

The release of effective crisis statements during product-harm crises in China

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Abstract: The release of effective corporate statements in crisis communication was investigated. Based on 92 crisis statements released by companies in China between 2005 and 2012 during product-harm crises, two key parameters were studied: statement diffusion range and statement acceptability within news coverage. The results show that the approach taken (crisis statement releasing strategy) is more important than the content (instructing and adjusting information) in predicting diffusion range. Although the hypotheses regarding statement acceptability were rejected, nine key statement errors and omissions that result in negative comments from news media were identified. These can be used to guide practitioners to an error-free crisis statement. Additionally, regarding corporate characteristics, listing status and nationality do not influence the two parameters. Crisis type, however, shows an effect on statement diffusion range.

Key words: product-harm crisis; crisis communication; statement release; framing effect; agenda-setting; media coverage

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中国产品伤害事件的危机声明发布有效性分析

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摘要: 研究了2005~2012年发生在中国的新产品伤害危机事件中92篇危机声明数据,以危机声明扩散范围和危机声明可接受性为主要参数,分析危机沟通中声明发布的有效性。结果显示:①在危机声明扩散范围测试中,危机声明发布方法(发布战略)比危机发布内容(指导信息和调试信息)的影响更显著;②尽管关于危机声明可接受性的假设均被拒绝,但是这里总结了危机声明9个更易受到负面新闻报道的原因,以此引导参与者提供更易被接受的危机声明;③企业国籍、特征及是否上市对两个参数的影响不显著,而危机类型对声明扩散范围有显著影响。

关键词: 产品伤害危机事件; 危机沟通; 危机声明; 框架效应; 媒体报道

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0 Introduction

Product-harm crises create extreme demands for information from the public^[1]. For the focal company, the common prescription is to “tell it all and tell it fast”^[2] so as to respond to the crisis and restore the company’s damaged reputation. An example of the “tell it fast” strategy (providing a quick response) includes the release of a statement via the Internet, e.g., a website, blog, or Twitter. The release of a corporate statement is a common approach adopted by many companies in China in response to product-harm crises. For example, on Nov. 28, 2011, Coca-Cola released three successive statements via the Internet to address suspected contamination of drinks in China. Similarly, McDonalds released a statement to respond to a crisis concerning the appearance of a pink slime in their food products in 2012. The Abbott Company (parent company of Red Bull) and other such companies have employed popup windows on their homepages to convey up-to-date information. Such information is typically used by the news media to compile new stories^[3]. Although the news media is deemed to be the final arbitrator of crisis frames in most cases because of its public experience and the adoption of frames via news stories^[4], there is still the opportunity to embed a company-built crisis frame into news coverage by releasing a well-diffused crisis statement.

This study analyzed 92 statements released by Chinese companies during product-harm crises between 2005 and 2012. Related news stories were also examined to explore the determinants that influence the diffusion range of statements in news coverage and the acceptability of the statement by the news media. This study aimed to extend the knowledge of crisis communication and provide PR practitioners with a useful guideline to efficiently respond to a product-harm crisis by releasing a well-diffused crisis statement.

1 Literature review and hypotheses development

1.1 Diffusion of crisis framing information

Based on the situational crisis communication theory^[4], the strategy of crisis statement can be classified into three categories. To date, no prior investigations have explored how to effectively disseminate a crisis statement when a product-harm crisis occurs in terms of the arrangement of the content, timing, and the channel of dissemination. To better understand the process of the transmission of a crisis statement, we constructed a model outlining the effective release of corporate statements.

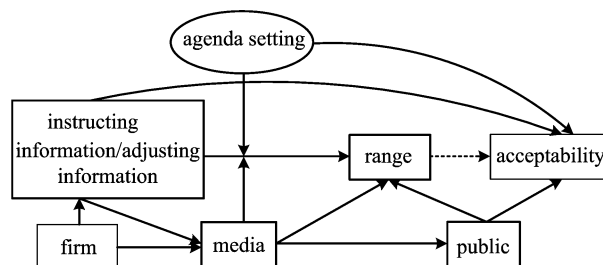


Fig.1 Research model

Based on the agenda-setting theory^[9], there are two stages in the process of the public release of a corporate statement. The first stage is corporate agenda setting, which aims to determine the content, timing, and channel. According to the heuristic-systematic information-processing model^[11], as individuals cannot fully understand the company and the product-harm crisis, heuristics may affect one’s opinions, especially when the public has insufficient information. Thus, a firm’s agenda setting can affect the public’s perceptions of the crisis, even though the dissemination of the crisis statement is restricted because stakeholders may not acquire the statement without the media’s agenda setting. Of course, the framing effects of media coverage of an issue have the direct impact on public’s opinions^[12]. Totally, the agenda-setting effects of news coverage on a corporate crisis statement play a key role in amplifying the firm’s agenda-setting effects^[10].

