholders, and recognize their claims and legitimacy, they have entered the domain of moral principles and ethical performance, whether they know it or not. So long as managers could maintain that shareholders and their profits were supreme, the claims of other stakeholders could be subordinated or ignored. There was no need for the manager to be concerned with fairness, justice or even truth. The single minded pursuit of profit justified any necessary means, so long as they were not illegal. (Clarkson, 1997, p 112)

Freeman defines a stakeholder as such: “A stakeholder in an organization is (by definition) any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Though this includes shareholders, shareholders are not the only stakeholder. Below is an example of potential stakeholder groups from Freeman (1984, p. 25):
As Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) note, this leaves an extremely broad list of potential stakeholders. This is important to remember when planning for communicating during a crisis, as the communication cannot focus on one particular group of stakeholders; crisis response managers must be aware of how their words could potentially affect all stakeholders. When groups of stakeholders are ignored, there is higher potential for unethical decision-making, as noted above. There is potential for a clash between Stakeholder Theory and SCCT, especially in a victim cluster where the organization is not at fault, but one stakeholder group is. In this case, the organization must weigh the pros and cons of following all of Coombs’ denial strategies, and perhaps adopt the strategies used in an accidental cluster instead.

Xu and Li (2011) studied Foxconn’s 2010 employee suicide crisis, during which twelve employees committed suicide over a five-month period and Foxconn did not communicate effectively. Xu and Li note,

Our findings show that Foxconn adopted a mixed response strategy by trying to address the concerns of various stakeholders while refusing to take responsibility for the suicides. Foxconn’s failure in the crisis was due to its imbalanced stakeholder relations that failed
to recognize employees as important stakeholders, resulting in the failure to provide the ethics of care and justice that was warranted.

These findings also note that Stakeholder Theory and the principles of crisis communication go hand-in-hand and can support each other to provide more ethical standing for creating crisis communication plans and strategies.

**Social Media Best Practices**

Social media is an ever-evolving revolutionary force in the communications field. Nearly instantaneous two-way communication happens all day, every day, regardless of time of day or night, day of the week, or holidays. Welford notes,

“Social media allows anyone to be a major influence in the community. Any customer who walks through your door could possibly have hundreds or even thousands of followers in your region, or if not, his friends might. Word of mouth marketing can reach a worldwide audience through social media; thus, one bad experience could be retold to the masses.” (Welford, 2010)

This immediate, large network created by social media involves nearly all of an organization’s stakeholders, making it an excellent communications channel during and after a crisis. Welford offers a list of best practices for crisis communication on social media, many of which touch back on Coombs’s aforementioned crisis management guidelines of “be quick, be accurate, and be consistent.” Welford suggests: (1) Act Quickly; (2) Take Charge; (3) Handle Reality; (4) Engage the Nay-Sayers; (5) Spread the Word; (6) Encourage Dialogue; and (7) Deliver on Your Word (Welford, 2010).

Though some crisis communications managers or senior leaders may be disinclined to use social media at first, Veil, Buehner and Palenchar note,
“With increasing frequency, the public turns to the Internet to learn details in a crisis. If crisis communicators choose to opt out of the online forum, the conversation on the crisis will continue through social media without the organization’s voice being heard.” (Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar, 2011, p.118)

**Rationale**

By blending Stakeholder Theory, Kant’s Categorical Imperatives, and crisis communications best practices with a knowledge of social media best practices, managers will create a series of tools to assist them in crafting the messages and responses appropriate for public perception. These tools will include pre-crisis planning documents and tasks, including identifying stakeholders, creating media lists, defining chain of command and identifying overarching brand language and messaging, as well as tools to be utilized during the active crisis.

The relatively new and unstudied landscape of social media and crisis communication demands further exploration and examination. With virtually instant communication, a widespread reach, and the sudden examination of each statement by thousands, if not millions of people, it is more important than ever for leaders to be able to make ethical communication decisions during times of crisis. This project will create a guide to assist crisis managers in making ethical decisions when using social media as the main channel of communication during a crisis.

**Research Design Question**

How does situational crisis communication theory and stakeholder theory apply to help organizations make more ethical decisions when using social media as a crisis communications tool in the first 48 hours of a public perception crisis?
Chapter 3: Scope & Methodology

Scope
This project is focused on addressing crises via social media. The overarching goal is to adjust the public’s attribution and perception of responsibility to less damaging levels through strategies that meet or exceed ethical requirements. The resulting guide assists crisis communication managers in preparing and responding to crises on social media. It is broken up into three parts: pre-crisis—planning and organization; active crisis—how to respond during a crisis; and post-crisis—how to maintain or rebuild reputation.

This guide may be used in a variety of crisis scenarios, as the overarching principles and goals of crisis communication are the same across the board. This project focuses on combining Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Kant’s Categorical Imperatives to help provide an ethical framework for addressing and drafting messages during a crisis.

Methodology
This project will employ archival (or documentary) research, a form of qualitative research. Qualitative research focuses on “soft data (i.e. words, sentences, photos, symbols)” (Neuman, 2011, p. 165), as opposed to quantitative research, which focuses on “hard data (in the form of numbers)” (Neuman, 2011, p 165). The goal of this project is not to test variables and hypotheses, as is found in quantitative research, but instead to apply Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Kant’s Categorical Imperatives to the development of a plan or guide for applying best practices for crisis communication on social media.
The guide’s three parts, pre-crisis, active crisis, and post-crisis, will be broken up into subsections detailing possible responses for different scenarios and include spaces where the communications managers can fill in their own pertinent information, such as chain of command, passwords, account information, contact information for decision makers, and space to draft stock responses.

