

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

Taylor Heine

Southern Utah University

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

Signature Page

I certify that I have read this thesis and that, in my opinion, it is satisfactory in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of Professional Communication.



Kevin Stein, Ph.D., Capstone Chair, MAPC Graduate Director

Table of Contents

Introduction.....3

Literature Review.....5

 Image Repair Theory and Corporate Crises.....5

 Image Repair Theory and the Airline Industry.....8

Methods.....10

Artifacts.....14

Analysis.....14

Discussion.....22

Conclusion.....25

References.....27

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

Introduction

On October 29, 2018, Lion Air Flight 610 crashed into the Java Sea, claiming the lives of 189 on board. A preliminary report revealed the Boeing 737 MAX had experienced issues with the plane's automated control system, Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS). The MCAS had been receiving improper sensor readings; thus, forcing the plane's automatic system to activate and thrust the nose downward, plunging the aircraft into the ocean at 450 mph (Glanz, Beech and Suhartono, 2018).

Nearly five months later, a Boeing 737 MAX operated by Ethiopian Airlines crashed in Bishoftu, Ethiopia, killing 149 passengers and eight crew members. The flight appeared to have experienced issues strikingly similar to those that occurred with the Lion Air crash in late October. Following the devastating accident, dozens of countries issued an airspace ban on 737 MAX models and many airlines suspended operations of the fleet until further notice (Laris, Aratani, Dawsey and Olorunnipa, 2019). However, the United States seemed reluctant to follow suit of their global counterparts as the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued a statement insisting the plane was air-worthy. The Boeing Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Dennis Muilenburg, followed with a personal phone call to United States President, Donald Trump confirming the plane's safety (Samuels, 2019). Despite the FAA and Boeing's efforts to continue operating the 737 MAX jets, President Trump ordered American models to be grounded on March 13, 2019 (Rosen, 2019). Shortly after, Boeing announced its decision to support an international grounding of the 737 MAX aircraft (Boeing, March 2019).

The crisis continued to spiral for the aerospace giant as stocks plummeted 11 percent, the greatest reported loss since the 9/11 attacks (Bloomberg, 2019). Shareholders filed a class action

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

lawsuit and families of victims sought legal action against the manufacturer. In addition to the financial and litigation trouble, the brand received considerable backlash from air carriers and pilot unions for failing to disclose the MCAS was on the aircraft or include critical system information in the flight crew manual until after the initial crash (Gates, 2019). Furthermore, passengers were seemingly uneasy about traveling aboard the 737 MAX jet. According to CNBC, “a UBS survey found 70% of flyers polled would hesitate to book on the MAX” (Josephs, 2019). The distrust among airline professionals and the traveling public intensifies the ramifications as Boeing aims to regain brand confidence.

There are three key reasons we should examine this context. First, Boeing is one of the largest airplane manufacturers in the world. Second, the company had 2 fatal crashes involving their aircraft within less than 6 months, which is completely unprecedented for a reputable industry leader. Third, the tragedies have clearly impacted travelers and many are reluctant to fly aboard the 737 MAX.

This study seeks to explore the image restoration strategies employed by Boeing and the fate of the 737 MAX in wake of the catastrophic crashes. The contents presented in this essay will involve a comprehensive literature review, followed by a methods section, analysis, and discussion.

Literature Review

The following literature will provide insight into two important concepts relevant to this research study. The review will explore existing cases involving the theory of image repair, corporate crises and the airline industry.

Corporate Crises and Image Repair Discourse

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

Benoit's typology has been applied to a variety of corporate communication crises over the years. Brinson and Benoit (1999) analyzed Texaco's image repair discourse following accusations claiming the company was racist after a prejudiced tape featuring Texaco executives surfaced in November 1996. The key strategies utilized by the major oil company include mortification, corrective action, bolstering and shifting blame. The combination of these image restoration strategies was proven to be effective in the sense that it diverted the media's attention from the Texaco brand, allowing their stock to rebound and public image to recover. The findings of this study suggest that corporate entities can successfully repair their image during crises by employing appropriate image repair strategies. The next article will illustrate the importance of consistency and timeliness in corporate crisis communication.

Josh Compton (2013) examined the image repair tactics employed by Arby's after airing a comparative television spot against their competitor, Subway in 2012. The advertisement revealed Arby's meats were sliced in-house and Subway prepared their deli meat at a factory located in Iowa. Therefore, insinuating Arby's was the fresher and more desirable sandwich. Following the airing, Iowans reported feeling insulted by the advertisement. Arby's was forced to respond. Two apologies were issued. The first combination of image repair tactics utilized include mortification, good intentions and corrective action. The second apology was consistent with the initial set of tactics. However, Arby's opted to apply bolstering as well. According to the results, Arby's image repair efforts was mostly sufficient. The strategies complemented each other and the sandwich shop was able to deliver on their promises to remove the advertisement in a timely manner. The following essay will also demonstrate a corporation's ability to overcome crisis and restore their image by engaging in *apologia*.

