



Is it so hard to say sorry? Revisiting image restoration theory in the context of Australian supermarkets

Louise Grimmer, University of Tasmania

Abstract

This study examines public apology in the context of the retail industry, specifically the Australian supermarket industry. The study revisits Benoit's (1995) Image Restoration Theory in order to extend its application to Australian supermarkets. Image Restoration Theory provides a typology of five strategic responses for reparation of image following a crisis, controversy or challenge. Using a multiple case study approach, this study analyses the strategic responses provided by Australia's two major supermarkets – Coles and Woolworths – to protect their image in the wake of a crisis. The severity level of each crisis is determined and the findings of this study reveal the act of apologising (the Mortification strategy in Image Restoration Theory) is only employed in the most serious of the four cases. The study's findings are extended to discuss the reasons why Australia's two major supermarket corporations do not apologise (say 'sorry') to their customers, shareholders, suppliers and stakeholders.

Keywords: crisis communication, image restoration theory, retailing, supermarkets

Introduction

An apology is the super glue of life. It can repair just about anything - Lynn Johnston, Cartoonist

"I'm sorry", the two most inadequate words in the English language - Beth Revis, Author

At some stage an organisation may make an error that requires a public apology, and examples of corporations failing to apologise effectively, or indeed at all, highlight the detrimental effect that such failures can have on an organisation's image and reputation (Schweitzer, Wood Brooks & Galinsky, 2015). Is it becoming less common for organisations to apologise when attempting to restore their image following a transgression? To say 'sorry' when they have made an error? This study sets out to examine the strategies used by Australia's two largest supermarkets – Coles and Woolworths – to address image restoration in crisis situations.

In the study, Benoit's (1995) Image Restoration Theory (IRT) is employed in order to extend its application to the retail industry, in the age of the 24-hour news cycle, social media and heightened awareness of corporate social responsibility. The study deals with public apology in the context of the Australian supermarket industry, and applies the IRT strategic typology (Denial; Evading Responsibility; Reducing Offensiveness; Corrective Action; Mortification) in four cases analysing apologies from Coles and Woolworths. Coles and Woolworths are amongst the twenty largest retailers globally, and together they employ more Australians than any other entity (other than state governments) (Knox, 2015). Whilst it would be expected that large retailers would seek to protect their reputation (image) by adopting the traditional mode of crisis management communication theory (apologising), it will be shown that this is not always the case.

Senior managers of corporations are responsible for making decisions that often have significant ramifications (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997) and a corporation accused of wrongdoing may face litigation in addition to the threat to image and reputation. The option of Mortification (apology) to restore or repair corporate image therefore becomes less and less attractive as the spectre of litigation looms. In this regard, corporations often face the competing goals of image restoration versus litigation, and many decide that fending off litigation is a corporate imperative that overrides restoring image and reputation (Benoit, 1997); this strategy is evident in three of the four cases examined in this study. Whilst apologising and asking forgiveness is considered by many communications practitioners (and academics) to be an effective and 'low cost' strategy that may create substantial value for an organisation (Schweitzer, et al., 2015), the findings of this study reveal the act of apologising (the IRT Mortification strategy) is only used in one out of four cases involving Coles or Woolworths.

Using IRT, this paper aims to illustrate the way in which the severity of the crisis frames and transforms the apology strategy selected by retailers. Suggestions are provided regarding how the severity of crises can be assessed and implications are drawn for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Image Restoration

A crisis can be defined as an incident that is unexpected and overwhelming and, in an organisational context, could threaten image and reputation if not handled appropriately (Barton, 2001, Coombs, 1999; Sturges, 1994). In response to a crisis, controversy or challenge, an organisation (or well-known individual) may need to work to repair its image or reputation, particularly if the audience (or public) consider them responsible for the offensive act (Benoit, 1995). Crisis communication theory attempts to synthesise strategies used to recover from crisis situations (Compton & Compton, 2014). Building on the work of Benson (1988) in situational crisis communication theory, and on *kategoria* (Ryan, 1982), *apologia* (e.g. Ware & Linkugel, 1973) and accounts (Scott & Lyman, 1968), Benoit's IRT typology used here is a 'blend of situational and social constructionist approaches' (Pfahl & Bates, 2008, p.137).

IRT does not seek to describe different types of crisis situations, nor the stages of a crisis; rather, IRT discourse focuses on message options in a crisis, and Benoit (1997a) argues IRT is more exhaustive than earlier theories (e.g. *apologia*, accounts). IRT is useful for both academics and practitioners. It is used by academics to critically evaluate responses developed during crisis situations, and it is also a valuable tool to assist communications practitioners craft messages during an unfolding crisis.