**Ethical Considerations**

As the research does not involve any human participants, there is no concern for harm. As the guide is intended to be used during times of crisis, there is some concern that the strategies mentioned could be used in an unethical fashion once it has been published, though the author believes that the heavy focus on ethics throughout the guide will minimize any abuse of this content.
Chapter 4: The Project

Project Description
This project has resulted in the creation of a guide to be utilized by communications managers in small to medium sized businesses in times of crisis. This guide is designed to help prepare crisis communications managers to jump into action quickly when faced with the sudden need to communicate effectively and ethically during a crisis. The guide is broken up into four parts—a brief primer in crisis communication, pre-crisis, active crisis, and post-crisis. It is intended to be read through and set up prior to an actual crisis, as there is workbook space for some sections, as needed to assist in planning.

The primer in crisis communication provides a brief look into the communications, ethics, and management theories that served as the basis for the guide. The intent behind this section is to give managers likely to face crisis communication issues a quick education in communication theory and a better understanding of some decisions later in the guide. In this section, types of crises, the RDAP scale, Kant’s Categorical Imperatives, Stakeholder Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, and benefits of communicating via social media are all addressed.

The second section of the guide, the pre-crisis section, is all about planning. It walks the user through identifying stakeholders, VIPs, and the chain of command. It contains space to include contact information for the most important members of the organization who may need to be reached at a moment’s notice during a crisis. The pre-crisis section also includes space to store either the login information for each social media channel currently being used by the organization or the contact information for that channel’s admin. Space to create a media list that includes social handles is also included in this section.
The third section of the guide assists managers in communicating during an active crisis. The primary focus during an active crisis is to ensure that all stakeholders are safe and secure, or that all means are being used to make them so. The active crisis phase also includes a subsection on fact-finding. Who are the reliable sources? What is fact? What is rumor? Who is spreading rumor? What are the ethical and legal concerns of this crisis?

The next subsection under Active Crisis focuses on making statements. It begins with an overview of what should be included in the first statement, as well as when to provide updates and how often this should occur. There are also drafts of sample posts.

The final section of the guide covers post-crisis communication and reputation management. This is where SCCT is seen most heavily. This section begins with fact finding—what has been done post-crisis to prevent a similar crisis? What steps were in place to try to prevent this crisis? Then, the guide helps managers identify the crisis cluster the incident belongs in and how best to address the potential reputational harm of that cluster.

The last two subsections in the post-crisis section cover follow-up and summation statements as well as how to best move past the crisis and begin posting normally on social media again.
Examples of the Work

**Ethical Crisis Communication on Social Media: A Guide for Communications Managers**

By: Kayla Murphy

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Appendix: Crisis Communications Check List
The most important rule in crisis communication is three fold:

**Tell the Truth, Tell it All, and Tell it Fast.**

This guide is designed to help prepare you to jump into action quickly when faced with the sudden need to communicate effectively and ethically during a crisis. The first part provides an introduction and overview of key crisis communication theories, and the second, third, and fourth sections act as a workbook that you can tailor to your specific organization. Though this guide does require a bit of planning ahead, you’ll be happy to have the foundations in place when the phone rings at 3 a.m. and you need to start crafting responses.

**A Brief Primer in Crisis Communications**

Crises are rare and tend to create a large amount of uncertainty internally and externally to the organization. Additionally, they are often difficult to resolve completely (Johnson, 2012)—there is no one response to fit all types of crises an organization may encounter. Craig E. Johnson, professor of Leadership Studies at George Fox University, author of *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow*, notes that there are ten commonly accepted types of crisis: public perception, natural disasters, product or service, terrorist attacks, economic, human resources, industrial, oil and chemical spills, transportation, and outside environment (Johnson, 2012). An event becomes a crisis when there is potential for significant damage to people, business, physical objects or places, or reputation. As all types of crisis have the potential to harm an organization’s reputation, we will treat every crisis as though it is a public perception crisis and focus on maintaining reputation throughout.
Types of Crises

1. *Public Perception:* In a public perception crisis, the organization may or may not actually be at fault. There may be a rumor going around, or the organization could have been mistakenly named as being involved in an incident.

2. *Natural Disasters:* Natural disaster crises arise from so-called ‘acts of God’ including hurricanes, wildfires, earthquakes and other weather events. The disaster can be either the direct impact of the weather event itself, or subsequent events caused by the event, such as an earthquake breaking a gas main, which then causes an explosion.

3. *Product or Service:* Product or service crises are centered on defects in an organization’s product, such as product safety recalls, or perceived inconsistencies in the services rendered by an organization.

4. *Terrorist Attacks:* These crises can include hostage situations, bombings, cyber threats, cyber-attacks, and more.

5. *Economic:* Economic crises typically center on a company’s financials being released unexpectedly, particularly when the statements are showing little cash on hand or lower than expected projections.

6. *Human Resources:* Human resources crises cover a variety of different scenarios, from fraud and embezzlement to inappropriate relationships, wage disputes, union disputes, and more.