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

Benoit and Lindsey (1987) conducted an apologetic criticism which examined the argument strategies utilized by Johnson & Johnson in response to the tainted Tylenol bottles which resulted in seven deaths in September 1982. The primary tactics employed by Johnson & Johnson were denial, bolstering and differentiation. The connection between Tylenol and cyanide poisoning was denied, the brand then bolstered by ensuring customers the safety of their product and finally, Tylenol Extra-Strength capsules were differentiated from the other products offered by the brand. The results indicated, Johnson & Johnson employed appropriate strategies to successfully repair the brand's image and helped restore sales allowing Tylenol to reclaim notoriety as the leading over-the-counter pain reliever. While the findings of this study commend Johnson & Johnson for employing pertinent argument strategies and effectively repairing their image, other scholarship often focus on scrutinizing corporations for futile image restoration efforts.

Brinson and Benoit (1996) examined the image restoration strategies used by Dow Corning in response to allegations regarding the safety of their silicone breast implants. The tactics utilized by Dow Corning include denial, minimization, bolstering, transcendence, attacking the accuser, mortification and corrective action. The results of this study indicate, the company's initial response was ineffective and caused severe damage to their image. However, the final image restoration attempt involving the combination of mortification, corrective action and bolstering were successfully employed in preventing further harm to the brand's image.

Another corporation that demonstrated a poor image recovery effort when forced to handle a crisis situation was Firestone. Blaney, Benoit and Brazeal (2002) investigated the image repair discourse following Firestone's defective tires which were allegedly responsible for 101 deaths and eventually increased to a total of 271 deaths. The image restoration strategies

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

employed by the Bridgestone-Firestone Corporation include shifting blame, corrective action, bolstering and mortification. The conclusion of this study revealed that the corporation's image restoration strategies failed to persuade the general public of safety regarding their tires which consequently hindered Firestone's ability to recover their image.

Benoit (1995) also analyzed the image repair strategies used by Sears in response to allegations regarding their auto repair centers performing unnecessary repairs to vehicles. The primary image restoration tactics employed by Sears was good intentions, denial, differentiation and bolstering. The findings of this study indicate that the corporation's image repair efforts were ineffective because Sears refused to employ mortification prompting customers to form unfavorable attitudes towards the brand's image. The following section will examine image repair cases involving the airline industry.

Image Repair Theory and the Airline Industry

The airline industry is no stranger to crises. Whether managing a response to devastating crashes or issuing an apology after a passenger sits in dog feces, air transportation is very accustomed to crafting persuasive messages to repair brand reputation. In fact, several studies have examined the image repair discourse employed by air carriers such as United and U.S. Air.

An early study in image repair theory applied Benoit's typology to the apology issued by U.S. Air in response to the fatal plane crash that killed 132 people near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on September 8, 1994 and a public condemnation featured in the *Times*. Benoit and Czerwinski (1997) concluded the strategy combination, denial, bolstering and corrective action employed by U.S. Air was ineffectual as the carrier failed to acknowledge the issues outlined in the scathing article. Bolstering was ineffective as the organization used flight attendants in their advertisements to endorse their mechanical safety record. The research duo indicated the strategy

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

would have been more influential had U.S. Air featured a mechanic. Scholars also found corrective action and denial to be ineffective. Benoit and Czerwinski recognized the company refused to take responsibility for the act and appeared to engage in “pseudo-corrective action”. Therefore, the carrier did not acknowledge the issues to truly prevent recurrence of the crisis but, rather “regain trust of the traveling public” (Benoit and Czerwinski, 1997). According to the research findings, employing pseudo-corrective action is concerning as the phenomenon offers a unique approach to restore brand image but is unlikely to enhance safety or operational procedures. The findings of the study suggest, airliners should respond directly to accusations and offer clear solutions to stop the crisis from occurring in the future.

A more recent study conducted by Benoit (2018) examined the image restoration efforts employed by United Airlines following the ruthless removal of a passenger aboard Flight 3411 in April 2017. The research emphasized the importance of responding quickly in the age of digital media. Furthermore, the study revealed how corrective action can be an effective crisis communication tool when used appropriately. However, the strategy must be consistent with supplemental defense rhetoric. For example, Benoit explains, “do not deny the existence of a problem and propose corrective action” (Benoit, 2018). This strategy combination would weaken the apology. Thus, creating a greater challenge for the accused to save face. The study helps scholars understand the value of a prompt apology and the proper approach for employing corrective action when managing airline crises.

While these studies offer diverse and thought-provoking contexts for airline crises the literature focuses specifically on the responses issued by corporate carriers. Existing scholarship has yet to investigate apologetic discourse utilized by Boeing, arguably the largest aerospace company in the world, responsible for designing aircraft and delivering to 191 air carriers.

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

The following research questions will be investigated in the study:

RQ 1: What image repair strategies were employed by Boeing in response to the 737 MAX crisis?

RQ 2: Were these strategies effective in rectifying Boeing's image?

Method

A critical analysis using Benoit's image restoration typology will be applied to analyze the rhetorical tactics employed by Boeing following the global grounding of the MAX 737. The Benoit framework is comprised of fourteen image repair tactics including denial, shifting blame, provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions, bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, compensation, correction action and mortification.