There have been several studies on the use of image restoration in an organisational context (e.g. Beniot & Czerwinski, 1997; Benoit & Lindsey, 1987; Brinson & Benoit, 1996; 1999; Tam & Huang, 2016; Jung, Graeff & Shim, 2011), as well as a number of studies examining image repair strategies adopted by celebrities, royalty and politicians (e.g. Benoit, 1995b; 1997; Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Compton & Miller, 2011; Furgerson & Benoit, 2013; Oles, 2010; Wilson, 1976). Whilst recognising Benoit's (1995b) study of the U.S. department store Sears, the current study nonetheless recognises a gap in the literature on the application of image repair theory in the context of the retail industry. Using the lens of Benoit's (1995) IRT, the study examines four crises case studies in the Australian supermarket industry, to determine which image restoration strategies were adopted to attempt to repair organisational image. The study acknowledges Benoit's (2000) concession, in response to Burns and Bruner (2000), that image 'repair' is a preferable term (and concept) to image 'restoration', given that an organisation's image might never be restored to its original state.

IRT (Benoit, 1995) synthesizes a typology of image repair strategies into a comprehensive theory for understanding self-defence discourse in the fields of communication/rhetoric and sociology (Benoit, 1997). The typology consists of five strategies (see Table 1) (some of which involve specific tactics): (i) Denial; (ii) Evade Responsibility; (iii) Reduce Offensiveness; (iv) Corrective Action, and (v) Mortification (Beniot & Drew, 1997).

Table 1. Image Restoration Strategies

Benoit & Pang (2008, p. 248)

Strategy	Key Characteristic
Denial	
Simple denial	Did not perform the act
Shifting the blame	Act performed by another
Evasion of Responsibility	
Provocation	Responded to act of another
Defeasibility	Lack of information or ability
Accident	Act was a mishap
Good Intentions	Meant well in act
Reducing Offensiveness of Event	
Bolstering	Stress good traits
Minimization	Act not serious
Differentiation	Act less offensive than similar ones
Transcendence	More important considerations
Attack accuser	Reduce credibility of accuser
Compensation	Reimburse victim
Corrective Action	Plan to solve or prevent problem
Mortification	Apologize for act

A *Denial* strategy has two components – Simple Denial and Shifting the Blame. An individual or organisation accused of wrong-doing may simply deny committing the offensive act, or deny that the act even occurred (Semin & Manstead, 1983). Another option is to admit to performing the act but denying it was in any way harmful (Brinson & Benoit, 1996). Alternatively, the accused may opt to Shifting the Blame if they did not commit the offensive act (Benoit, 1997). This tactic acknowledges the act occurred but that another organisation (or individual) was responsible (Benoit & Pang, 2008). An organisation adopting a Denial strategy may issue ‘statements that deny the occurrence of the questionable event or that the accused organisation is the cause of the event’ (Tam & Huang, 2016, p.84).

An organisation may use *Evasion of Responsibility* which has four specific tactics. An organisation may claim that the act was the (reasonable) response to Provocation prior to the offensive act: that it was motivated by another act (Benoit & Pang, 2008; Scott & Lyman, 1968). A additional option is Defeasibility, where a lack of control or information is used to try to excuse the act or reduce responsibility for the act (Benoit & Pang, 2014). Another argument is that the offensive action happened by Accident – that the act was inadvertent rather than intentional (Benoit, 1995b). If an organisation can persuade the audience that the action happened accidentally, it therefore follows that the organisation should be held less accountable (Benoit & Pang, 2014). Finally, an organisation may stress that it only ever had Good Intentions, that is, something ‘bad’ happened while the organisation was trying to do something ‘good’ – and that the act was without malice (Benoit & Hiron, 2001).

An organisation or individual may elect to reduce the perceived offensiveness by using one of six tactics to *Reduce Offensiveness*. Bolstering highlights the positive aspects of the accused (Compton & Compton, 2014) to try to offset negative feelings towards the offensive act (Benoit, 1997). The hope is that favourable feelings or a positive attitude toward the organisation will counterbalance any negative feelings as a result of the offensive act (Benoit & Pang, 2008). Minimisation attempts to downgrade (or downplay) the perceived harm of the offensive act and reduce associated negative feelings about the organisation. Differentiation (Ware & Lunkugel, 1973) may be used to contrast the offensive act with similar acts in an attempt to distinguish it as being less offensive than the other comparable acts. In an attempt to place the act in a more favourable context, the organisation may use Transcendence to direct attention to a ‘higher’ consideration, for example, the end justifying the means (Benoit, 1997; Compton & Compton, 2014). An organisation may opt to simply Attack the Accuser to reduce the credibility of the source of the allegation (Benoit, 1995b) and to reduce the effectiveness of the attack (Benoit & Pang, 2014). Lastly, an organisation may offer Compensation to the victim/s to help mitigate negative feelings arising from the offensive act (Benoit, 1997).

