The Tide Pod Challenge: A Case Study

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COMM 714: Crisis Communication

Abstract

In January of 2018, The Tide Pod Challenge went viral and created a unique crisis for the associated company. Although Tide was not involved in this viral trend, the dangerous outcomes fell into their lap. The company's reputation was put at stake. Their response showed successful use of Image Repair Theory, specifically Evasion of Responsibility. The crisis campaign that was released as a response to this challenge was successful in decreasing the number of laundry detergent consumptions in children and teenagers. This case shows both the positives and negatives involved when using social media as a business.

Keywords: Social Media, Image Repair Theory, Tide Pod Challenge

Introduction

The rise of social media networking sites has led to a need for change in best practices and strategies for organizational communication. Businesses, companies, and organizations have had to redesign their communications plans to fit well in the new online media climate. The ways in which a company communicates before, during, and after a crisis has also evolved. Crisis communication theories have been adapted for social media response plans.

Although it has its benefits, the uprising of social media usage has also caused unique issues and risks for organizations. The widespread interactivity associated with online media and social networking sites have led to the potential for damages to their reputation. Companies have had to prepare for sour social media posts and backlash from their publics.

In 2018, social media caused a crisis for Tide and their parent company Proctor & Gamble with the Tide Pod Challenge. Image Repair Theory and Denial of Responsibility were the main two reputation restoration strategies used by the organization during the crisis. The poison control data reflects the onset of the crisis and shows the success in the campaign's ability to reduce the intentional poisonings.

Literature Review

The Tide Pod Challenge Social Media Crisis

Although social media usage from an organizational perspective has a lot of benefits, there are also negative aspects that can create problems. The ease of use and ability to communicate with large quantities of people across the world has caused a new type of crises for organizations. One of the biggest examples of this newer phenomenon is the Tide Pod

Challenge- an online "challenge that's virality created a crisis for Tide and their parent company Procter & Gamble.

The positive attributes of social media usage are also met with negative factors that create unique issues for companies. Online networking sites are seen as places where individuals have the freedom of expression (Civelek et al., 2016). The high quantity of posts being produced every minute can cause issues with monitoring the factuality of information spread. Information can be distributed to millions without intervention (Bratu, 2016). The uncontrollability and gaps of legality of social media have created a cesspool of disinformation (Civelek et al., 2016).

Social media's ease of use and ability to communicate with the masses has created a new type of crises for organizations. Everyone with Internet access is a potential content creator (Grimmelmann, 2017). Virality and extremism combined create a system for optimized automatic content creation (Grimmelmann, 2017). What makes content outrageous, offensive, and unacceptable is also what causes it to go viral in the first place (Grimmelmann, 2017). The desire to gain social media popularity can lead to engagement in risky behavior, such as the participation in dangerous online challenges (Ward, 2019). The ease of virality in popularity-related risk behaviors led to a phenomenon where teenagers began completing dangerous tasks to obtain social attention via views and likes (Ward, 2019).

Tide Pod Challenge may have started as a joke, but its virality caused a crisis with an unfortunate aftermath. Participating in these dangerous online challenges is a popularity-related risky behavior (Ward, 2019). Online dare cultures quickly adopted the idea of eating detergent pods (Grimmelmann, 2017). Unfortunately, some teenagers did not realize Tide Pods are legitimately dangerous for consumption (Grimmelmann, 2017). Teenagers who consumed Tide Pods did so intentionally, but it was also an accident - they were not in on the joke and took the

challenge at face value (Grimmelmann, 2017). In 2017/2018, the AAPCC reported a dramatic increase in intentional adolescent laundry pod ingestion (Quail, 2018). Because Procter & Gamble had an established crisis plan, they were able to take swift action and minimize damages to the company. P&G issued multiple customer alerts denouncing the Tide Pod Challenge and warning the dangers of laundry detergent consumption (Quail, 2018). P&G issued multiple customer alerts denouncing the Tide Pod Challenge and warning the dangers of laundry detergent consumption (Quail, 2018).

The Use of Social Media From a Business Perspective

Businesses and other organizations that wish to be successful in the current age should have an Internet presence via the use of social media and social networking sites. Modern public relations campaigns often revolve around the use of online media platforms. There are many benefits that come with the incorporation of social media in public relations strategies. Having an online media presence as a business is both practical and encouraged.

Nowadays, it is crucial to incorporate social media in an organization's public relations strategy. Social media started gaining popularity in 2004. Since then, social media has been used in public relations. More specifically, social media has been adopted by practitioners as tactics for crisis management. The optimization of social media tools is important for crisis communication. Successful public relations practitioners are the ones who understand how social media works and in what ways they can manipulate it when communicating with their publics (Apuke & Tunca, 2018).

