

Short communication

Communicating during crisis: Use of blogs as a relationship management tool[☆]

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Abstract

Using a post-test only experimental design with control group, this study investigated the impact of blogs on relationship management during a crisis. Participants ($N = 109$) were exposed to a personal blog ($n = 45$), organizational blog ($n = 46$), or control ($n = 18$). Results indicate blogs impact the perception of the level of crisis an organization experiences. Additionally, relationships created through blogs impact the perception of crisis. Use and credibility were also investigated.

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1. Introduction

There has been much attention to the use of blogs as an emergent public relations tool. Blogs seem ideally suited for crisis communication situations. Because blog writing style lends itself to more frequent publishing in its shorter statements through a personal/human voice, it seems logical that organizations could deploy crisis blogs as a means of quickly communicating during a crisis.

The data provided in this study allows academics and practitioners to better understand the real impact of blogs during crisis situations, from a relationship management perspective. Using a post-test only with control group experimental design, this study investigates changes in relationship management scores, credibility, and perception of an organization's state of crisis as a result of exposure to either a personal (organizationally unaffiliated) blog or an organization-sponsored blog providing updates and disseminating messages during a crisis situation.

2. Method

This study employed a post-test only experimental design with participants ($N = 109$) randomly assigned to a control group ($n = 18$), a cell where they read a personal blog writing about the crisis ($n = 45$), or the organization's "official" blog discussing the crisis ($n = 46$). The blogs were based on a real crisis that occurred at the time of the experiment

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but were created for the study. Each blog covered the same topics in posts from their different perspectives and voices. Respondents reported reading an average of 1.09 blogs per day (S.D. = 1.89).

Participants in the two stimuli cells completed a post-test and those in the control group completed a variation of the survey without being exposed to stimuli. The survey was comprised of items adapted from various other studies measuring relationship management, crisis communication strategies, and credibility.

Items from the perceived relationship management scale were factor analyzed (principal axis factoring with oblique rotation) producing six factors. The factors explained 64.3% of the variance and were, in order: *conversational human voice* ($\alpha = 0.77$), *communicated relational commitment* ($\alpha = 0.77$), *task sharing* ($\alpha = 0.77$), *relationship quality* ($\alpha = 0.67$), *responsiveness/customer service* ($\alpha = 0.56$), and *positivity/optimism* ($\alpha = 0.60$).

A series of 14 items gauging whether participants felt the company was in crisis were summed into a crisis index ($\alpha = 0.66$). Credibility of blogs (medium credibility) was assessed through five items summed into an index ($\alpha = 0.62$).

3. Results

RQ1 asked about the impact that reading blogs has on one's perception of blog credibility. The item asking participants how many blogs they read each day was split at the mean to create groups of high users and low users. This high/low blog use variable served as the factor in a one-way analysis of variance with the credibility index as the dependent variable. The ANOVA revealed that the credibility assigned to blogs did not differ from the high blog use to the low blog use groups ($F(1.107) = 0.25, p > 0.84$).

RQ2 asked about the impact of blog exposure on relationship management. An independent samples *t* test compared the means for each of the six relationship factor scores for the stimuli cells. Two factors were different at a statistically significant level. In the *conversational human voice* factor, respondents who read the organizational blog felt the company did a better job at establishing and maintaining relationships than those in the personal blog cell, $t(88) = 5.23, p \leq .001$. Additionally, those who were exposed to the organizational blog rated the company higher with respect to relationship management than those in the personal blog for the *responsiveness/customer service* factor.

RQ3 asked about impact of blog exposure (personal, organizational, control group) on the perception that an organization was in crisis. An ANOVA with the crisis index as the dependent variable and the exposure group as the factor was run ($F(2.104) = 332.39, p < 0.001$). Tukey's post-hoc analysis revealed statistically significant differences on the perception of crisis between the organizational blog cell, personal blog cell, and the control group. Those who did not read a blog at all but thought of the crisis (control group) reported the highest crisis score ($M = 45.35$; S.D. = 4.60), followed by those in the personal blog cell ($M = 43.35$; S.D. = 4.17). Those in the organizational blog cell ($M = 39.04$; S.D. = 5.07) perceived the lowest level of crisis for the company in crisis.