Corrective Action is a strategy in which the organisation moves to correct the transgression or offensive act. This can take two different forms: the organisation can promise to restore the situation to the original state of affairs (before the offensive act took place), or it can promise to take action to prevent a similar act from occurring in the future (Benoit, 1997; Benoit & Pang, 2008; Compton & Compton, 2014). Finally, a *Mortification* strategy (Burke, 1970, 1973) comprises a confession of the transgression (admission of guilt), an expression of regret and a plea for forgiveness (Benoit, 1997; Benoit & Pang, 2008; Schonbach, 1980). Benoit (1995, 2000) provides a full explanation and literature review and a more expansive treatment of the IRT typology strategies and tactics (Compton & Compton, 2014). To date IRT has only been applied in a very limited capacity in a retail organisational context, and so this study aims to examine the use of IRT in the context of the supermarket industry.

Australia has one of the most concentrated grocery markets in the world, and as stated earlier the Australian supermarket industry is dominated by two giants (some would even argue 'behemoths') – Coles and Woolworths. These companies employ more Australians than any other entity, other than state governments, and are amongst the twenty biggest retailers globally (Knox, 2015). Coles (owned by Wesfarmers) and Woolworths (Woolworths Limited) have interests that extend beyond supermarket retailing, covering petrol, liquor, finance products, insurance, hotels and gambling, general merchandise and hardware. Both corporations have nearly 1,000 supermarkets, 700 petrol stations, more than 1000 bottle shops and hotels (meaning they also operate the largest number of Australia's poker machines), as well as more than 500 variety and hardware stores (Knox, 2015). 'Together, [Coles and Woolworths] take in more than 70 cents of every dollar spent in Australian supermarkets' (Knox, 2015, p.3); in the context of Australian supermarket retailing these giant corporations now operate effectively as a powerful duopoly.

In general terms, large retailers in Australia have embraced social media (around half of all *small* retail firms still do not use any form of social media) (Grimmer, 2016; Sensis, 2016, 2016b) and both Coles and Woolworths have a relatively significant social media presence with both organisations primarily interacting with customers via their respective Facebook pages. Coles (www.coles.com.au) utilise Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. The Coles Facebook page has just over 1 million 'Likes'; the Coles Twitter account has just over 33 thousand followers, and the Coles Instagram page has 42.7 thousand followers. Woolworths (www.woolworths.com.au) utilise Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest and Tumblr. The Woolworths Facebook page has just under 1 million 'Likes'; the Woolworths Twitter account has almost 16 thousand followers, and the Woolworths Instagram account has 57 thousand followers. These data, describing the use of social media by Coles and Woolworths, are included to provide context – the four crisis case studies that are examined in this study were 'played out' in both the traditional and online (including social) media. In the two Woolworths cases, the campaigns were launched via social media and the company faced a consumer and media backlash on both social and digital media.

It should also be noted that in the discussion of crises, the severity of the four cases examined in this study should be considered within the context of the retailing (and supply) industry, as well as taking into account the prevalence of social media and how long a crisis remains in the 'cycle' of conversation. The level of each case examined was not so severe that there was an injury and/or fatality involved. Rather, the study proposes that the level of 'severity' be assessed using three criteria: (1) how many people were likely to have been affected/offended by the crisis; (2) how long the crisis remained in the media, and (3) were legal proceedings initiated against the organisation? The four crises are described further below in order from least severe to most severe and the response provided by Coles or Woolworths is analysed using Benoit's (1995) IRT typology of strategies and tactics.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Over the last six years Coles and Woolworths have been involved in a number of retail crises or controversies, some more serious than others; four recent cases are examined here. The first two involve Woolworths launching, and then (in response to consumer backlash on social media) withdrawing expensive and high-profile marketing campaigns. The second two are more serious in nature and involve action taken against Coles by the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC) regarding misleading advertising of products, and anti-competitive behaviour in a B2B context. The study explores:

Research Question 1: Which image repair strategies are used in responding to the crises?