The benefits of employing social media for a company are particularly useful when it comes to public relations. Social media is a highly effective means of communication because of

its ability to keep mass audiences engaged, entertained, and active (Civelek et al., 2016). Social

media makes it easy for people to access, share, distribute, and comment on information (Apuke

& Tunca, 2018). Online media usage is especially right for mass audiences because of the ability

to open the dialog between substantial amounts of individuals at any moment (Bratu, 2016).

Social Media's Role in Crisis Communications

Social media can and should be implemented into a company's strategies for

communicating during a crisis. Organizational success amidst a crisis relies on having a pre-

established communication plan. The use of social media during a crisis has become more

common. Social media and networking sites should be incorporated into crisis communications

strategies.

Having an established crisis communication plan is essential for organizational success.

When a crisis occurs, there is a requirement for immediate intervention. Preparing for potential

crises in advance helps drop the negative effects. Businesses do not have control over external

factors- studies have shown that preplanned strategies minimize the damage caused by external

factors (Civelek et al., 2016).

When a crisis occurs, it is common for there to be an increase in social media usage.

About 90% of studies on crisis communication have found that the public is active on social

media when these crises erupt (Apuke & Tunca, 2018). Crises disturb order, which in turn

interrupts interaction between stakeholders and threatens the image and reputation of

organizations (Apuke & Tunca, 2018). Social media involves the audience straightaway in

emergency management situations (Bratu, 2016). Having distinctive social media plans and

policies decreases clutter and inaccuracies in a crisis (Bratu, 2016). Quickly responding to social media communication amongst customers helps prevent disinformation (Civelek et al., 2016).

Social media is a necessary tool that should be implemented in an organizations' crisis communications plan. The benefits of social media use as a company hold significant importance during crises. Direct-to-audience platforms allow an organization to talk to their stakeholders unswervingly without separation (Bratu, 2016). Evidence suggests that social media works well in terms of warning and creating awareness. Apologies and other information can be provided through social media (Apuke & Tunca, 2018). The direct and real-time characteristics of social media combined with the personal touch abilities to incorporate videos and images makes it a valuable point of contact between crisis communicators and stakeholders (Bratu, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Image Repair Theory

Image Repair Theory (IRT), originally referred to as Image Restoration Theory, is a theoretical framework focusing on improving an organizations reputation. Organizations want a favorable image, and so when their reputation becomes tarnished, the goal is to repair it (Benoit, 2008). IRT helps answer the question of how an organization can best react in the situation where they are suspected of wrongdoings (Cheng, 2018). There are five main strategies that can be used to help restore an organization's reputation: Denial, Evasion of Responsibility, Reducing Offensiveness, Corrective Action, and Mortification (Benoit, 2008).

The ways in which a company responds to a crisis effects their reputation and the restoration of their image. There is a relationship between response strategy and the perception

of an organization's attractiveness (Kollitz et al, 2022). The reaction choices an organization makes matters to their stakeholders and their publics (Kollitz et al, 2022).

Of the five strategies used in Image Repair Theory, the one used in Tide's case was evasion of responsibility. Evasion of responsibility can be applied under four situations- defeasibility, provocation, accidental and good intentions (Cheng, 2018). Audience perception plays the biggest role in an organization's reputation: false statements can still cause damage if public believe them to be true (Holtzhausen et al, 2009). In evasion of responsibility, the organization involved denies involvement in the crisis by claiming good intentions, blaming the crisis on being an accident, or arguing defeasibility due to lack of information or controllability (Holtzhausen et al, 2009).

Research and Analysis

The Tide Pod Challenge created a unique crisis for the companies involved. Tide as an organization was not responsible for this crisis, but they had to deal with the repercussions. Tide never claimed responsibility for the challenge but showed concerns for those taking part in their response. The Tide Pod Challenge campaign focused on why people should not consume laundry detergent.

RQ1- Does the campaign messaging show proper use of evasion of responsibility?

RQ2- Was Tide's campaign successful in reducing laundry pod consumption?

Finding

Tide's response was done through Twitter because that is where the challenge began. The time in which this campaign ran was relatively short. The campaign took place in

January of 2018 because that is when the Tide Pod Challenge was at its peak. Below are three examples of posts made by Tide in response to the challenge.

The numerical data for this case study comes from the National Poison Data System as provided by America's Poison Centers. The data on laundry detergent liquid consumption in ages 6-19 from 2017, 2018, and 2019 can be used to show the arc of the crisis timeline. This challenge gained popularity at the end of 2017/beginning of 2018. The data from 2019 shows the aftermath.