Benoit's Image Repair Strategies

Denial

Denial occurs when the indicted refuses that they committed the harmful act. For example, Tylenol denied accusations by asserting "the tampering and the poisoning of the product did not take place in our plant" (Benoit & Lindsey 1987). Tylenol illustrated this strategy by simply denying allegations that they were involved in the offensive act.

Shifting Blame

Shifting blame happens when the accused blames another for the offensive act. For instance, "Texaco CEO, Peter Bijur attributed the prejudiced remarks made by Texaco executives to a few bad apples" (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). In this statement the CEO transfers fault to other entities in an attempt to deny responsibility.

Provocation

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

Provocation occurs when the accused claims the act was provoked by another. For example, severe budget cuts forced the university to cut the football program. This illustrates provocation because the football program was discontinued due to university budget cuts.

Defeasibility

Defeasibility can be defined as when the accused blames the act on the lack of information or ability. For example, “a spokesperson could suggest that new federal regulations had not been communicated to the company” (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997). Therefore, they should not be responsible for violating federal regulations due to the lack of information.

Accident

Accident occurs when the accused claims that the incident was a mistake. For instance, “Sears’ Chairman responded to charges of auto repair fraud by claiming that the auto repair mistakes were inadvertent, rather than intentional” (Benoit, 1997). This statement illustrates Sears’ attempt to evade responsibility for their offensive act.

Good Intentions

Good Intentions can best be defined as when the accused claims they meant well by their actions. For example, Sears expressed “We want you to know that we would never intentionally violate the trust customers have shown in our company for 105 years” (Benoit, 1995). This statement clearly demonstrates Sears emphasizing good intentions to their customers.

Bolstering

Bolstering occurs when the accused attempts to rectify their image by stressing their positive qualities. For instance, Firestone bolstered the quality of their tires by stating, “Firestone is committed to building quality tires” (Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002). This

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

illustrates Firestone bolstering their commitment to producing quality tires in an attempt to restore the brand's image.

Minimization

Minimization occurs when the accused attempts to make the act appear less serious than it really is. For example, "Dow Corning knew that silicone could potentially escape the breast implants and travel through the recipient's body. However, company scientists believed that the silicone would not have serious health effects" (Benoit & Brinson, 1996). This statement demonstrates Corning's attempt to reduce the harmful risks associated with their product.

Differentiation

According to Benoit (1995) differentiation occurs when a "person attempts to distinguish the act from other similar but less desirable acts". For instance, Tylenol distinguished the extra-strength capsules from other products offered by the brand by explaining that "most of the Tylenol products were not susceptible to poisoning and assured consumers that the only product that could be tampered with was capsules" (Benoit & Lindsey 1987). This was done in an attempt to lessen the severity of the damage by distinguishing the capsule product.

Transcendence

Transcendence can be defined as when the accused places the offensive act into a more important situation. For example, "A company that experiments on animals could claim that humans from such research outweigh the harms to animals" (Benoit, 1997). This strategy is often used to help reduce the offensiveness of the act.

Attacking the Accuser

Attacking the accuser occurs when the accused denounces the indicter for blaming the individual of wrongdoing. For instance, Dow Corning attacked the accuser after the FDA

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

demanded further information regarding the safety of their breast implants by claiming that “the agency failed to adequately review the documents previously submitted by the company” (Benoit & Brinson, 1996). This strategy was employed by Dow Corning in an attempt to divert some of the negative attention of the company's image and reduce the offensiveness of the act.

Compensation

Compensation is when the accused offers to pay the victim for the harmful act. For example, Bill O' Reilly compensated a female news contributor following accusations of sexual harassment. According to the New York Times (2017), “the Fox News host struck a \$32 million agreement with a longtime network analyst to settle new sexual harassment”. This illustrates Bill O'Reilly's efforts to compensate the victim in an attempt to rectify his personal image.

Corrective Action

Corrective Action is when the accused attempts to resolve the issue or prevent the act from recurring. For instance, Firestone employed corrective action in response to accusations their tires were unsafe by stating, “In the role of watchdogs, a new team of top mechanical and quality control managers has been assembled to continuously analyze tire and safety data” (Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002). This statement is considered corrective action because it acknowledges the company's effort to prevent the problem from occurring in the future.

Mortification

Perhaps, the most commonly used apologetic strategy is mortification. Mortification is when the accused apologizes and takes responsibility for their actions. For example, President George W. Bush apologized for poorly executed disaster relief efforts in response to the ravaged gulf coast city of New Orleans by stating, “If the federal government fails to meet such an obligation, I, as President, am responsible for the problem, and for the solution.” This statement

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

illustrates how President Bush uses mortification to express remorse for inadequate government support in an attempt to restore confidence in the administration. The next section will introduce the artifacts selected for study and follow with a detailed analysis.

Artifacts

Five responses issued by Boeing via official statements released on the company website and public appearances over several months will be systematically examined to identify prominent themes. These artifacts include an open letter, video apology, broadcast interview, appearances at an aviation industry event and a press release.