Research Question 2: Does the severity of the crisis influence the choice of IRT strategy employed?

METHOD AND FINDINGS

Case Studies

To answer the two research questions, a multiple case study method is used to analyse the four cases of crisis communication (Yin, 2013). This approach allows a level of depth to be achieved (for each case) in understanding the communication methods employed in response to crisis; at the same time, comparison across cases shows the breadth of application of IRT. Each case is summarised as follows.

Woolworths - Michelle Bridges Delicious Nutritious Range

In late 2015, Woolworths partnered with popular fitness instructor and television personality Michelle Bridges to develop a Woolworths-exclusive pre-packaged food range. The 'Michelle Bridges Delicious Nutritious' range was launched with what was intended to be a light-hearted marketing campaign with an initial online advertisement (YouTube, 2015) featuring Michelle Bridges labelling people who grow their own vegetables "freaks".

Not surprisingly, the campaign alienated Woolworths' customers as well as fans of the celebrity trainer, many of whom grow their own fruit and vegetables and like to eat fresh food. The advertisement was pulled from Woolworths' and Michelle Bridges' Facebook pages just hours after it was launched as customers attacked both the supermarket and the celebrity trainer on social media. Woolworths posted a short statement on its Facebook page confirming they had removed the advertisement and that it was never their intention to upset anyone:

We've listened to your feedback about the latest Michelle Bridges video and have removed it. Our intention was never to upset anyone. As the fresh food people we know how passionate our customers are about fresh food. We share their passion and want everyone to eat healthily whether they grow their own or choose healthy foods from our supermarkets (Facebook/Woolworths, 2015).

Michelle Bridges also posted a short statement on her Facebook page stating 'there was never any intention to offend and for this we sincerely apologize (sic).' In their statement, Woolworths used the Evade Responsibility strategy (specifically 'Good Intentions') and then Corrective Action (taking down the offensive advertisement). In contrast, Michelle Bridges (as an individual) used Mortification ('sincerely apologise') and Evade Responsibility strategies (specifically 'Good Intentions') as well as a Corrective Action strategy (taking down the offensive advertisement).

Woolworths - Fresh in Our Memories

In April 2015, Woolworths launched the 'Fresh in Our Memories' campaign by encouraging customers to visit a website (www.freshinourmemories.com.au) designed to commemorate the centenary of ANZAC Day. The campaign invited customers to upload photographs of individuals affected by war to the company's 'profile picture generator' that branded the image with the Woolworths logo and the tagline 'Lest We Forget ANZAC 1915-

2015...Fresh in our memories' (Sydney Morning Herald Online, 2015). Initial responses on social media pointed out that the campaign's title 'Fresh in our Memories' was too similar (and indeed completely inappropriate) to the supermarket's 'fresh food people' mantra (Bastick, 2015). The 'Fresh in Our Memories' campaign received extensive backlash on social media which was then picked up by mainstream media.

Woolworths initially responded to the crisis by reiterating that it was one of Australia's largest employers; a national partner of the RSL and Camp Gallipoli, and that the use of their logo on the website was used in a similar manner by other corporate sponsors (Reducing Offensiveness: Minimization). A company spokesperson even insisted that 'Fresh in our memories' was not a 'marketing campaign' (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2015c). In fact, Woolworths had not sought permission to use the term 'ANZAC' and following a late night phone call to the Woolworths' marketing team from the then Veterans' Affairs Minister Michael Ronaldson, the supermarket immediately took down the website and cancelled the entire campaign (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2015b). Woolworths refused to comment on their use of the term 'ANZAC' and in a statement released on the company's Facebook page, Woolworths expressed regret that the supermarket's branding on the image generator had caused offence:

We regret that our branding on the picture generator has caused offence, this was clearly never our intention. Like many heritage Australian companies, we were marking our respect for ANZAC and our veterans (The Australian, 2015).

Woolworths used the strategy of Reducing Offensiveness, specifically Bolstering, in response to the crisis. At no stage did they apologise for the campaign; instead they reinforced their positive qualities – their reputation as a large employer, their support for the RSL (and 'ANZAC') and its associated activities, and their regret for any offence caused.