1.2 Determinants of effective crisis statement release

1.2.1 Newsworthiness of statement

The statement typically contains instructing information and adjusting information, which are considered by crisis experts to be the two dominant factors in a crisis statement^[8,13-14]. The inclusion of instructing and adjusting information in the crisis statement not only reduces the cost of searching for newsworthy material for journalists^[18], but also shows the focal company as having a responsible image^[4-5,15,19]. Instructing information tells the public what they must do to protect themselves from the physical threat of the crisis^[2]. In an information-processing model, providing instructing information is a means to demonstrate control over a technical failure crisis^[35]. According to previous studies, instructing information “4W1H”, namely, what, why, when, where, and how information of a crisis^[15]. Kim and Liu^[14] operationalized instructing information as disseminating information that (a) meets the public’s primary information needs; (b) provides details about how an organization is preparing for the crisis; and (c) delivers basic information about the crisis.

Adjusting information helps people to cope with the psychological threat of the crisis, including expressing concern and compassion for the victims, and outlining corrective actions as soon as feasible^[4,14]. Previously, researchers have treated corrective actions and expressions of concern as reputation repair strategies but both fit better as adjusting information^[4]. Corrective actions reassure the public that they are safe, thereby reducing their psychological stress^[16].

The second stage is media agenda setting, which can act as a mediating influence between firms and the public. The news media has an important influence on how the public perceive and react to the crisis^[4,20]. In public relations, the crisis statement serves as an information subsidy to ensure that the focal company’s crisis frame obtains media coverage^[3,8]. The two key predictors

of an effective crisis statement release are the extent of the news coverage received by the statement and the attitude of the media toward the statement. This is denoted by statement acceptability and represents the extent to which the media accepts the crisis frame built by the focal company^[8]. Therefore, the hypotheses suggested in this study are as follows:

H1: Instructing information in a crisis statement has a significant effect on statement diffusion range and statement acceptability.

H2: Adjusting information in a crisis statement has a significant effect on statement diffusion range and statement acceptability.

H3: Instructing information and adjusting information in a crisis statement have a significant interaction effect on statement diffusion range and statement acceptability.

1.2.2 Accessibility of statement

In addition to the content of the crisis statement, the strategy concerning the statement release is another recommendation discussed in crisis communication literature^[15] and refers to how a crisis statement will be presented, consisting of timeliness and channel. Crisis managers are encouraged to respond in a timely manner^[15]. A timely response can help to reduce the urgency, threats, surprises, and public doubts regarding a corporation’s loss of control that often accompanies a crisis^[22]. Timely messages and statements have been found to be key factors in fostering stakeholder satisfaction^[23] and trust^[16]. A company’s timely response will attract the attention of the news media, meet their demand for information, and impress them with its corporate responsibility. Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H4: The timeliness of a crisis statement release has a significant effect on statement diffusion range and statement acceptability.

Furthermore, the integration of the Internet into crisis communication has led to much discussion^[5,19,25]. Regarding communication tactics,

several traditional tactics include the transcripts of news conferences, news releases, fact sheets, question-and-answer formats, and memos/letters to relevant public groups^[5]. In most cases, the companies incorporate these traditional tactics with the Internet, that is, the tactics are carried out via the company's home page, news portals, or both. Many companies use mailing list newsletters as their main news portal. This method represents an effective communication tactic to provide information subsidies as well as influence the media's agenda-building. In this paper, the three most common channels are discussed: official websites, mailing list newsletters, and mixed release channels. It is noted that the channels not only help the company to respond quickly to the crisis, but provide journalists with varying levels of ease in accessing newsworthy information^[3]. Accordingly, the hypothesis is

H5: The channel used for the release of the crisis statement has a significant effect on statement diffusion range and statement acceptability.

1.2.3 Characteristics of company and crisis

The degree of media attention and exposure varies from company to company, depending upon their characteristics. Size, industry, nationality and whether it is a listed company can contribute to attract the media's attention^[26-27,33]. Generally, large companies manufacture consumer products that are more likely to garner media exposure. However, the key focus of this paper is to address the effects of the characteristics of the statement release on statement diffusion range and statement acceptability. The impact of corporate characteristics and crisis type on statement diffusion range and statement acceptability are also considered as additional factors. Therefore, it is posited:

H6a: Listing status of the company has a significant effect on statement diffusion range and statement acceptability

H6b: Company nationality (domestic or foreign) has a significant effect on statement diffusion range and statement acceptability.