7. *Industrial:* An industrial crisis is typically a failure of some part of the physical plant—an explosion, nuclear reactor meltdown, a mine collapse, etc.

8. *Oil and Chemical Spills:* Crises involving spills are not limited to oil tankers running aground. It can include spills in a factory that cause harm to workers, chemicals seeping into ground water or reservoirs, and pipeline leaks.
9. **Transportation:** Transportation crises involve plane crashes, train derailments, automobile accidents, boating accidents, or any other sort of accident involving a vehicle.

10. **Outside Environment:** These crises often are not directly caused by the organization but may affect the way it does business. These include a financial collapse, rising gas prices, a fall in stock prices, regulation or deregulation, etc.

**RDAP Scale**

A commonly accepted scale for measuring the reaction and responsiveness of corporations is the Reactive-Defensive-Accommodative-Proactive (RDAP) scale, based on work from many communication theorists, including Wartick, Cochran, Carroll, Clarkson, Starick, and Pinkston. The RDAP scale illustrated by Clarkson (1995) reads as such:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Posture or Strategy</th>
<th>Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Reactive</strong></td>
<td>Deny responsibility</td>
<td>Doing less than required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Defensive</strong></td>
<td>Admit responsibility but fight it</td>
<td>Doing the least that is required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Accommodative</strong></td>
<td>Accept responsibility</td>
<td>Doing all that is required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Proactive</strong></td>
<td>Anticipate responsibility</td>
<td>Doing more than is required</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The RDAP scale allows organizational response to be measured in clearly defined terms against an ideal proactive response, where an organization not only accepts responsibility and does what is required, but goes above and beyond to accept any potential responsibility and does more than is strictly required. Ideally, organizations will fall into the Accommodative or Proactive slots on the RDAP scale. The goal of this guide is to help organizations perform as accommodative at a minimum, preferably as proactive. These forward-thinking, responsibility-
bearing positions are the most ethically acceptable places to operate. An ethical organization does not do the bare minimum required; it goes above and beyond to make sure all stakeholders are cared for in an appropriate manner. Therefore, this guide will focus on getting organizations into a proactive state.

The next few sections of this guide discuss some of the theoretical underpinnings that will be repeated throughout. A quality understanding of these principles will assist managers in making the right decision more quickly and will provide a solid framework from which to base communications regarding statements.

Ethics

An important basis for this guide is rooted in two formulations of 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperatives (Kant, 1964). The first, “Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to become universal law” (Kant, 1964, p. 88), means that whatever principle one uses to make a decision, one must be ready to have everyone behave in that manner. For example, if one chose to use ethical egoism as the rationale for making a decision, and make that decision on what is best for the person’s personal (or organizational) interests, one must be willing for everyone to follow the same principle, making every decision based on ethical egoism. The second categorical imperative is “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time an end” (Kant, 1964, p. 96). This imperative dictates that everyone must be treated as an equal—no one should be placed above another, and each person deserves equal respect.
**Stakeholder Theory**

Stakeholder Theory is a management theory proposed by R. Edward Freeman in *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, first published in 1984. With a heavy focus on considering all stakeholders when making decisions, Stakeholder Theory diverged from many management theories that focused solely on what was best for the shareholders (Xu and Li, 2012; Clarkson, 1995; Philips, 1997; Mitchell, Agle, Wood, 1997; Freeman, 1984). This focus has helped managers and organizations to operate on more ethical principles (Clarkson, 1995).

Clarkson notes,

> The moment that corporations and their managers define and accept responsibilities and obligations to primary stakeholders, and recognize their claims and legitimacy, they have entered the domain of moral principles and ethical performance, whether they know it or not. So long as managers could maintain that shareholders and their profits were supreme, the claims of other stakeholders could be subordinated or ignored. There was no need for the manager to be concerned with fairness, justice or even truth. The single minded pursuit of profit justified any necessary means, so long as they were not illegal. (Clarkson, 1997, p 112)

Freeman defines a stakeholder as such: “A stakeholder in an organization is (by definition) any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Though this includes shareholders, shareholders are not the only stakeholders. Below is an example of potential stakeholder groups from Freeman (1984, p. 25):
As Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) note, this leaves an extremely broad list of potential stakeholders. This is important to remember when planning for communicating during a crisis, as the communication cannot focus on one particular group of stakeholders; crisis response managers must be cognizant of how their words could potentially affect all stakeholders. When groups of stakeholders are ignored, there is higher potential for unethical and ineffective decision-making, as noted above. However, there is potential for a clash between Stakeholder Theory and SCCT, especially in a victim crisis cluster where the organization is not at fault but one stakeholder group is. In this case, the organization must weigh the pros and cons of following all of Coombs’s denial strategies (found in the next section on Situational Crisis Communication Theory) and perhaps adopt the strategies used in an accidental cluster instead.
Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational Crisis Communication Theory, first introduced by W. Timothy Coombs, was developed to assist crisis managers with reputation management for an organization (Coombs, 2007). SCCT “provides an evidence-based framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication” (Coombs, 2007, p. 163). It is considered post-crisis communication in that for ethical reasons, the primary concern and communication during a crisis must be for public safety, or else the organization’s reputation can be irreparably damaged.