The open letter penned on March 18, 2019 was selected as it was the first statement issued by Boeing following the second 737 MAX tragedy that occurred nearly 8 days prior. The video apology published in response to the findings outlined in the preliminary report was also chosen for examination as the results suggested Boeing's aircraft was responsible for the crash. The CBS interview with Norah O'Donnell that aired May 29, 2019 was selected because it was the first sit down interview on national television since the crisis unfolded. The Paris Air Show appearances in June were chosen as the event is considered the largest industry function of the year and all eyes were on Boeing as the plane manufacturer needed to respond to aviation leaders. Finally, the July 3, 2019 press release issued in response to criticism and numerous lawsuits filed against the company was the fifth artifact selected to round out the collection of texts selected for study.

Analysis

This section will analyze the image repair strategies employed by Boeing. The primary tactics the airplane manufacturer utilized in their image repair efforts include bolstering, corrective action, mortification, shifting blame and compensation.

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

Bolstering

A key strategy consistently employed by Boeing was bolstering. On March 18, 2019 Boeing Chief Executive Officer, Dennis Muilenburg issued an open letter to airlines, passengers, and the aviation community in response to the two crashes involving the aircraft manufacturer's best-seller, the 737 MAX. The aerospace giant often utilized bolstering to tout the company's promise to design safe airplanes. Muilenburg opened his letter by emphasizing, "We know lives depend on the work we do, and our teams embrace that responsibility with a deep sense of commitment every day. Our purpose at Boeing is to bring family, friends and loved ones together with our commercial airplanes—safely" (Muilenburg, 2019a). Boeing continued bolstering in subsequent passages of the memo. The manufacturer expanded on the company's experience and explained how the brand would make air travel more secure. Muilenburg asserted,

Boeing has been in the business of aviation safety for more than 100 years, and we'll continue providing the best products, training and support to our global airline customers and pilots. This is an ongoing commitment to make safe airplanes even safer (Muilenburg, 2019a).

On April 4, 2019 investigators released a preliminary report suggesting the flight control system aboard the jet was the root cause of the accident. Later that day, Dennis Muilenburg issued a video apology on the Boeing website and company Twitter account. The CEO persisted to boast the safety of the aircraft. Muilenburg declared, "We remain confident in the fundamental safety of the 737 MAX, all who fly on it, the passengers, flight attendants and pilots including our own families and friends deserve our best" (Muilenburg, 2019b). The CEO furthered his efforts by pledging, "When the MAX returns to the skies with the software changes to the

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

MCAS function, it will be among the safest airplanes to ever fly” (Muilenberg, 2019b). The ambitious promises continued into late spring.

On May 29, 2019 Dennis Muilenberg joined Norah O'Donnell of CBS News for Boeing's first television interview since the 737 MAX grounding. When asked if he would put his “family on a 737 MAX?” (O'Donnell, 2019), Muilenberg admitted, “Without any hesitation. Absolutely” (Muilenberg, 2019c). The response exemplifies bolstering as the CEO uses one of the strongest appeals to tout 737 MAX safety.

Corrective Action

Boeing also relied heavily on corrective action to respond to the crisis. Dennis Muilenberg initially employed corrective action in his open letter to acknowledge the company's ongoing efforts to discover the cause of the most recent plane crash and to prevent future accidents from recurring by stating,

This overarching focus on safety spans and binds together our entire global aerospace industry and communities. We're united with our airline customers, international regulators and government authorities in our efforts to support the most recent investigation, understand the facts of what happened and help prevent future tragedies. Based on the facts of the Lion Air Flight 610 accident and emerging data as it becomes available from the Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 accident, we're taking actions to fully ensure the safety of the 737 MAX Jet (Muilenberg, 2019a).

Following the preliminary findings, Muilenberg used corrective action in his video apology to reassure customers the accidents would never recur by simply stating, “it is our responsibility to eliminate this risk” (Muilenberg, 2019b). The CEO expounded and provided insight concerning their ongoing efforts to install a software update that would provide safeguards to make certain

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

the tragedies would never happen again. Muilenberg asserted, "This update along with the associated training and additional educational materials that pilots want in the wake of these accidents will eliminate the possibility of unintended MCAS activation and prevent an MCAS related accident from ever happening again" (Muilenberg, 2019b). These messages clearly demonstrate corrective action. Muilenberg concluded his video apology by promising, "together we'll do everything possible to earn and re-earn that trust and confidence from our customers and the flying public in the weeks and months ahead" (Muilenberg, 2019b). This remark reinforces earlier statements of corrective action by once again, pledging to regain customer trust.

