

Crisis Response Strategies Used by Kenya Power and Lighting Company during the 9th February 2018 National Power Interruption

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Abstract: Social media is a platform where information and ideas are shared. It is in the same platforms where problems and discussion of issues affecting individuals, groups or communities are shared and feedback achieved immediately. Most organizations have been using social media to get feedback on their products. Service industries on the other hand have been using the platform to respond to complaints and to perhaps crises. In this regard, this study sought to assess the crisis response strategies used by Kenya Power and Lighting Company during the 9th February 2018 national power interruption. The study obtained secondary data from the customers' posts on the Facebook platform. The data was collected from the Facebook account of KPLC where the text data was then coded based on the study objectives. The researcher used qualitative method as the main research approach for the study with the descriptive method as the research design. The result revealed that KPLC used both primary crisis response strategy and secondary crisis response strategy. In primary crisis response strategy, KPLC attacked the accusers that were making negative post on their Facebook account by reminding them that the power failure was an emergency and they were working on it to have it resolved. KPLC used denial strategy by denying through their Facebook post that there was no crisis as the situation was under control. KPLC also used an excuse strategy by denying the intention to cause a crisis where it explained the cause of the crisis to the stakeholders and assured them that the situation would soon be under control as the engineers were already working to bring it back to normalcy. Finally, KPLC apologized to the stakeholders for the inconvenience caused to them by the power failure making them feel appreciated by the company. KPLC used secondary response strategy by reminding the stakeholders' about the good work that it has undertaken in the past and how fast it has always responded to similar crisis. Finally, KPLC indicated to the stakeholders that they were also victims of circumstances that the power failure was not their fault and they were working expeditiously to return the power supply to normalcy. The study therefore recommends for a continued use of the rebuild strategy in any crisis event and a further study on the use of other mass media such as print media and radio transmissions on crisis management by any organization with a national outlook.

Keywords: Crisis response strategies, Kenya Power and Lighting Company, national power interruption.

1. Introduction

Crisis refers to sequence of unwanted events at the workplace, which lead to disturbances and major unrest amongst the individuals. Crisis generally arises on a short notice and triggers a feeling of threat and fear in the employees. In simpler words crisis leads to uncertainty and causes major harm to the organization and its employees. It is essential for the employees to sense the early signs of crisis and warn the employees against the negative consequences of the same (Tsarenko&Tojib, 2015). Crisis not only affects the smooth functioning of the organization but also pose a threat to its brand name. Crisis Communication refers to a special wing, which deals with the reputation of the individuals as well as the organization. Crisis communication is an initiative, which aims at protecting the reputation of the organization and maintaining its public image (Dutta & Pullig, 2011).

Company related adverse events may result in negative consequences affecting several aspects of the whole company and damaging the overall performance. In particular, as they are generally featured by intense media coverage, hence well-publicized (Siomkos&Kurzbard, 1994), an event crisis is very likely to result in negative publicity (Dean, 2004). Therefore, expected consequences area weakened company's reputation (Coombs, 2007), poorer relationships with consumers

According to Mbui (2016) organizations need to establish a good working relationship by working closely with the media in order to avoid media speculation and untruths. Organizations also need to provide customers with explanations and information during a crisis that go beyond the basic information provided by stories in the mass media. In the recent past, crisis communication management plans as well as strategies have been adopted by both private and public sector organizations, as well as by institutions of higher learning in Kenya. For the last two decades, crisis communication has grown as a field of study (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007), and has been addressed from different scientific domains, making it difficult to oversee the bulk of research that has been conducted. Moreover, research on the effectiveness of communication strategies to restore reputations during crises, is still in its infancy (Hobbs, 1995). It is against this background that the study sought to establish role of crisis response strategies on crisis responsibility.

2. Statement the problem

Most scholars affirm that the crisis response strategies in most organizations are still misunderstood (Mwasi, 2014; Chue & Wang, 2015). In addition, there is no clear consensus regarding the link between the crisis response strategies and attribution of responsibility by the stakeholders. The existing studies do not give in-depth coverage on the relationship between the response strategies on the perceived reputation of an organization since most

global studies focused on strategic responses with respect to a firm's performance (Ofori&Atiogbe, 2015; Chue& Wang, 2015).