SCCT is rooted in attribution theory—the idea that people will look for a person or organization to hold accountable, especially when dealing with negative events. Coombs notes:

Attribution Theory provides the rationale for the relationship between many of the variables used in SCCT. SCCT extends upon this Attribution Theory base to predict the reputational threat presented by a crisis and to prescribe crisis response strategies designed to protect reputational assets. The crisis is the negative event that leads stakeholders to assess crisis responsibility. (Coombs, 2007, p. 166)

According to Coombs, SCCT recognizes three types of crisis clusters, based on an organization’s perceived responsibility for the crisis (Coombs 2007). The first cluster is the “victim cluster,” in which an organization has (or is perceived to have) little-to-no responsibility for the crisis, such as “natural disasters, workplace violence, product tampering and rumor” (Coombs, 2007, p. 167). The second cluster is called the “accidental cluster,” in which an organization has (or is perceived to have) slight responsibility or attribution for the crisis, including, “technical-error accident, technical-error product harm and challenge” (Coombs, 2007, p. 167). The third cluster is the “intentional cluster,” which includes all crises for which the organization has (or is perceived to have) a strong responsibility and wherein the event is
considered purposeful, including “human-error accident, human-error product harm and organizational misdeed” (Coombs, 2007, P. 167).

There are three objectives regarding reputation protection in crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007). They include “(1) shape attributions of the crisis, (2) change perceptions of the organization in crisis and (3) reduce the negative affect generated by the crisis” (Coombs, 2007, p. 171).

To achieve those three objectives in a perception crisis under SCCT’s victim cluster, the main strategy for crisis response is denial. “Deny strategies seek to establish a crisis frame. Deny strategies attempt to remove any connection between the organization and the crisis” (Coombs, 2007, p. 171). If the connection between the organization and the crisis can be removed, there can be no reputational harm to the organization. However, crises are not usually so clear, and, “in rumor and challenge crises, managers need to argue that there is no ‘real’ crisis. Managers deny the truth to the rumor or refute the charges of immoral conduct” (Coombs, 2007, p. 171). Managers who successfully frame the crisis in this manner will allow the organization to leave the crisis with their reputation intact.

Coombs outlines three crisis response strategies under the denial strategy: attack the accuser, denial, and scapegoat (Coombs, 2007). Scapegoating is not an option that will be entertained in this guide, as it fails to pass Kant’s second categorical imperative, and therefore must be dismissed. Coombs explains these strategies as such:

*Confront the accuser*: Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization

*Denial*: Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis. (Coombs, 2007, p. 170)
These strategies may seem harsh, and seemingly at odds with the aforementioned ethical principles. However, if an organization is truly not at fault, they can unequivocally deny their involvement with the crisis. During a crisis where the organization is not at fault, being overly accommodating can backfire on the crisis managers—stakeholders often wonder if the crisis is actually more serious than originally thought if an organization responds in a disproportionate way, hence the strategies for a victim cluster are much less accommodating than the strategies used in an intentional cluster.

Strategies for addressing a crisis that falls into the accidental cluster fall under the “diminish” category. Coombs notes two main strategies for accidental clusters:

**Excuse**: Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.

**Justification**: Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.

(Coombs, 2007, p. 170)

When dealing with a crisis that falls into the accidental cluster, once the potential for ongoing harm has been stopped and the immediate needs of all stakeholders have been addressed, the crisis manager needs to communicate using Coombs’ diminish strategies—excuse and justification. The organization should clearly state what happened, why it happened, why it was an accident, and why the organization is not at fault.

Perhaps the most challenging time to try to salvage an organization’s reputation is during and after a crisis that falls into the intentional cluster. Organizations facing a crisis in this cluster have a high attribution for responsibility, and therefore must become extremely accommodating. As with all crises, the first task is to stop any more harm from occurring, but when it is time to
salvage reputation, Coombs recommends a series of rebuilding strategies. The rebuild strategies include:

*Compensation:* Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to the victims

*Apology:* Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness. (Coombs, 2007, p. 170)

When employing this approach, Coombs notes, “the crisis managers say and do things to benefit stakeholders and thereby take positive actions to offset the crisis” (Coombs, 2007, p. 172).

**The Benefits of Communicating via Social Media**

Social media is an ever-evolving revolutionary force in the communications field. Nearly instantaneous two-way communication happens all day, every day, regardless of time of day or night, day of the week, or holidays. Welford notes,

“Social media allows anyone to be a major influence in the community. Any customer who walks through your door could possibly have hundreds or even thousands of followers in your region, or if not, his friends might. Word of mouth marketing can reach a worldwide audience through social media; thus, one bad experience could be retold to the masses.” (Welford, 2010)

This immediate, large network created by social media involves nearly all of an organization’s stakeholders, making it an excellent communications channel during and after a crisis. Welford offers a list of best practices for crisis communication on social media, many of which touch back on Coombs’s aforementioned crisis management guidelines of “be quick, be accurate, and be consistent.” Welford suggests: (1) Act Quickly; (2) Take Charge; (3) Handle
Reality; (4) Engage the Nay-sayers; (5) Spread the Word; (6) Encourage Dialogue; and (7) Deliver on Your Word (Welford, 2010).

Though some crisis communications managers or senior leaders may be disinclined to use social media at first, Veil, Buehner and Palenchar note, “With increasing frequency, the public turns to the Internet to learn details in a crisis. If crisis communicators choose to opt out of the online forum, the conversation on the crisis will continue through social media without the organization’s voice being heard” (Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar, 2011, p.118).
Pre-Crisis: Preparing for the Worst

These principles and best practices can be used as a guide for any organization and any crisis, though it is specifically designed to assist small to medium sized organizations which may be without the benefit of a devoted crisis communicator.