Crisis type has significant effects on the growth of news stories that disclose negative events^[17]. According to Ref.[4], there are three types of crises: victim, incident, and preventable. Among the three types, preventable crises have the highest level of responsibility attribution, followed by incident crises, and then victim crises, which are attributed with the lowest level. Typically, the greatest degree of media attention is paid to crises where responsibility is attributable. Thus, it is assumed that:

H7: Crisis type has a significant effect on statement diffusion range and statement acceptability.

In contrast with statement acceptability, criticism regarding the crisis statement is relatively common in the news reports covering a crisis. Thus, is it worthwhile to determine why the news media make negative comments regarding a company's crisis statement. Therefore, the following research question is suggested:

RQ: Why does news media make negative comments regarding the crisis statement released by the company?

2 Method

2.1 Data collection

A total of 92 statements released during product-harm crises were collected from corporate websites and/or news portals, which is in line with the three parameters that delineate a crisis^[5,28-29]. It is notable that the time span in the study is from 2005 to 2012, as there is a significant amount of information missing from several news portals before 2005. Based on the method used by Caldiero et al.^[3], news reports on the crisis statements within the first 72 hours after the statement release was reviewed and coded. A total of 40 050 news records quoting crisis statements were collected via

the Internet news search engine Baidu.com. If the repetitive news reports are excluded, 13 716 news records would remain. All data, including content of statement, release strategies, company characteristics, crisis type, and news records, were collected and comprise the basic database for this study.

2.2 Variables measured and coding

Variable instructing information was operationalized and coded referring to previous studies by Kim and Liu^[14]. Instructing information was categorized into three types: a) basic information about the crisis, including what the crisis was and where and when it occurred; b) information that meets the public's primary information needs, namely, how to avoid damage or harm from defective products; c) and the reason for the crisis, that is, why the crisis occurred. Instructing information that only involves basic instructing information was coded as 1. If one of the other two kinds of information was found in the statement, it was coded as 2. When all three types of information were found, the instructing information was coded as 3.

In the same vein, adjusting information was judged by messages of compassion and corrective actions^[4,14] contained in the statement. When the statement included no compassion and corrective action information at all, adjusting information was coded as 0; if either compassion or corrective action information was included in the statement, adjusting information was coded as 1; when both kinds of information were found, adjusting information was coded as 2.

Timeliness was measured looking at the time span from the breaking of the crisis to the release of the statement and then divided into three categories: 0~12 hours, 13~48 hours, and more than 48 hours. For the variable of release channel, the use of an official web site was coded as 1; mailing list newsletter as 2; and a mixed release channel as 3.

The average number of news reports was calculated by collecting the total number of news reports about the company within 6 months before the crisis, and calculating the news reports per day, then multiplying it by 3. If the company is listed on the Shanghai Stock Exchange and/or Shenzhen Stock Exchange in China, the variable of listed was coded as 1, otherwise coded as 0. Regarding nationality, domestic companies were coded as 1 and foreign companies as 0. In line with Coombs^[4], crisis type was categorized as either victim, incident, or preventable, as based on the attribution theory^[32,34]. Among the three types, victim, incident, and preventable crises were coded as 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

To measure statement diffusion range, we used the number of news reports that quote the crisis statement either in full or in part within the first 72 hours of the statement release. Using the content analysis technique, all news reports quoting the crisis statement were analyzed and classified as positive, neutral, or negative^[18]. The indicators regarding positive, neutral, and negative news reports were coded based on the dichotomy of the message's presence (i.e., 1 or 0), and the frequency of each indicator was counted. Finally, the total number of news reports quoting crisis statements were divided into three groups: positive, neutral, and negative news reports. Statement acceptability was gauged by the sum of positive and neutral news reports. Neutral news reports were included to represent statement acceptability because they demonstrate a willingness to accept the frame delivered in the crisis statement.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Results

MANOVA was used to test the key claim in Hypotheses 1 ~ 3, that is, the instructing and adjusting information contained in a crisis statement have a significant interaction effect on

statement diffusion range and statement acceptability. The p -values from the Shapiro-Wilk test were higher than the 0.05 threshold; thus, a normal distribution was obtained. A homogeneity of variance test was also conducted. The results showed that the data were suited to MANOVA. Tab.1 shows that the main and interaction effects of instructing and adjusting information on dependent variables were not significant in this study. Instructing information, however, showed a weak main effect on statement diffusion range and statement acceptability ($F = 2.679$, $p = 0.075$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$; $F = 2.712$, $p = 0.072$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.062$). Thus, Hypotheses 1~3 are strongly rejected in this study.