The Boeing CEO continued to explain how the company would prevent aircraft failures moving forward in an emotional interview with CBS News. During the interview, Norah O'Donnell shared the opinion of a man who lost his family in the recent Ethiopian Crash that believed, "It was up to Boeing and others in charge to save them" (O'Donnell, 2019). Then she asked, how the comment made the executive feel. Muilenberg acknowledged his inability to fix the past with empathy and asserted, "[but] what I can commit to is our company is going to do everything possible to ensure safety" (Muilenberg, 2019c). The CEO's response illustrates corrective action in the simplest form. However, Muilenberg later revealed Boeing is in the process of repairing the software designed to engage the angle-of-attack disagree alert, the key safety mechanism that would have notified pilots of the issue on board. Resolving the software problem would provide pilots with additional time to respond and could prevent future accidents from occurring.

Other Boeing executives appeared to echo similar affirmations at the Paris Air Show. On June 17, 2019, Chief Financial Officer, Greg Smith declared, "These accidents have only

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

intensified our efforts to ensure the highest level of safety and quality in everything we do” (AP Archive, 2019). Smith continued to discuss how teams are working around the clock to make certain Boeing is “meeting the needs and the priorities of regulators and customers around the globe” (AP Archive, 2019). He emphasized, the safe return of the 737 MAX is the ultimate priority and top aviation experts in the industry are working to get the plane back in service. The CFO further elaborated on their collaboration efforts with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regarding the 737 MAX. Smith stated,

Day in and day out, we've been working with the FAA and regulators around the world to ensure that we're answering all of their questions and addressing any concerns that they may have. We're also supporting our airline customers during this challenging time and collectively preparing to return the fleet back to service (AP Archive, 2019).

He concluded his statement by reminding customers of the plane maker's commitment to safety as they strive to move forward from the crisis. Smith stated, "We're mindful of the importance of restoring public trust and confidence in Boeing on behalf of our airline customers. Safety is a shared priority amongst government regulators, suppliers, manufacturers and operators. And we're dedicated to work in this broad industry to make aviation even safer” (AP Archive, 2019). Air travel safety continued to be a central theme in the apologies issued by Boeing executives. The second Paris Air Show statement delivered by the Boeing Commercial Airplanes President, Kevin McAllister, sought to support previous attempts to rectify the company's reputation with corrective action. His statement resounded similar remarks concerning safety in previous apologies. McAllister echoed,

Safety is sacred in this company. And our people who work in the factories, the engineers who design our airplanes, to all of us in every corner of this business, safety is simply the

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

top priority in everything we do. And company-wide, as Greg said, our first priority is doing absolutely the right thing and doing everything to get this airplane safely returned to service (AP Archive, 2019).

Repeatedly acknowledging the importance of safety and sharing updates on their progress to recertify the plane may help audiences feel more comfortable booking on 737 MAX when the grounding is lifted.

Mortification

In addition to bolstering and corrective action, Boeing employed mortification. However, mortification was not applied until after the preliminary report was released. In April, the aerospace manufacturer utilized the strategy on two accounts. First to express remorse and apologize for the fatal crashes. The CEO stated,

We at Boeing are sorry for the lives lost in the recent 737 max accidents. These tragedies continue to weigh heavily on our hearts and minds and we extend our sympathies to the loved ones of the passengers and crew on board Lion Air flight 610 and Ethiopian Airlines flight 302. All of us feel the immense gravity of these events across our company and recognize the devastation to the families and friends of the loved ones who perished (Muilenberg, 2019b).

This statement illustrates mortification as Muilenberg apologizes for the lives lost and conveys the heartache Boeing is experiencing company-wide. Muilenberg added one final effort to express remorse in the video apology. He expressed, “again, we’re deeply saddened by and we are sorry for the pain these accidents have caused worldwide. Everyone affected has our deepest sympathies” (Muilenberg, 2019b). Boeing continued to utilize mortification throughout the spring. During the CBS interview, Muilenberg stated,

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

I do personally apologize to the families. We feel terrible about these accidents, and we apologize for what happened, we are sorry for the loss of lives in both accidents, and that will never change. That will always be with us. I can tell you it affects me directly as a leader of this company, it's very difficult (Muilenberg, 2019c).

When later pressed in the discussion about issues concerning Boeing's transparency and credibility. The CEO acknowledged, "No, as I said, we clearly fell short and the implementation of this angle-of-attack disagree alert was a mistake, right, we did not implement it properly" (Mullenberg, 2019c). These two messages illustrate mortification. However, the initial statement fails to accept responsibility and the second response appears to admit fault and disregards an expression of regret.

Boeing appeared to increasingly accept responsibility for mishaps and fatalities as the 737 MAX crisis lingered into the summer. At the Paris Air Show, Boeing Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Greg Smith, opened his statement by acknowledging the loss of life. He stated, "The tragedy of Lion Air and Ethiopian accidents certainly weighs on all of us and words simply cannot express the sorrow and the sympathy that we feel for the families and the loved ones of those that were lost in these tragic accidents" (AP Archive, 2019). The statement expresses the regret Boeing feels for the tragic accidents and clearly illustrates mortification.