Identifying Stakeholders and VIPs

As you plan for a crisis, the first thing to do is identify the different groups of stakeholders that could be affected by a crisis in your organization. Once you’ve identified the groups, consider the types of crises that could affect each group. Often, the answer will include more than one type of crisis. Reference the Stakeholder View of Firm included in the brief overview to get an idea of stakeholder groups that may apply. Fill out the following table with the applicable stakeholders:
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder Group</th>
<th>Potentially affected by:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>All crises</td>
</tr>
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</table>
**Identifying Chain of Command**

In any crisis, the crisis communication manager must coordinate closely with those managing the crisis. This could be the CEO, owner, legal team, chair of the emergency management committee, or you. Use this space to identify who needs to be called in and briefed on crises, and who (if anyone) must give approval for any public communications during a crisis. Highlight the name of who must give approval. Be sure to gather work and personal contact information, as crises rarely happen during normal business hours. Also collect both phone numbers and email addresses, as it is not uncommon for phone lines to become jammed during a large crisis, and email may be an easier method of contact.

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**Account Information**

In a time of crisis, it is imperative to have immediate access to the organization’s social media sites. Though everyone does not need to be a manager on all accounts, in many organizations, the login information is housed with one individual, and may not be easily accessed. Use this space to store your organization’s account information. Keep in mind that this is highly sensitive information that should not be left unsecured where it can be easily taken by unauthorized individuals. If you choose not to use this space to list the username and password, at least list all accounts, who in the organization has the needed access, and the best number to reach them.

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<tr>
<th>Account</th>
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Account: _________________________________________________________________
Username/Account Owner ________________________________________________
Password/Phone Number: ________________________________________________
Identify the Primary Communications Channel

Now that you’ve identified how to log in or who has access to each of the social media accounts the organization manages, you’ll need to identify which channel will be your primary source for communication. Different social media channels have different attributes and provide different formats for communicating, so the primary channel may change depending on the type of crisis. Some of the most popular social media channels that could be used in times of crisis are Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

**Facebook** is a popular option for a variety of reasons. It is the largest and most active social media site, which means there are a larger number of people who could potentially see your update. Additionally, Facebook allows for longer text updates than some other social media channels. A potential drawback of using Facebook could be that because of the way their feed algorithm is designed, users do not necessarily see your posts in chronological order. If you post an update during an active crisis that garners a lot of engagement and then post an update at the end of the crisis that does not receive the same volume of engagement, it is entirely possible that your fans will only see the post with higher engagement in their newsfeed. To ensure they are seeing the most up-to-date information, users can simply click over to your organization’s Facebook page, where they will be able to see all posts. This is the social media channel the author recommends for posting updates during a crisis.

**Twitter** is a very popular choice for crisis communication, especially during an active crisis because of its immediacy. However, there are drawbacks, including that posts are limited to a mere 140 characters. Twitter may not be the best option for a long-form message, though it is an excellent form for posting a link to the longer post, whether that post is found on your website, your Facebook page, or on an update from a local authority.
*YouTube* has potential as an excellent social media option because you can record messages from the spokesperson or CEO and then deliver them to a large audience. Adding a face to the message can help the message be received more positively, as the spokesperson has the ability to show emotion and connect with the audience. If, however, your primary spokesperson or CEO is perceived to play a major role in the crisis, you may not want to feature them in the YouTube video.

Whichever social media applications you choose, be sure you understand how to use them, and consider writing a post on your other social media sites to alert fans/users as to where all crisis information can be found.

Your primary social media channel for communication:

________________________________________________________________________
Media List

Cultivating a media list is still necessary when communicating on social media, as the majority of your local media outlets will be monitoring your social media accounts and may reach out to you through social media. It is good to know who your local journalists are and what their social media handles are so if you are contacted, you have a quick reference as to who is contacting you. Use this space to list social handles of local reporters.

Reporter: _____________________________  Outlet: _____________________________
Facebook Name: ______________________  Twitter Handle: _____________________________
Other Social Accounts: _______________________________________________________________

Reporter: _____________________________  Outlet: _____________________________
Facebook Name: ________________________  Twitter Handle: _____________________________
Other Social Accounts: _______________________________________________________________

Reporter: _____________________________  Outlet: _____________________________
Facebook Name: ________________________  Twitter Handle: _____________________________
Other Social Accounts: _______________________________________________________________

Reporter: _____________________________  Outlet: _____________________________
Facebook Name: ________________________  Twitter Handle: _____________________________
Other Social Accounts: _______________________________________________________________
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Reporter</th>
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<th>Facebook Name</th>
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<tr>
<th>Other Social Accounts</th>
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</table>
Active Crisis: Focusing on Stakeholders

Stopping Any and All Scheduled Posts

The first thing to do on social media during a crisis is to immediately STOP any and all pre-scheduled posts. Posts that were seemingly innocuous when they were scheduled anywhere from a day ago to a month ago may now be easily perceived as insensitive when posted during an active crisis. The last thing an organization needs during a time of crisis is to require further damage control due to the perceived insensitivity of a tweet or post.