A nonparametric K independent sample test was conducted to analyze the effect of those factors on the dependent variables. According to Tab.2, timeliness and release channel have a significant

effect on statement diffusion range (chi-square = 6.06, $p = 0.048$; chi-square = 6.27, $p = 0.045$), but not on statement acceptability (chi-square = 3.74, $p = 0.154$; chi-square = 5.09, $p = 0.079$). Therefore, Hypotheses 4 and 5 are somewhat supported.

A Mann-Whitney U test (nonparametric test using two independent samples) was performed. As shown in Tab.3, there were no differences in the means of statement diffusion and acceptability between listed and non-listed companies (Mann-Whitney $U = 713.5$, $p = 0.605$; Mann-Whitney $U = 720.5$, $p = 0.650$). The same result was observed when testing Hypothesis 6b, which posits that the nationality of the crisis-stricken company has a significant effect on statement diffusion range and statement acceptability (Mann-Whitney $U = 915.0$, $p = 0.506$; Mann-Whitney $U = 880.0$, $p = 0.391$). Therefore, Hypotheses 6a and 6b are rejected.

Tab.1 Multivariate analysis of variance for instructing and adjusting information

variables	statement diffusion range			statement acceptability		
	F	p	partial η^2	F	p	partial η^2
average news in 72 h	0.156	0.694	0.002	0.016	0.899	0
instructing information	2.679	0.075	0.061	2.712	0.072	0.062
adjusting information	0.117	0.889	0.003	0.279	0.757	0.007
instructing \times adjusting information	0.361	0.835	0.017	0.209	0.932	0.01

Tab.2 Nonparametric test for timeliness and release channel

variables		statement diffusion range		statement acceptability	
timeliness	12 h ($n = 16$)	566		479	
	12~48 h ($n = 24$)	545		471	
	>48 h ($n = 52$)	344		326	
Kruskal-Wallis test		chi-square=6.06	$p = 0.048$	chi-square=3.74	$p = 0.154$
release channel	official website ($n = 34$)	377		339	
	mailing newsletter ($n = 28$)	328		305	
	mixed release channel ($n = 30$)	601		527	
Kruskal-Wallis test		chi-square=6.27	$p = 0.045$	chi-square=5.09	$p = 0.079$

Tab.3 Nonparametric test for characteristic of company and crisis type

variables		statement diffusion range	statement acceptability
listed company ^①	Yes($n=22$)	463	413
	No ($n=70$)	426	382
Mann-Whitney test		Mann-Whitney $U=713.5$, $p=0.605$	mann-whitney $U=720.5$, $p=0.650$
nationality	domestic ($n=34$)	392	356
	Foreign ($n=58$)	460	409
Mann-Whitney test		Mann-Whitney $U=915.0$, $p=0.506$	mann-whitney $U=880.0$, $p=0.391$
crisis type	victim ($n=38$)	417	389
	accident ($n=28$)	308	268
	preventable ($n=26$)	598	524
Kruskal-Wallis test		chi-square= 5.93 , $p=0.05$	chi-square= 5.02 , $p=0.081$

[Note]① Company listed in China security exchange market; the mean of statement diffusion range and statement acceptability in different groups is shown in table.

Hypothesis 7 posits that crisis type will influence statement diffusion range and statement acceptability. Test results in Tab.3 show that Hypothesis 7 is somewhat supported. The statement diffusion range is significantly different among the three crisis type groups (chi-square= 5.93 , $p=0.05$). However, statement acceptability

shows no significant difference among those groups (chi-square= 5.02 , $p=0.081$). Crisis type itself has no inherent relationship with crisis statement. Tab.3 shows that news media organizations tend to report stories concerning preventable crises featuring companies that are attributed with a high level of responsibility.

Tab.4 Reasons of negative comments on crisis statement

reasons	counts of crisis statement	%
① Lack of information for explaining why the crisis happened	35	42%
② The statement is beating around the bush and ignores the question concerned by the public	10	12%
③ Lack of specific instructing information guiding consumers to get compensation	9	11%
④ Full of arrogant tone in the statement	8	10%
⑤ Cold and expressing no sympathy to the harmed	8	10%
⑥ Come to a denial conclusion without investigation in advance	6	7%
⑦ Later statement is not consistent with former one	3	4%
⑧ Statement too concise to seem responsible	3	4%
⑨ Respond slowly	2	2%

[Note] Rounding-off method is used to calculate percentage.