Coles - Freshly Baked Bread Proceedings

In mid-2012, former premier of Victoria Jeff Kennett mailed a box of Coles' bread and muffins to the Chairman of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) Rod Simms. His complaint was that Coles was marketing specific bakery products ('Cuisine Royale' and 'Coles Bakery' brands) as 'freshly baked' when in fact the products were par-baked in Ireland and shipped to Australia frozen, and were then re-baked before being sold. The complaint specified that Coles was 'deceiving' its customers by selling bread and muffins marketed as 'baked in-store today' as well as an additional complaint that Coles was acting in a 'predatory' manner against local producers and farmers by driving them out of business (The Australian Newspaper, 2012).

Initially, the ACCC took no action and in response to the claims. A Coles spokesperson used the strategy of Reduce Offensiveness by responding that Mr Kennett was 'making mountains out of molehills' (Minimization) and that the Irish bread was simply an option for the supermarket's customers (Differentiation). Undaunted by the lack of action from the ACCC, Jeff Kennett mounted a campaign in the media (primarily through talkback radio) for almost a year which resulted in the ACCC eventually launching action against the supermarket, claiming it misled consumers who believed some of the company's (previously par-baked and frozen) bakery products were baked fresh in-store ('baked today, sold today'). Coles' initial response to the action from the ACCC was to use the strategy Reduce Offensiveness. Whilst the company admitted their packaging contained

the words 'freshly baked in-store' and 'baked today, sold today', they reinforced the fact that the packaging also contained the words 'Made in Ireland'. In addition, the company used Evade Responsibility (in particular 'Defeasibility'); in addition, they had already ceased using the 'baked today' and 'fresh' phrases on its packaging prior to the court action (Sydney Morning Herald, 2013).

In April 2015, the Federal Court eventually ordered Coles to pay \$2.5 million for making false or misleading representations and engaging in misleading conduct. The company was also required to refrain (for a period of three years) from making any representation regarding bread being entirely baked on the day of sale on any packaging, signage, website or other promotional material, and to place a corrective notice on its website and in its in-store bakeries (ACCC, 2015). In a statement, Coles reiterated the company had not set out to 'deliberately mislead anybody' (Evade Responsibility, specifically Good Intentions), and that it would do a 'better job at explaining' (Reduce Offensiveness, specifically Bolstering) how their products are baked. They also advised changes to product packaging and other information about their products were in development (Corrective Action) (SBS, 2014).

Coles - Supplier Rebate Proceedings

In December 2014, the ACCC ruled that in 2011 Coles had engaged in unconscionable conduct in its dealings with certain suppliers regarding claims for various payments as part of Coles' Active Retail Collaboration (ARC) program. Specifically, the program, designed to improve Coles' earnings, required suppliers to make 'rebate' payments and threatened those suppliers who declined to make payments with a range of actions including the supermarket's withdrawal of support for replenishing stock in-store, promotional activities, and future orders. The so-called rebate payments were also used to cover purported profit gaps, retrospective and prospective waste and late and short deliveries by suppliers. ACCC Chairman Rod Sims noted '...this is one of the first findings of unconscionable conduct in a business-to-business context under the Australian Consumer Law' (ACCC, 2014). Indeed, the ACCC considered some of the alleged conduct was an 'unconscionable or a misuse of market power' (ACCC, 2014).

Coles was originally handed a \$10 million penalty and in June 2015, they were also ordered to pay an additional \$12 million to suppliers, and to enter into a formal process to provide the 220 suppliers referred to in the proceedings with options for redress (ACCC, 2015b). Coles' initial response to the original Federal Court action brought by the ACCC was to reject the allegations outright. In defence papers lodged in the Federal Court, Coles said 'the supermarket rejects allegations it threatened suppliers who refused to pay the rebate with 'commercial consequences' (ABC, 2014). In this case, Coles' initial strategy when the allegations were first made was to use Denial (Simple Denial) by rejecting the allegations. The company also tried to Shift the Blame by claiming:

[Supplier] Participation in the ARC program was at all times voluntary. Coles consulted with (smaller) suppliers regarding the value of the expected benefits of the ARC Program and responded to supplier queries concerning those benefits. Coles maintained trading relationships with suppliers irrespective of whether or not they decided to participate in the program (Rolfe, 2014).

They also claimed that while 32 of the 200 suppliers did not agree to participate in the program, 'Coles continues a trading relationship with each of those suppliers' (Rolfe, 2014).