Fact Gathering

The very first step is to gather as many facts as possible. Find out what exactly is known. Compile these facts in one document. In a separate document, list out any and all rumors that have been heard. Clearly label each list. This will help keep you from including rumors or conjecture in your statements. Remember, the overarching rule of crisis communication—Tell it All, Tell the Truth, and Tell it Fast. You’ll want to put as much information as possible in your first statement.

Identify Your Sources

Who can you gather reliable information from? Do you have contact with anyone at the site of the incident (if there is one)? Are you in communication with local law enforcement? What about your local, state, or other appropriate governmental agencies? Who is responsible for the area of the organization where the incident took place? Do you have a contact with your natural gas company or electric company? Find your reliable sources and make sure you stay in contact with them.

Identifying the Type of Crisis

As you gather information, you should be able to determine the type of crisis your organization is currently facing. Is your organization under physical or cyber-attack? Has a
hurricane just devastated one of your facilities? Has the CEO embezzled money and left the country? Did the media just post a scathing exposé about your organization? Categorize your crisis.

**Identifying Potential for Harm & How to Address It**

Once categorized, consider the potential harm to all stakeholders as the situation escalates. If the cyber-attack continues, whose information could have been corrupted or stolen? Your employees? Your customers? Your contacts in your field? How can you start to mitigate that damage right now? In that scenario, it will take time to begin a contract with a credit-monitoring bureau, but you could draft a message alerting your stakeholders that their personal information has been compromised and they should begin monitoring their credit and accounts immediately. At this point, try to come up with logical next steps and work with the crisis management team to understand how the organization is addressing potential escalations.

**Ethical & Legal Considerations**

It is imperative to keep ethical & legal considerations in mind when fact gathering. Releasing information prematurely could cause irreparable harm to both the stakeholders and the organization. Remember Kant’s Categorical Imperatives, “Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to become universal law” and “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time an end.” Consider the facts you’ve gathered so far—do they include names of individuals who have been harmed or killed? Do they include very specific threats, which could cause chaos if released? Do you have the exact description of an assailant, but the authorities have requested you to not release a key descriptor so as not to impede an investigation? As you choose what information you plan to include in your statements, see if they pass when run through Kant’s questions. If you plan to release the names of the victims
before families have been notified, is that a plan that you would be comfortable with everyone following? Would you be okay hearing a family member was in a workplace accident through social media before your family has the opportunity to hear? While the overarching rule for crisis communication specifies telling it all, the reality is that the world is not black and white, and sometimes decisions must be made to not release all of the information immediately, as releasing it would be the ethically wrong decision.

**Making Statements**

Once you have all of the facts, it is time to start drafting your statements. As you draft the statements, keep the RDAP scale in mind. Highly ethical organizations take a proactive stance, going above and beyond to handle the crisis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Reactive-Defensive-Accommodative-Proactive (RDAP) Scale</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rating</strong></td>
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<td>1. Reactive</td>
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<td>3. Accommodative</td>
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<td>4. Proactive</td>
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**The First Statement**

You’ll want to make your first statement as soon as you possibly can. This statement can be as simple as, “We are aware of the current situation. We are gathering information, and will provide an update as soon as possible. For the most recent updates from {our organization}, check {primary communications channel}.”
If there is any information that has been verified as fact, you should include it. For example, you can say, “We have become aware of new safety concerns in our Newport warehouse. Warehouse operations have ceased, and workers have been sent home until a special team can complete the inspection. Stay tuned to our {primary communications channel} for updates.”

Include timestamps clearly at the beginning of your statements—though social media posts have times and dates, they are typically small and easily overlooked when someone is scanning your page for information quickly. Your post could read:

“9:45 a.m.: We have become aware of new safety concerns in our Newport warehouse. Warehouse operations have ceased, and workers have been sent home until a special team can complete the inspection. Stay tuned to our {primary communications channel} for updates.”

Keep in mind that posts of even this length are too long for Twitter, making Facebook a better channel in this example. If your primary communication channel is Facebook, consider sending a tweet that says something like:

“All updates regarding the current warehouse investigation are being posted on our Facebook page: <link>”

You can then pin that tweet to the top of your Twitter page so no matter when someone visits, they will see where to go for the most recent information. Be sure to unpin the posts when the crisis has passed.

**Follow Up Statements**

Follow up statements should be issued to clarify any information previously released or to update and release new information. Whenever possible, information should be housed in the
same post. Facebook posts are editable, which means when you have a follow up, go back to the original post, and add an update, very clearly marking it as an update.

Ex.

“EDIT: UPDATE: 11:30 a.m.: The investigative team discovered that the machine malfunction in the Newport warehouse was caused by a broken widget. We do not yet know how the widget was broken. The widget has been replaced, tested, and the machine is now fully functioning. The factory will open again at 3:00 p.m. today.

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ORIGINAL POST: 9:45 a.m.: We have become aware of new safety concerns in our Newport warehouse. Warehouse operations have ceased, and workers have been sent home until a special team can complete the inspection. Stay tuned to our {primary communications channel} for updates.”

Continue posting follow up statements until the active crisis is complete and all stakeholders are safe and accounted for.

When Saying Nothing is the Best Option
Saying nothing is very rarely the best course of action during a crisis. It is much more likely that there will be parts of the crisis that may not be appropriate to share. Working with the legal team and local authorities may be imperative, especially when dealing with a terrorist attack. In instances where you are asked to not release certain information, be sure to run it through Kant’s two categorical imperatives—is holding back that type of information a course of action you would not want other organizations taking? Would holding back the information
cause one person or group of people to be treated as less than their innate worth? If the answer to either of those questions is yes, you must do everything in your power to make sure that information is shared.