Shifting Blame

Although, the airplane manufacturer finally accepted some culpability for the crash and seemed fairly remorseful, it was evident the Muilenberg was initially reluctant to claim full responsibility for the crashes. In the April video response, he acknowledged the MCAS activation was due to erroneous angle-of-attack information and additional factors. The CEO indicated, "history of our industry shows most accidents are caused by a chain of events"

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

(Muilenberg, 2019b). Muilenberg was convinced there were additional factors involved in the plane crashes and the MCAS was not the sole cause of the tragedies. He elaborated, "In these two accidents, as pilots have told us, erroneous activation of the MCAS function can add to what is already a high workload environment" (Muilenberg, 2019b). The message attempts to shift blame to demanding work conditions or discretely point fingers at the pilots in an apparent effort to share fault and divert some of the negative attention.

Shifting blame also emerged during the broadcast interview with Norah O'Donnell. When asked about the cause of the plane crash, Muilenberg stated, "We know there was inaccurate sensor data that came into the airplane and there appeared to be a maintenance issue with that sensor. We know that the MCAS software was activated multiple times during that flight and in the end that added to the pilot workload" (Muilenberg, 2019c). This statement reiterates previous efforts to shift blame to the pilots and the demands of operating an aircraft while still maintaining some responsibility for the accidents.

Compensation

On July 3, 2019 the Chicago-based company issued a press release on their website. The announcement utilized one primary image repair strategy, compensation. Boeing pledged, "\$100 million in funds to address family and community needs of those affected by the tragic accidents of Lion Air Flight 610 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302" (Boeing, 2019). The plane builder acknowledged how the funds would be allocated and disbursed. Boeing indicated, "These funds will support education, hardship and living expenses for impacted families, community programs, and economic development in impacted communities. Boeing will partner with local governments and non-profit organizations to address these needs. This initial investment will be made over multiple years" (Boeing, 2019). The company also revealed employees would have

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

the opportunity to make contributions and Boeing would match the funds through December 31, 2019. These statements illustrate how restitution can be used to comfort the families and loved ones of the passengers that perished aboard the 737 MAX. If accepted by the audience, this strategy could help alleviate some of the negative attention Boeing has received since the first accident.

Discussion

This section will evaluate the efficacy of the image repair discourse employed by Boeing in response to the 737 MAX crisis.

Mortification is an expected strategy following a fatal plane crash. Typically, the air carrier is responsible for apologizing. However, in this particular case, the circumstances are slightly different. Considering the findings of the Lion Air crash suggested the faulty MCAS system developed by Boeing brought down the flight and the results of the preliminary report from the Ethiopian crash revealed the same issue occurred, it is reasonable to assume the aircraft manufacturer would be responsible for apologizing. Boeing eventually expressed remorse for the loss of life although it was not until nearly a month later which is considerably delayed for a deadly incident. In addition to the overdue apology, Boeing never truly accepted responsibility for the accidents. The air carrier claimed aviation tragedies are caused by a chain of events and remained resolute in the fact that Boeing was not the only party involved.

The aerospace manufacturer indicated the MCAS activated multiple times in flight and ultimately added to the pilot workload. Therefore, employing an unusual attempt to shift blame. As noted earlier, shifting blame occurs when the accused assigns fault to another but Muilenberg insinuated the pilots were already overwhelmed by the workload and Boeing's MCAS system exacerbated the issue. The corporation clearly deployed this strategy in an attempt to share fault

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

and divert some of the negative attention. However, the strategy was poorly executed.

Unfortunately, Boeing was already in hot water for failing to apologize and take responsibility in a timely manner. The plane manufacturer later admitted they were a link in the chain of events that occurred. Then, the company proceeded to blame pilot workload in an effort to share fault. Perhaps the strategy would have been more effective if Boeing was willing to accept more responsibility for the accidents from the outset and employed the strategy earlier. Regardless, sharing fault may be a subcategory of shifting blame and should be further explored to better understand the functionalities.

Another strategy examined throughout the discourse was corrective action. This strategy was also very perplexing. Boeing offered contrite apologies for the loss of lives but was very reluctant to taking full responsibility for the accidents. If the accused does not believe he/she played a fundamental role in the tragedy, then why would the company feel obliged to correct action? Boeing is clearly aware of its wrongdoing and the repercussions. Therefore, the company developed a comprehensive plan to resolve defective software and recertify the plane to ensure public safety. These approaches to correct action were sufficient. However, Boeing's inability to take responsibility for the crashes greatly hinders the value of this strategy. Although the company never denied the fault for the tragedy, they never totally accepted it either. Thus, if the Boeing did not accept fault for the offense then they should not feel compelled to correct action. Engaging in corrective action confirms Boeing is responsible for the crashes that occurred and weakens the intended outcomes of supplemental strategies.

An additional image repair tactic identified in the study was bolstering. While this is a commonly used image repair strategy in response to fatal airplane crashes and usually very effective, Boeing did not appear to be entirely successful. Most of the promises employed by the

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

plane manufacturer were predictable and unjustified. Dennis Muilenberg often bolstered the safety of the 737 MAX aircraft and claimed the model would be among the safest aircraft to ever fly upon its return to the skies. Although the statement would seem reasonable following recertification and software updates, the plane model already has a severely blemished safety record. A company cannot claim to be the safest, if their product has claimed nearly 350 lives in a five-month period, prior to undergoing repairs. I would imagine Boeing would have to maintain an impeccable safety record for at least two years for the traveling public to be persuaded. Muilenberg later went as far as saying he would put his family on board a 737 MAX. This statement would certainly appeal to many but of course a CEO is going to stand behind his product. Therefore, the statement is only moderately convincing. The only really effective use of bolstering was illustrated when the company highlighted their experience. The company has over 100 years of experience designing and manufacturing aircraft which helps the audience better understand their level of competency.