KPLC has faced numerous challenges in communicating during an emergency or crisis especially when it comes to their programmed power interruptions or rationing, short interruptions due to breakdowns, power surges and voltage dips. On January 9 2018, parts of the country were plunged into darkness on Tuesday evening due to what was described as a "power system disturbance" by electricity distributor KPLC as published in the Standard newspaper on 10th January 2018. KPLC failed to provide enough information to the key stakeholders resulting to unfavorable publicity. To address any future happening it would be of great importance to consider the reactions from the social media platform including the Facebook. Review of literature indicates that there exists limited number of studies on crisis communication across multiple linked crisis events that affect multiple organizations. This gap offers a new theoretical opportunity for scholarship in crisis communication and public relations. Therefore, the study sought to fill the knowledge gaps of the existing little literature on the relationship of crisis response strategies on the attribution of responsibility by the stakeholders at KPLC.

Research Objective

To describe the crisis response strategies used by Kenya Power and Lighting Company during the 9th February 2018 national power interruption.

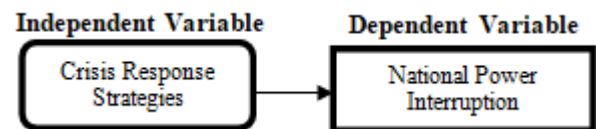
3. Theoretical Framework

Sequential Theory of Decentralization

This paper positions Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as the foundation of this study, particularly in regards to linking the crisis type and the application of crisis response strategies (CRS). At a glance, SCCT suggests that an organization's reputation is a valued resource that is threatened by crises. Moreover, SCCT functions to predict the reputational threat presented by a crisis and to prescribe CRS designed to protect reputational assets. One can predict reputational threat with two steps by assessing the initial crisis responsibility attached to a crisis (that is the crisis type) and then assessing the other two intensifying factors of reputational threat – crisis history and prior relationship reputation. These crisis types, increased by factors of crisis history and prior relationship reputation, allow the organization in crisis to indicate the crisis responsibility that is posed upon it and thus anticipate its stakeholders' perception and reaction towards the crisis and the organization itself. Based on SCCT theory, they have 3 goals; changing perceptions of organizations in crisis, shape the attributions of crisis and reduce the negative effects generated by crisis. These strategies can be achieved through primary crisis strategy (Rebuild, denial, diminish) and one secondary response strategy (bolstering) (Coombs, 2007).

4. Conceptual Framework

The study adopted the following conceptual framework:



Crisis Response Strategy

The crisis response strategies discussed in this section are: denial response strategies rebuild response strategies and diminish response strategy.

Benoit's (1995) image repair strategies including denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification. Denial strategy involves denying the offense took place or denying that he or she performed the offensive action. The evading responsibility strategy involves four variants: scapegoat by claiming provocation, defeasibility by pleading lack of information, by claiming the offense as an accident, and by claiming the offense may be justifiable. Reducing offensiveness strategy tries to reduce the level of negative feelings experienced by the audience by bolstering, minimizing the offense, and by placing the offense in a different context. Corrective action strategy promises to correct the problem that may have caused the offense. Mortification strategy involves an outright apology, admitted responsibility, and a request for forgiveness (Benoit, 1995).

Image is usually determined by the stakeholders and publics' perceptions of the organization or brand because of words or actions of that organization. An organization's reputation is normally damaged or threatened when the organization is held accountable for an undesirable event. True or untrue, public perception is the only ingredient necessary to damage a reputation (Holtzhausen, 2007). Coombs and Holladay (1996) acknowledged the challenges crisis communication researchers faced in the previous several years, such as discovering the range of response strategies and finding the best response strategy for a given crisis type (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Credit goes to Caillouet *et al* (1994), for helping meet one of those challenges to find an appropriate range of crisis response strategies. Coombs and Holladay attempted to build on Benoit's (1995) research and meet the other challenge of finding the best response for different situations. This is where attribution theory first comes into play for crisis communications research. "One consistent theme in communication research is that situations relationship the selection of communication strategies" (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, p. 279).