**Post-Crisis: Maintaining Reputation**

Recall that SCCT, which focuses on maintaining or bolstering reputation after a crisis, is rooted in attribution theory—the idea that people will look for someone to hold accountable in times of crisis. The goal post-crisis is to help your organization recover with its reputation intact. Providing ethically sound, quick, and honest communication during a crisis is one major factor in coming out of the crisis with minimal reputational harm. The other major factor is post-crisis communication—shaping the attribution, changing perception, and reducing negative affect.

**Fact Gathering**

*What steps have been taken post-crisis?*

Once the immediate crisis has subsided, gather information on steps that have been taken in response to the incident. Has the organization changed suppliers? Has the CEO been fired? Has a new committee been formed? Is there a new policy? List out all of the actions taken as a result.

*What steps were taken before the crisis to try to prevent it from happening?*

What is the inspection schedule on the machine that failed? When was the last time it was inspected? What policies are in place to try to prevent the crisis? What safeguards were you using to protect confidential information? Create a list of all checks, balances, policies, and systems that were in place to try to prevent this.

*Identifying the organization’s culpability*

Now that you’ve assessed which pre-crisis precautions and post-crisis steps were taken, assess your organization’s true responsibility in the crisis. Is your organization not to blame? Was
it a natural disaster? Workplace violence? Simply a rumor? Was your organization at least partially to blame? Was it a technical error? Was it an unforeseeable equipment malfunction? Was the organization largely to blame? Was your product tampered with by an employee? Was a member of senior leadership falsifying the books? Was there a cover-up? Did inaction or lack of planning on the organization’s part contribute to the severity of the crisis?

When evaluating the organization’s culpability, remember that this is a public perception issue—it may not matter whether or not the organization was ACTUALLY culpable, but whether it could be or is PERCEIVED to hold responsibility for the events. Try to take a mental step back and consider how the crisis looks from the perspective of someone who is unfamiliar with your organization and the decades of good work the organization may have done. You may consider using a social media listening tool such as Social Mention, Topsy, Talkwalker or Icerocket to track the general tone of social media posts from others.

**Drafting the Appropriate Level of Response**

Not every crisis needs the same amount or type of response. In crises where the organization is minimally at fault, it can actually hurt to be too accommodating, as it can raise a red flag—the public may think, “If the organization is putting so much time/money/effort into these responses, the issue must go deeper than what we currently know.”

**Identifying the Crisis Cluster**

The first step to identify the proper response is to identify the crisis cluster—victim, accidental, or intentional. A crisis that falls into the victim cluster is one where the organization has little to no blame—rumor, natural disaster, product tampering, etc. Crises in the accidental cluster are ones where the organization is partially to blame—perhaps the equipment failed, or there was a technical error. The most damaging cluster is the intentional cluster—this category includes all
crises where the organization has or is perceived to have a strong responsibility for the event—human error, immorality, unethical decision-making, etc.

**Posting Follow Up/summation Statements**
As people will be turning to your social media accounts throughout the crisis, it is important to draft necessary follow up and summation statements to ensure that you are closing the loop with stakeholders and that the public knows that the crisis is finished and what steps you are taking or have taken to move on from the crisis.

**Victim Cluster**
For crises that fall into the victim cluster, the recommended strategies are to confront the accuser and deny the existence of a crisis. This can be the first response to some crises, such as a rumor or mistaken identity. For example, when responding to an article stating CEO Jane Smith was arrested for trespassing, when in fact it was June Smith, her sister, the post could simply state:

"*XYZ Media Outlet reported that Organization CEO, Jane Smith has been arrested for trespassing. This is untrue. Jane Smith was not arrested, nor involved in any interactions with law enforcement officials.*"

A short response like this a) confronts the accuser—*XYZ Media Outlet*, b) denies the CEO’s involvement, and c) does not allow space for a grey area. There is no need to publicly address this perception crisis more than once.

**Accidental Cluster**
Accidental cluster crises require a bit more finesse and communication. The recommended strategies for handling these crises are excuse and justification. The excuse strategy means you explain that the event was not intentional, and the organization had no way of preventing the crisis. Highlighting the processes, policies, or steps taken to try to avoid this
event are typically a good way to excuse the crisis. The justification strategy focuses on minimizing the damage caused by the event. For example, in a crisis where an organization’s factory has been evacuated because of faulty machinery that caused damage to the structure but not to any of the workers, the statement could say:

“Despite monthly safety checks conducted by specially trained employees and quarterly routine maintenance, which most recently occurred on April 2, 2015, the widget machine in our Topeka factory malfunctioned, causing significant damage to the factory. However, no employees have been harmed, and the machine has been repaired and is once again operating normally, with little to no disruption to production.”

**Intentional Cluster**
Intentional clusters are the most difficult to address, as crises in this cluster have the highest level of responsibility attributed to the organization, and generally have high levels of actual harm. In this case, the best thing organizations can do to help salvage reputation is to be very accommodating. The two recommended strategies are compensation and apology. Compensation involves giving gifts or money to the victims, and when following the apology strategy, the apology must be given freely, without condition, and the organization must take full responsibility and ask for forgiveness.