Denial and Shifting the Blame are not necessarily considered as appropriate (or effective) means to restore or repair image, particularly by those who are injured by the

action (Benoit & Brinson, 2009). However, Benoit (2000) conceded that these strategies may not inevitably be considered inappropriate or ineffective by audiences other than the injured parties and in the case of Coles, with multiple stakeholders, they were used by the organisation in responding to the charges. However, by December 2014, as the severity of the crisis continued to feature in the media, Coles finally admitted to unconscionable conduct in relation to dealings with some suppliers in 2010 and 2011 (ABC, 2014b). Managing Director John Durkan released a statement in which the company used the Mortification strategy and apologised for its actions:

Coles unconditionally apologises and accepts full responsibility for its actions in these supplier dealings. I believe that in these dealings with suppliers, Coles crossed the line and regrettably treated these suppliers in a manner inconsistent with acceptable business practice. We will await the judge's decision in these matters (Coles, 2014).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the strategies used by Australia's two largest supermarkets to address image repair in a crisis situation. The first research question sought to analyse which IRT strategies were used by Coles and Woolworths in response to a specific crisis. An examination of the four crisis communications cases involving Coles and Woolworths reveals that in each case the companies deployed all five Strategies – Denial, Evade Responsibility, Reduce Offensiveness, and Corrective Action. In some cases, as the crisis unfolded, one or more strategies were employed. Analysis of the responses provided by the organisations reveal the Mortification strategy was used in only one of the four cases examined – in the case that the study ranked as the highest in terms of severity.

A variety of strategies and tactics as presented in the IRT typology were adopted by both supermarkets in each of the cases. For example, Woolworths used the strategy of Reducing Offensiveness to limit the reaction to the Fresh in Our Memories campaign; Coles used Minimisation and Evading Responsibility in responding in the Freshly Baked Bread proceedings. In some cases, as the crisis unfolded, one or more strategies (and associated tactics) were employed; however, the study showed the strategy of Mortification, which is an effective method to try and restore image by apologising and asking forgiveness (Benoit, 1997a), was employed in only one of the cases. Coles used Mortification in the Rebate case but only towards the end of the proceedings brought against them by the ACCC.

The second research question sought to examine the IRT strategy selected within the context of the severity of the crisis. The four cases of crisis may be ranked in order from: Mild (Woolworths - Michelle Bridges Delicious Nutritious Range); Moderate (Woolworths Fresh in Our Memories); Serious (Coles Freshly Baked Bread), and Severe (Coles Supplier Rebate). In the most severe case (Coles Supplier Rebate) the organisation initially used a Denial Strategy (Simple Denial and Shifting the Blame) in response to the allegations brought about by the ACCC. However, as the case progressed and the seriousness of the charges were more widely acknowledged (particularly in the media), the CEO made a statement using the Mortification strategy – a full and frank apology was provided.

The seriousness of the transgression appears to have had an impact on the strategic response in each case (see Table 2).

Table 2. Image Restoration Strategies Adopted by Coles and Woolworths

Crisis	Severity	Strategy
Delicious Nutritious Range <i>Woolworths</i>	Mild	Evasion of Responsibility Good Intentions Corrective Action
Fresh in Our Memories <i>Woolworths</i>	Moderate	Reducing Offensiveness of Event Bolstering Minimization
Freshly Baked Bread <i>Coles</i>	Serious	Evasion of Responsibility Good Intentions Reducing Offensiveness of Event Bolstering Corrective Action
Supplier Rebate <i>Coles</i>	Severe	Denial Simple Denial Shifting the Blame Mortification Apologize for act

The results suggest Coles and Woolworths dominate the Australian market to such an extent that image repair might not be an organisational priority. In addition, the culture of the 24-hour news cycle, and the prevalence of social media, serve to create an environment in which the ever-evolving succession of news negates the need for some corporations to apologise for failed campaigns, errors of judgement or more serious transgressions. Issues and crises played out on social media (and to some extent in the digital media) tend to become 'yesterday's news' so quickly that many organisations

choose to 'ride out' a crisis until the issue is replaced by another transgression from another organisation.

Limitations

It should be noted that the study had certain limitations. The analysis undertaken was limited by the relatively small number of cases. Whilst the four cases and the two supermarkets selected can be considered as reasonably representative of the supermarket industry in Australia, a greater analysis of responses to crises across a range of supermarkets currently operating in Australia (e.g. IGA, Aldi, Costco, independent operators) would provide a more detailed understanding of the application of IRT within the context of supermarket retailing.