RQ4 asked about the relationship between blog credibility and relationship management on blogs. The credibility index was split at the mean to categorize respondents into high and low credibility groups and this new high/low credibility item was used as the factor in an ANOVA. Each relationship management factor served as the dependent variable. There were no statistically significant relationships.

RQ5 asked about the relationship between blog credibility and the perception of an organization being in crisis. To answer this question, the credibility index was divided at the mean to categorize credibility into high and low credibility scores. Using a one-way ANOVA with the crisis index as the dependent variable and the credibility high/low categorization variable as the factor, we found that participants who said the blog they were exposed to (or blogs in general for the control group) were low in credibility reported higher scores in the crisis index ($F(1.105) = 6.62, p < 0.01$).

RQ6 asked about the relationship between relationship management and the perception of an organization being in crisis. In order to answer this question, the crisis index served as a dependent variable in a one-way ANOVA with the high/low categorizations of the relationship management factors as the independent variable. The ANOVA revealed that participants who had low scores in the *task sharing* factor were more likely to believe that the organization was in crisis ($F(1.87) = 5.02, p < 0.05$). The relationship was similar to results for the *responsiveness/customer service* factor ($F(1.87) = 10.04, p < 0.01$). Put differently, both the *task sharing* factor and the *responsiveness/customer service* factor played a factor in reducing the perception of crisis. While the relationship for the other relationship factors and the perception of crisis was the same (low factor scores resulting in higher crisis scores), the findings for the other factors were not statistically significant.

4. Discussion

Findings here indicate that those who read blogs (personal and organizational) perceive a lower level of crisis for an organization than those not exposed to blogs. Furthermore, those exposed to the organizational blog reported the lowest score for the crisis index among all three groups examined here. This suggests that blogs may have great promise as an organizational crisis management tool. The results of this exploratory study suggest that launching a blog in response to a crisis may indeed be an effective crisis management tool.

There was an inverse relationship between perception of crisis and blog credibility. When the reader believed the credibility of a blog is low, then the reader had a higher “crisis” score. This is an important point for practitioners who may choose to blog in that they should be cognizant of the impact credibility can have on their crisis communication message. If the message appears to be a “corporate mouthpiece” then more damage may be done by the blog than good. As such, practitioners should consult “best practices” documentation from industry leaders.

In regard to relationship management, the conversational human voice factor and the responsiveness/customer service factor appeared to be the key components in improving relationships with publics during a crisis through an organizational blog. That is, organizational blogs can win over publics and improve relationships employing the conversational human voice factor and the responsiveness/customer service factor. One reason for this may be that establishing and regularly updating a blog gives the impression that an organization is not shying away from discussion of the incident in question. The sense that the organization is attempting to provide timely and accurate information even in the midst of a crisis may in fact lead to more positive overall impressions of the organization, both during and after the crisis.

In examining the differences between the three groups regarding perception of crisis, the perceived state of crisis decreased as communication increased and got closer to the organization itself. Participants who received no stimulus whatsoever reported the largest “crisis” score for the company in question. Reading a personal blog decreased the perception that the company was in crisis, but the lowest perception of crisis was reported among those who read the organizational blog. That is, as one gets closer to being exposed to non-journalistic, official company statements, the perception of crisis decreases. Put simply, reading blogs can change the perceived level of crisis. Furthermore, exposure to an organizational blog has the greatest impact on readers and decreases the feeling that a company is in crisis. As such, these findings suggest that organizations in crisis should continue to employ open communication practices during crisis situations and consider adopting blogs as another tool through which to disseminate official messages.