In early July, Boeing finally offered to compensate victims' families and the communities that were affected by the tragedies. Compensation is almost always acceptable when a crisis involves the loss of life. However, the aerospace manufacturer once again, failed to employ the strategy at an earlier stage. Obviously restitution cannot bring back loved ones but if Boeing would have started administering the funds sooner, perhaps the victims' families could have afforded a memorial service to honor those who passed or been provided with a safety-net to cover unforeseen expenses associated with the sudden death of a family member. In addition, respective governments could have been reimbursed for the investigation costs and crash site communities could have received compensation for the negative impact to the local economies.

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

Conclusion

The analysis revealed Boeing utilized mortification, shifting blame, corrective action, bolstering and compensation in an attempt to restore the its image following the devastating 737 MAX crashes. Although the strategy combination was moderately appropriate, execution was poor.

Boeing initially faltered by failing to take full responsibility for the accidents that occurred. It was evident the 737 MAX played an integral role in fatal crashes. Boeing would have been better off had they acknowledged their involvement immediately following the Ethiopian plane crash and apologized directly to the families of the passengers that perished. The plane manufacturer's defense continued to weaken as the Chicago-based company denied they were the culprit of recent crashes and attempted to share fault in a unique instance of shifting blame.

Additionally, Boeing managed to employ corrective action. Obviously, after regulators issued a mandate ordering a global grounding of the fleet, Boeing had no choice but to fix the faulty MCAS system and recertify the aircraft. However, by then, one would assume the manufacturer would have taken full responsibility for the events that occurred but Boeing refused. It is illogical for the accused to deny fault and then employ corrective action if the company firmly believes they are not guilty for the tragedies that occurred. By employing corrective action, Boeing essentially admitted responsibility.

The only slightly effective strategies were bolstering and compensation. Bolstering was used to highlight 737 MAX safety which is peculiar considering the aircraft was just involved in two of the most recent air tragedies in aviation history. Clearly this statement was ineffectual but Boeing managed to emphasize their experience which underlines their expertise and could give

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

the flying public confidence in the jet when the 737 MAX returns to service. Compensation could have also been more successful had Boeing distributed the funds sooner but this seemed to be a strategy that transpired from litigation. Perhaps Boeing could have avoided lawsuits had the company agreed to compensate earlier.

Overall, Boeing was unsuccessful in repairing its image. The 737 MAX has been out of service for nearly 6 months with no anticipated date of return and recently reported their lowest second-quarter earnings in history. In addition, opinion polls suggest the traveling public is still uncomfortable flying the 737 MAX. According to a recent UBS Group AG survey, approximately “12% of respondents indicated “no amount of safe operation will alleviate their concerns” about flying on the plane” (Park and Johnson, 2019). Perhaps the aerospace manufacturer would have been more successful had they been more transparent, empathetic and remorseful from the outset. This study underscores the importance of authenticity and taking full responsibility for fatal plane crashes.

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

References

- AP Archive. (2019, June 22). Retrieved August 07, 2019, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAhzoS9Tyws>
- Benoit, W. L., & Lindsey, J. J. (1987). Argument strategies: Antidote to Tylenol's poisoned image. *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, 23(3), 136-46.
- Benoit, W.L. (1995). *Accounts, excuses, and apologies: A theory of image restoration strategies*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Benoit, W. L. (1995). Sears' repair of its auto service image: Image restoration discourse in the corporate sector. *Communication Studies*, 46(1-2), 89-105.
- Benoit, W. L., & Czerwinski, A. (1997). A critical analysis of USAir's image repair discourse. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 60(3), 38-57.
- Benoit, W. L. (2014). *Accounts, excuses, apologies: Image repair theory and research (2nd ed.)*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Benoit, W. L. (2018). Crisis and image repair at united airlines: Fly the unfriendly skies. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 1(1), 11-26.
<https://doi.org/10.30658/jicrcr.1.1.2>
- Blaney, J. R., Benoit, W. L., & Brazeal, L. M. (2002). Blowout!: Firestone's image restoration campaign. *Public Relations Review*, 28(4), 379-392.
- Bloomberg. (2019, March 11). Boeing Stock Drops Most Since 9/11 After Second 737 Crash. *Time*. Retrieved from <https://time.com/5549031/boeing-737-stocks-down/>
- Brinson, S. L., & Benoit, W. L. (1996). Dow Corning's image repair strategies in the breast implant crisis. *Communication Quarterly*, 44(1), 29-41.
- Brinson, S. L., & Benoit, W. L. (1999). The Tarnished Star Restoring Texaco's Damaged Public

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

Image. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 12(4), 483-510.