Directions for Future Research

The study provides several avenues for further research. The study's framework could be applied to other supermarket 'players' in the Australian market – including multinationals Aldi and Costco. Already, Aldi (German-owned) and Costco (US-owned) are making strong market gains in Australia. Their projected growth of market share in Australia is anticipated to have a significant impact on the duopoly currently enjoyed by Coles and Woolworths. It is likely that increased competition from leading global supermarket chains operating in Australia will have an effect on the way in which Coles and Woolworths respond to customers and stakeholders in future crises. As competition increases in the highly concentrated Australian supermarket industry, both Coles and Woolworths will face increased pressure in all aspects of their operations, including crisis communication. Future research could also examine the response strategies and tactics used by Aldi, Costco (and others) in crisis communications. The framework could also be extended to other types of large retailers including Myer, David Jones, IKEA and the like, with a specific emphasis on product recall issues.

References

- Australian Broadcasting Corporation. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-07-01/coles-defence-against-acc/5562776>
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation. (2014b). Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-12-15/coles-acc-reach-settlement-on-supplier-conduct/5967476>
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation. (2015). Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-07/social-media-slams-michelle-bridges-ads-for-woolworths/6920688>
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation. (2015b). Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-15/rsl-responds-to-woolworths-fresh-in-our-memories-campaign/6393498>
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation. (2015c). Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-14/woolworths-under-fire-for-anzac-promotion/6392848>
- Australian Competition & Consumer Commission. (2014). Retrieved from <https://www.accc.gov.au/media-release/court-finds-coles-engaged-in-unconscionable-conduct-and-orders-coles-pay-10-million-penalties>
- Australian Competition & Consumer Commission. (2015). Retrieved from <https://www.accc.gov.au/media-release/coles-to-pay-25m-for-misleading-baked-today-and-freshly-baked-in-store-bread-promotion>
- Australian Competition & Consumer Commission. (2015b). Retrieved from <https://www.accc.gov.au/media-release/coles-refunds-over-12-million-to-suppliers-following-acc-action>
- Barton, L. (2001). *Crisis in Organizations* (2nd Edition). Cincinnati: South-Western College Publishing.
- Bastick, J. (2015, April 15). <http://www.bandt.com.au/media/woolies-shamed-for-naff-anzac-promo> Woolies shamed for naff ANZAC promo
- Benoit, W.L. (1995). *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Benoit, W.L. (1995b). Sears' repair of its auto service image: Image restoration discourse in the corporate sector. *Communication Studies*, 46: 89-105.
- Benoit, W.L. (1997). Hugh Grant's image restoration discourse: An actor apologizes. *Communication Quarterly*, 45: 251-267.
- Benoit, W.L. (2000). Another visit to the theory of image restoration strategies. *Communication Quarterly*, 48 (1): 40-43.
- Benoit, W.L. & Brinson, S. (1999). Queen Elizabeth's image repair discourse: Insensitive royal or compassionate Queen? *Public Relations Review*, 25: 145-156.

- Benoit, W.L. & Brinson, S. (2009). AT&T: "Apologies are not enough". *Communication Quarterly*, 42 (1): 75-88.
- Benoit, W.L. & Czerwinski, A. (1997). A critical analysis of USAir's Image Repair Discourse. *The Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication*, 60: 38-57.
- Benoit, W.L. & Drew, S. (1997). Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Image Repair Strategies. *Communication Reports*, 10 (2): 153-163.
- Benoit, W.L. & Hirson, D. (2001). *Doonesbury* versus the Tobacco Institute: The Smoke Starters' Coupon. *Communication Quarterly*, 49: 279-294.
- Benoit, W.L. & Lindsey, J.J. (1987). Argument strategies: Antidote to Tylenol's poisoned image. *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, 23: 136-146.
- Benoit, W.L. & Pang, A. (2008). Crisis Communication and Image Repair Discourse. In Hansen-Horn, T.L. & Dostal, B. (Eds.), *Public Relations: From Theory to Practice*. Mass: Pearson.
- Benson, J.A. (1988). Crisis revisited: An analysis of the strategies used by Tylenol in the second tampering episode. *Central States Speech Journal*, 38: 49-66.
- Brinson, S. & Benoit, W.L. (1996). Dow Corning's image repair strategies in the breast implant crisis. *Communication Quarterly*, 44 (1): 29-41.
- Brinson, S. & Benoit, W.L. (1999). The tarnished start: Restoring Texaco's damaged public image. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 12: 483-509.
- Burke, K. (1970). *The rhetoric of religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1973). *The philosophy of literary form* (3rd Edition). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burns, J.P. & Bruner, M.S. 2000. Revisiting the Theory of Image Restoration Strategies. *Communication Quarterly*, 48 (1): 27-39.
- Coles. (2014). Retrieved from <https://www.coles.com.au/about-coles/news/2014/12/15/unconscionable-conduct-proceedings>
- Compton, J. & Compton, J.L. (2014). College Sports, Losing Seasons, and Image Repair Through Open Letters to Fans. *Communication & Sport*, 2 (4): 345-362.
- Compton, J. & Miller, B. (2011). Image repair in late night comedy: Letterman and the Palin joke controversy. *Public Relations Review*, 37: 415-421.
- Coombs, T. (1999). *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*. Los Angeles, Sage.
- Facebook/Woolworths. (2015). <https://www.facebook.com/woolworths/posts/970057689733029>
- Furgerson, J.L. & Benoit, W. L. (2013). Limbaugh's Loose Lips: Rush Limbaugh's Image Repair after the Sandra Fluke Controversy. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 20 (2): 273-291.