RQ1

Example 1.A-

Example 1.B-

Tide ✓
@tide
⊘ Official

Replying to @corvetteevettee

We're going to continue to bring you the convenience of our liquid laundry packets, together with other forms of detergent, Yveetteee. Our PODS™ are safely used by millions of households across the country every day, and it's not true we're discontinuing them.

10:31 AM · Jan 27, 2018 · Sprinklr

Example 1.C-

Tide ✓
@tide · **Follow**
⊘ Official

What should Tide PODs be used for? DOING LAUNDRY. Nothing else.

Eating a Tide POD is a BAD IDEA, and we asked our friend @robgronkowski to help explain.

Watch on Twitter

HEY GRONK,
IS EATING TIDE PODS
EVER A GOOD IDEA?

5:15 PM · Jan 12, 2018

These examples were chosen because they were all posted in Janurary of 2018, when the Tide Pod Challenge was at its peak. Example 1.C is a video post made as an overarching response to the challenge, wheras examples 1.A and 1.B are both responses to individuals with questions and/or concerns. The fact that people were tweeting at the company regarding their concerns shows that Tide's reputation was in jepordy. Consumers saw this challenege as dangerous and wanted to know what the company was doing about it and if their products were safe. The company responded in both a broad way for everyone to see, as well as in response to specific individuals. Addressing these concerns on a personal level helped signifigantly in repairing their image.

Something that is important with all of these posts is that Tide never once takes blame. The company does not put their product at fault- rather, they address how the issue is due to the missue of their product. This is a prime example of Evasion of Responsibilty, one of the tactics in Image Repair Theory. Specificially, Tide follows provocation and defeasibilty- they argue that the misdeed was due to a lack of control over others, as well as a lack of information over why the challenge started in the first place. The denial of responsibility is not always seen as a good method for image restoration, but it was apporaite for this situation. The Tide Pod Challenge was not something encouraged or created by Tide- they did not play an active role in the crisis. By denying responsibility, they avoided blame and were able to separate the company from the crisi, which in tuen helped repair their reputation.

RQ2

Example 2.A (2017) *

Table 22A. Demographic profile of SINGLE SUBSTANCE nonpharmaceuticals exposure cases by generic category. – Continued.

	No. of Case Mentions	No. of Single Exposure	Age							Reason				Treated in Health Care Facility	Outcome				
			≤5	6–12	13–19	≤20	Unknown Child	Unknown Adult	Unknown Age	Unint	Int	Other	Adv Rxn		None	Minor	Moderate	Major	Death
Laundry Detergents: Granules (Unit Dose)	338	326	234	17	5	57	1	12	0	318	6	1	1	61	67	71	8	0	0
Laundry Detergents: Granules (Various Containers)	2,454	2,331	1,645	111	84	393	4	84	10	2,217	76	23	10	349	389	403	27	0	0
Laundry Detergents: Granules with Liquids (Unit Dose)	233	231	207	7	1	11	1	4	0	228	3	0	0	86	42	80	11	1	0
Laundry Detergents: Liquids (Unit Dose)	12,286	12,091	10,431	632	196	652	24	139	17	11,913	132	17	20	4,361	2,332	5,060	664	23	1
Laundry Detergents: Liquids (Various Containers)	6,677	6,287	4,335	269	222	1,228	4	205	24	5,992	219	56	9	1,018	1,047	1,170	124	3	2
Laundry Detergents: Other or Unknown Types of Household Laundry Detergent and/or Fabric Cleaner	248	227	125	12	17	59	1	12	1	208	11	3	5	67	47	41	15	0	0
Laundry Detergents: Soaps	176	151	107	8	7	27	0	2	0	142	5	1	2	29	34	33	5	0	0

Example 2.B (2018) *

Table 22A. Demographic profile of SINGLE SUBSTANCE nonpharmaceuticals exposure cases by generic category. – Continued.

	No. of Case Mentions	No. of Single Exposure	Age							Reason				Treated in Health Care Facility	Outcome				
			≤5	6–12	13–19	≥20	Unknown Child	Unknown Adult	Unknown Age	Unint	Int	Other	Adv Rxn		None	Minor	Moderate	Major	Death
Laundry Detergents: Liquids (Unit Dose)	11,911	11,782	9,291	739	542	928	36	198	48	11,122	555	41	35	4,331	2,246	4,463	642	14	1
Laundry Detergents: Liquids (Various Containers)	6,523	6,135	4,104	305	274	1,221	9	209	13	5,763	272	53	26	993	988	1,136	105	6	1
Laundry Detergents: Other or Unknown Types of Household Laundry Detergent and/or Fabric Cleaner	275	246	143	7	18	61	1	14	2	220	16	5	4	60	44	51	6	1	0
Laundry Detergents: Soaps	187	171	105	9	2	48	0	7	0	164	5	0	2	17	48	25	3	0	0
Laundry Detergents																			
Laundry Detergents: Granules (Unit Dose)	397	387	236	16	18	98	1	16	2	368	12	2	5	77	97	74	10	0	0
Laundry Detergents: Granules (Various Containers)	2,592	2,429	1,644	114	89	477	1	93	11	2,313	78	17	13	355	374	397	43	2	1
Laundry Detergents: Granules with Liquids (Unit Dose)	224	221	169	14	3	29	0	5	1	214	7	0	0	83	55	80	11	0	0

Example 2.C (2019) *

Table 22A. Demographic profile of SINGLE SUBSTANCE Nonpharmaceuticals exposure cases by generic category – Continued.