Boeing. (2019, March 13). In Consultation with the FAA, NTSB and its Customers, Boeing Supports Action to Temporarily Ground 737 MAX Operations. Retrieved from <https://boeing.mediaroom.com/news-releases-statements?item=130404>

Boeing. (2019, July 3). Boeing Pledges Support to Families, Communities Affected by Lion Air Flight 610 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 Accidents. Retrieved from <https://boeing.mediaroom.com/2019-07-03-Boeing-Pledges-Support-to-Families-Communities-Affected-by-Lion-Air-Flight-610-and-Ethiopian-Airlines-Flight-302-Accidents>

Gates, D. (2019, May 05). Long before first 737 MAX crash, Boeing knew a key sensor warning light wasn't working, but told no one. *Seattle Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/long-before-first-737-max-crash-boeing-knew-a-key-sensor-warning-light-wasnt-working-but-told-no-one/>

Glanz, J., Beech, H., & Suhartono, M. (2018, November 27). In Indonesia Lion Air Crash, Black Box Data Reveal Pilots' Struggle to Regain Control. *New York Times*. Retrieved from --

Josephs, Leslie. (2019, June 08). Boeing's rocky road to win back trust after deadly 737 Max crashes: 'We're not there yet'. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/04/boeing-has-a-rocky-road-to-win-back-trust-after-deadly-737-max-crashes.html>

Laris, M., Aratani, L., Dawsey, J., & Olorunnipa, T. (2019, March 13). FAA doubles down on decision not to ground the Boeing 737 Max, as counterparts around the world have done. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/european-aviation->

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

officials-break-with-faa-and-boeing-and-ground-737-max-8-aircraft-involved-in-crash/2019/03/12/cd64a8d0-44d4-11e9-90f0-0ccfeec87a61_story.html

Muilenberg, D. (2019, March 18). Letter from Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg to Airlines, Passengers and the Aviation Community. Retrieved from

[https://boeing.mediaroom.com/2019-03-18-Letter-from-Boeing-CEO-Dennis](https://boeing.mediaroom.com/2019-03-18-Letter-from-Boeing-CEO-Dennis-Muilenburg-to-Airlines-Passengers-and-the-Aviation-Community)

[Muilenburg-to-Airlines-Passengers-and-the-Aviation-Community](https://boeing.mediaroom.com/2019-03-18-Letter-from-Boeing-CEO-Dennis-Muilenburg-to-Airlines-Passengers-and-the-Aviation-Community)

Muilenberg, D. (2019, April 4). Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg Addresses the Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 Preliminary Report. Retrieved from

<https://boeing.mediaroom.com/2019-04-04-Boeing-CEO-Dennis-Muilenburg-Addresses-the-Ethiopian-Airlines-Flight-302-Preliminary-Report>

Muilenberg, Dennis (2019, May 29). Boeing CEO on 737 Max software implementation: "We did not do it correctly". Retrieved from [https://www.cbsnews.com/news/boeing-ceo](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/boeing-ceo-dennis-muilenburg-737max-software-implementation-cbs-evening-news-norah-odonnell/)

[dennis-muilenburg-737max-software-implementation-cbs-evening-news-norah-odonnell/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/boeing-ceo-dennis-muilenburg-737max-software-implementation-cbs-evening-news-norah-odonnell/)

O'Donnell, Norah (2019, May 29). Boeing CEO on 737 Max software implementation: "We did not do it correctly". Retrieved from [https://www.cbsnews.com/news/boeing-ceo](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/boeing-ceo-dennis-muilenburg-737max-software-implementation-cbs-evening-news-norah-odonnell/)

[dennis-muilenburg-737max-software-implementation-cbs-evening-news-norah-odonnell/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/boeing-ceo-dennis-muilenburg-737max-software-implementation-cbs-evening-news-norah-odonnell/)

Park, K. and Johnsson, J. (2019, October 25). Analysis: When Will Boeing 737 Max

Fly Again and More Questions. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from

https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/when-will-boeing-737-max-fly-again-and-more-questions/2019/10/23/fc3ae61c-f5f8-11e9-b2d21f37c9d82dbb_story.html.

Rosen, E. (2019, March 13). President Trump Orders Grounding of Boeing 737 MAX Planes in the U.S. *Forbes*. Retrieved from

AN ANALYSIS OF BOEING'S IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ericrosen/2019/03/13/president-trump-orders-grounding-of-boeing-737-max-planes-in-the-u-s/#6ccc0b22118e>

Samuels, B. (2019, April 25). Trump speaks with Boeing CEO after crash raises concerns.

Retrieved from <https://thehill.com/policy/transportation/433734-trump-speaks-with-boeing-ceo-after-crash-raises-concerns>

Schmidt, M. and Steel,E. (2017, October 21). Bill O'Reilly Settled New Harassment Claim,

Then Fox Renewed His Contract. *The New York Times*, p. A1. Retrieved from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/21/business/media/bill-oreilly-sexual-harassment.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share>