- Grimmer, L. (2016, July 12). Keeping up with the shoppers, *The Mercury*, Fairfax Media.
- Jung, T., Graeff, R. & Shim, W. 2011. Good for Samsung is Good for Korea: Image Restoration Strategies Used by Samsung After a Whistle-Blowing Corruption Scandal. *The Open Communication Journal*, 5: 23-28.
- Knox, M. (2015). Supermarket Monsters: The price of Coles and Woolworths' Dominance. Collingwood: RedBack.
- Oles, D.L. (2010). Deny, Delay, Apologize: The Oprah Winfrey Image-Defense Playbook. *Northwest Journal of Communication*, 39: 37-63.
- Pfahl, M.E. & Bates, B.R. (2008). This is not a race, this is a farce: Formula One and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway tire crisis. *Public Relations Review*, 34: 135-144.
- Rolfe, J. (2014). Coles denies standover tactics claims made by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. *The Cairns Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.cairnspost.com.au/business/coles-denies-standover-tactics-claims-made-by-the-australian-competition-and-consumer-commission/news-story/554b5fabb1a100de7edb4faf39096017>
- Ryan, H.R. (1982). Kategoria and apologia: On their rhetorical criticism as a speech set. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 68: 254-261.
- Schonbach, P. (1980). A category system for account phases. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 10: 195-200.
- Schweitzer, M.E., Wood Brooks, A. & Galinsky, A.D. 2015. The Organizational Apology: A step-by-step guide. *Harvard Business Review*, 93(9): 44-52.
- Scott, M.H. & Lyman, S.M. (1968). *Accounts*. *American Sociological Review*, 33: 46-62.
- Sensis. (2016). Sensis e-Business Report 2016: The Online Experience of Small and Medium Enterprises. Retrieved from https://www.sensis.com.au/assets/PDFdirectory/Sensis_eBusiness_Report_2016.pdf
- Sensis. (2016b). Sensis Social Media Report 2016: How Australian people and businesses are using social media. Retrieved from https://www.sensis.com.au/assets/PDFdirectory/Sensis_Social_Media_Report_2016.PDF
- Special Broadcasting Service. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2014/06/18/coles-guilty-misleading-customers-over-freshly-baked-bread>
- Sturges, D.L. (1994). Communicating through Crisis: A Strategy for Organizational Survival. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 7 (3): 297-316.
- Tam, L. & Huang, P. Organisational Crises in the Media: Crisis Response Strategies and News Coverage. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 17 (1): 79-90.
- The Australian Newspaper Online. (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/colees-freshly-baked-irish-bread-a-con-kennett-tells-accs/story-e6frg6nf-1226418315364>. Viewed 28 March 2016.

- The Australian Newspaper Online (2015). Retrieved from <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/media/woolworths-apologises-over-anzac-fresh-in-our-memories-website/news-story/8b559732955cc5bfd256105b4976c631>
- The Sydney Morning Herald Online (2013). Retrieved from <http://www.smh.com.au/national/coles-baked-bread-supermarkets-response-to-court-20130716-2q1up.html>
- The Sydney Morning Herald Online (2015). Retrieved from <http://www.smh.com.au/national/woolworths-fresh-in-our-memories-debacle-puts-spotlight-on-anzac-branding-20150415-1mltt7.html>. Viewed 28 March 2016.
- Ware, B.L. & Linkugel, W.A. (1973). They spoke in defense of themselves: On the generic criticism of *apologia*. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 59: 273-283.
- Wilson, G.L. (1976). A Strategy of Explanation: Richard M. Nixon's August 8, 1974, Resignation Address. *Communication Quarterly*, 24 (3): 14-20.
- Yin, R.R. (2013). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Sage Publications.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.