Let’s say it comes to light than an organization had subcontracted a part of their work to a foreign country that uses slave labor and key members of the senior leadership team were aware of allegations of human rights violations against the subcontractor. After taking the appropriate steps that included termination of the contract and the firing of everyone who knew about the allegations and did nothing, the organization could release the following statement:
“This organization failed in its duties to properly vet Subcontractor, and as a result, played an unwitting part in the enslavement of people in Country. We deeply regret this failure and have decided to donate $X million dollars to X charity, a non-profit organization dedicated to ending human trafficking and slavery in Country, as well as $X to each of the individuals who worked in the factory. From the bottom of our hearts, we sincerely apologize for the pain and suffering we have contributed to, and hope that this money will help end the enslavement of any humans who are currently being denied just wages. For more information on how we plan to join the fight to end slavery, visit Website.”

Moving Past the Crisis & Back to Normal Communications

Depending on the crisis cluster and severity of the crisis, it could be prudent to suspend scheduled posts for a short period of time after the crisis until they can be reviewed to ensure the content will not be found insensitive. Once they have been reviewed and potentially offensive posts have been removed, your organization should move back to your normally scheduled posts and campaigns.
Crisis Communication Check List
Use this list as you work through the crisis to ensure you have not missed a step.

_____ Review the primer in crisis communication
_____ Complete all pre-crisis worksheets
    _____ Identifying stakeholders and VIPs
    _____ Identifying chain of command
    _____ Account information
    _____ Media list

Active Crisis
_____ Access all social media accounts
_____ Stop any and all scheduled posts
_____ Gather all facts
_____ Identify the type of crisis
_____ Identify potential for harm & how to address it
_____ Consider ethical & legal implications
_____ Make the first statements
_____ Continue to gather facts
_____ Draft and post follow up statements

Post-Crisis
_____ Fact Gathering
_____ What steps have been taken post-crisis?
_____ Identify the organization’s culpability
_____ Draft the appropriate level of response
_____ Post follow up/summation statements
_____ Move past the crisis & back to normal communications
Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusions

Limitations of the Study
This study has a few potential limitations. The primary limitation is that the technology of social media is ever-changing. This project focuses on some of the most popular social media channels in 2015, but in five years, these channels may not even exist. Additionally, the chosen methodology—archival research—while effective, is not exhaustive. Though the author does not believe that this detracts from the work, the author recognizes that the works that have been included were selected by her to provide insight on this specific research question.

Recommendations for Further Study
To take this to the next level, the author would recommend creating a series of cases focusing on the use of the guide during a crisis. By studying how the guide is used in a real-life application, the guide can then be refined and tailored to be even more helpful in times of crisis.

Further study could also be used to tailor this guide to specific industries, or perhaps types of crisis. A series of surveys to both crisis communicators and their target audience during a crisis could help inform the types and frequency of messaging that would result in the best results. Additionally, with further research, this guide could serve as the basis for a training series to help train managers on crisis communication.

Conclusions
At the beginning of this project, the question was posed: “How does situational crisis communication theory and stakeholder theory apply to help organizations make more ethical decisions when using social media as a crisis communications tool in the first 48 hours of a public perception crisis?”
The key element of this project is the way the theories work together to assist in ethical decision making. On its own, SCCT would encourage denial and scapegoating as chosen strategies for crises that fall into the victim cluster. However, by applying Kant’s Categorical Imperatives, it becomes clear that this is not an ethical option, and therefore, cannot be endorsed.

Additionally, as the primary goal of SCCT is to maintain or revitalize a company’s reputation, it can be a bit shortsighted, and harken back to the days where shareholders were the only group of people a company needed to be responsible to, and therefore, will make decisions that solely benefit that group.

Stakeholder Theory needs SCCT to be an effective communications strategy, as SCCT provides the base guideline for how to reclaim and maintain reputation. Without SCCT, Stakeholder Theory may help with decision-making, but doesn’t provide specific strategies or tactics.

The answer is: applying SCCT, Stakeholder Theory, and Kant’s Categorical Imperatives provides for counterbalances between the theories, resulting in more ethical and effective communication during a crisis than when the theories are used separately.

This is illustrated in the content of the guide that resulted from this project. The guide starts with in-depth analysis of SCCT, Stakeholder Theory, and Kant’s Categorical Imperatives in an effort to educate the user so he or she has a better understanding of the underlying principles. This overview also discusses different types of crises and crisis clusters so managers can more easily identify the type of crisis the organization is facing and the appropriate response level.
Ethical communication during a crisis starts with planning. The second section of the guide allows crisis managers space to proactively identify all stakeholder groups, the crises they could potentially be impacted by, VIPs, local media contacts, and allows space for account login information. Having the preparation done in advance can allow the crisis managers to implement the rest of the guide more quickly and ethically. It can also help ensure that important stakeholders are not forgotten when working quickly.

The third and fourth sections of the guide address responding to the crisis on social media. The initial focus is on fact gathering and addressing the emerging safety concerns as applicable, in accordance with Kant’s Categorical Imperatives and Stakeholder Theory. The focus of the fourth section brings in selected elements of SCCT to help the organization with reputation management after the initial active crisis. When organized thusly, the differing theories combine to create a comprehensive, ethical guide for managing crisis communication on social media.
References