	No. of Case Mentions	No. of Single Exposures	Age							Reason				Treated in Health Care Facility	Outcome				
			<=5	6-12	13-19	>=20	Unknown Child	Unknown Adult	Unknown Age	Unint	Int	Other	Adv Rxn		None	Minor	Moderate	Major	Death
Laundry Detergents																			
Laundry Detergents: Granules (Unit Dose)	410	397	278	16	15	67	3	17	1	382	9	4	1	73	94	86	7	2	0
Laundry Detergents: Granules (Various Containers)	2,374	2,260	1,468	93	99	456	4	125	15	2,128	82	23	13	344	379	399	37	2	0
Laundry Detergents: Granules with Liquids (Unit Dose)	252	251	200	16	7	21	0	6	1	246	4	0	0	78	57	82	13	0	0
Laundry Detergents: Liquids (Unit Dose)	11,967	11,863	9,981	678	279	708	18	166	33	11,548	226	28	31	4,268	2,282	4,651	600	20	0
Laundry Detergents: Liquids (Various Containers)	6,211	5,896	3,786	233	272	1,335	8	230	32	5,511	273	67	20	953	984	1,090	109	5	1
Laundry Detergents: Other or Unknown Types of Household Laundry Detergent and/or Fabric Cleaner	324	292	161	13	13	70	3	26	6	267	10	5	6	55	58	65	11	0	0
Laundry Detergents: Soaps	289	257	154	7	8	67	0	18	3	241	8	3	3	24	43	34	4	0	0

*National Poison Data System, America's Poison Centers. You can reach your local poison center by calling the Poison Help line: **1-800-222-1222**. To save the number in your mobile phone, text POISON to 301-597-7137. Email **media@PoisonCenters.org** or call 703-894-1863 for more information, questions, or to submit request data.

In 2017, the number of laundry detergent liquid consumption cases for the ages of 6-19 were 1,318. In 2018, this number was 1,860. In 2019, this number was 1,462. These number come from examples 2.A, 2.B, and 2.C. Each number comes from the addition of the cases of laundry detergent consumption in the 6-12 age group as well as the 13-19 age group.

The addition of the two age groups was decided on because those are the two age groups most affected by this challenge. The Tide Pod Challenge was partaken in by both teenagers and preteens. In 2017, there were 3 deaths due to laundry detergent liquid consumption. In 2018, there were 2, and in 2019 there was 1.

The challenge was at its peak in January of 2018. From 2017 to 2018, there was an increase of laundry detergent consumption by 542 cases. In 2019, there was a decrease of 398 cases. This is significant information for Tide because the case numbers went down to a similar number they had been before after they released their campaign. The numbers show a correlation between the challenge and an increase in laundry detergent consumption, as well as a correlation between Tide's response and a decrease in laundry detergent consumption.

Conclusion

Social media is both a blessing and a curse when it comes to crisis communication. Although it is greatly beneficial in distributing information quickly and effectively, social media can also cause issues of its own. In 2018, the Twitter creation of the Tide Pod Challenge caused a crisis for Tide, which lead to an anti-laundry-pod-consumption media campaign. Tide's use of Image Repair Theory and Evasion of Responsibility helped them restore their reputation and decrease the number of laundry detergent consumption cases in children and teenagers.

The Tide Pod Challenge crisis response campaign is a great example of what to do in the case of a crisis caused by external factors. Other organizations can use this campaign as a guide for what to do if they meet a similar situation. Evasion of Responsibility is not always seen as the most moral or ethical crisis response theory. Denying responsibility can sometime harm a company's reputation and organizational legitimacy. However, in this case, the use of defeasibility was appropriate and helped Tide keep their positive reputation.

There are a few limitations in this study. The major limitation is the lack of access to specific data about poison control reports. I contacted the American Poison Center for more specific data, but they were unable to meet my request due to time restraints and lack of a budget. If someone else is looking to elaborate on this or do a similar study, obtaining more specific data would be beneficial. The recommendation for a repetition of this study is to get in contact with the American Poison Center for the case information on circumstances of intentional laundry pod consumption.

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