As shown in Tab. 4, 56 crisis statements received negative media responses, and from these, nine reasons have been identified. Some statements were criticized for more than one reason. Of the nine reasons, five are related to instructing information. Specifically, news media are likely to

make negative comments toward statements that do not adequately address the cause of the crisis nor provide instructions for compensation. Two kinds of blame are derived from a lack of affective concern in the crisis statement, accounting for 20% of all negative media responses.

3.2 Discussion

Crisis-stricken companies are eager to frame the crisis for their own interests^[3,21]. However, the news media and the public always monitor negative events such as product-harm crises, critically and distrustfully, and in some cases are reluctant to accept the company's explanations. This study also concludes that what the crisis-stricken company has said is of little significance, rather it is how the statement is conveyed. This result is similar to that of Huang^[20]. However, no matter what information is released by the crisis-stricken company, the news media will seize very bit of newsworthy information in a period of information vacuum. Therefore, the amount of information contained in the statement does not determine the range of statement diffusion. Moreover, instructing and adjusting information rarely attract positive comments and acceptance from the news media. To remain independent journalists and the news media may be very cautious when quoting information released by a company in a crisis. Thus, it can be difficult for a company to receive positive comments from the media when a product-harm crisis is occurring, and as a result there is little chance to improve statement acceptability by providing instructing and adjusting information.

Timeliness was verified as a positive factor which is consistent with the study conducted by Huang & Sub^[36]. The importance of a timely response was reconfirmed regarding statement diffusion. An early-released crisis statement has the greatest effect as an information subsidy. A comparison of the means of statement diffusion ranges of the three timeliness groups shows that, when released within the first 12 hours of the breaking of the crisis, the statement diffusion range is the highest. The diffusion range then reduces with the delay of the statement release. As shown in Tab.2, if a statement is released within 12 hours, the mean of the statement diffusion range is 11 reports higher than when a statement is released between 13 to 48 hours.

Regarding the release channel, the mixed release channel is the most effective to disseminate statement information. Where a mixed release channel is used, combining both the official website and mailing list newsletters, the mean of the statement diffusion is nearly twice that of those only using single release channels (see Tab.2). Surprisingly in such cases, even when rules of timeliness and mixed release channel are followed, statement acceptability is not significantly different among the groups. The reason for the above results could be similar to the analysis of instructing and adjusting information. In practice, journalists and news media are too censorious to make positive comments imprudently in product-harm crises.

In contrast, although there is no difference among the groups in statement acceptability, negative news comments were found in 56 crisis cases, applying to more than half of the sample crises in this study. Thus, when the news media picks up on errors or omissions in a response, the negative reports can make the company's crisis response in vain. As shown in Tab.4, the media provided negative responses for nine main reasons. These reasons related to three aspects of the crisis statement: information contained, release strategy, and affective expression.

In addition, no bias was observed for statement diffusion and acceptability between the groups classified by listing status and nationality. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that a similar value is assigned to news stories by journalists and the news media based on the on crisis itself rather than the company involved. In the same vein, the nationality of the crisis-stricken company, either domestic or foreign, makes no difference regarding statement diffusion range and statement acceptability. Therefore, no discrimination was found based on company nationality. With regard to crisis type, preventable crises attract greater attention than those in the category of victim and accident. The news media appears more interested

in those companies that bear the most responsibility for the crisis because more newsworthy stories come from such companies. Due to the additional effect of crisis type, the range of statement diffusion is greater in a preventable crisis. However, the reason for this result does not stem from the quality of the statement and its release strategies, but from the greater attention paid by news media due to the allure of revealing wrongdoings.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, statement diffusion range and statement acceptability were viewed as the key parameters of effective crisis statement release, and determinants of the two parameters were also studied. This study highlighted nine statement failures or omissions that resulted in criticism from the news media in China. These nine factors can provide crisis managers and PR practitioners with a valuable guide to ensure mistake-free statements. In terms of crisis management, this study highlights three key guidelines: crisis statements should avoid the nine identified deficiencies to circumvent negative comments and statements should be released as soon as possible, via a mixed channel.

This study is limited by its focus on the product-harm crisis. Thus, different types of crises could also be investigated. The crisis statement in other types of crises, for instance, financial fraud, leader scandal, or factory explosion, may be designed and released in very different ways. Besides, verbal responses are not recorded or uploaded to the Internet. Further research on this topic could take two interesting directions. In general, one is how best to disseminate statements in the realm of microblog and the other question is how to effectively release multi-step crisis statements.

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