People naturally seek explications for why things happen (Rickard, 2014). Individuals weigh the contributions of various factors to a given outcome and then figure out the pattern with which such factors and effects relate to each other (Rickard, 2014). Stakeholders' observations relationship how they determine the cause of a crisis, whether it's from actions, or inactions, from an organization or someone outside the organization. "Causal attribution of a given event is based on two additional properties: (1) its controllability: the extent to which the cause is perceived to be under personal or situational control, and (2) its stability: the extent to which the cause is perceived to vary over time"

(Rickard, 2014). According to a study by Rickard (2014), variations in attribution by risk perception, respondent attribute, and experience related variables are “instructive from a practical perspective in that they reinforce the adage that communication to publics should not be envisioned as ‘one-size-fits-all’.

Research has shown that offering an apology a rebuild crisis response strategy—leads to more effective reputation restoration than the more defensive deny or diminish response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). The reputational threat is determined by the crisis type, which is defined in terms of the perceived responsibility attributed to the organization (Coombs, 2004, 2007). This idea is based on attribution theory (Coombs, 2007). Crisis managers should select crisis response strategies that are appropriate for the potential extent of reputational damage a certain crisis may inflict (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In an experimental study, Coombs and Holladay (1996) find that when crisis communication responses match the crisis type in terms of responsibility attribution, this leads to a more positive reputation perception than either no response or a mismatched response. Their research finds that organizational reputation benefits when diminish strategies are used in response to accidental crises and when rebuild strategies are matched with preventable crises. Previous research has examined the match between crisis type and a single crisis response strategy (Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

Rebuild response options is comprised of these strategies: ingratiation (managers praise stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good work of the organization), concern (managers express concern for the victims), compassion (managers offer money and other gifts to victims), regret (organization feels bad about the crisis), and apology (organization takes full responsibility for the crisis) (Coombs, 2012). Most of the times, KPLC failed to establish a crisis frame and sever any perceived connection between the organization and the crisis.

SCCT suggests that organizations that are currently experiencing high attribution crises should use more accommodative than defensive crisis response methods on social media (Coombs, 2014). On the same note, Ki and Nekmat (2014) found out that justification and apology were the most commonly used strategies on social media among the fortune 500 companies. Companies can additionally improve their reputations by offering gifts or money to compensate their victims, which will intern have a positive action that may offset the reputation. While when a company or organization apologizes, there is an indication that the organization has taken full responsibility and is asking for forgiveness (Coombs, 2007)

The diminish response option reflects the attribution theory aspect of SCCT. A crisis manager accepts a crisis occurred and that his or her organization is involved but tries to change the attributions stakeholders make about a crisis in order to reduce the reputational damage from the crisis (Coombs, 2012). KPLC has in most times failed in attempting to assure the publics that the crisis is not as bad as it seems or that the organization had nothing to do with the situation. These strategies help lessen the connection

between the organization and the crisis and help the organization’s publics see the crisis in a less negative light. Accordingly, it was found relevant to use the strategies of justification and apology in the present research, as these strategies are embedded in the distinct postures of diminishment and rebuilding respectively. Is an organization lessens the connection; eventually the effects of the crisis would be reduced.

5. Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive, causal and cross-sectional survey approaches aiming at addressing the objectives of the study. Descriptive research design is therefore appropriate for this study since it gives what is the role of online crisis response strategies on organizational reputation at Kenya Power and Lighting Company.

The research approach used in the study is qualitative. According to Coombs, (2012), qualitative research methods are designed in a manner that they help reveal the behavior and perception of a target audience with reference to a particular topic. He further indicated that there are different types of research methods like an in-depth interview, focus groups, ethnographic research, content analysis and case study research that use a qualitative approach. The study in this case adopted a content analysis as the type of qualitative research suitable for this case since content analysis from facebook post by KPLC on the power failure provided an opportunity to reveal the behavior of KPLC customers with respect to the communication provided online on power failure. The researcher used data coding sheets as the main data collection instruments where the facebook page for KPLC was reviewed then the comments regarding the 9th February 2018 national power interruption was taken. The comments were coded against the set themes such as comments on attribution of responsibility, comments on perceived reputation of KPLC and comments on the crisis history on the perceived reputation of KPLC.

The study results under this section area of content analysis was tailored in establishing the crisis response strategies used by KPLC to inform their customers about the power crisis which was a national power blackout that occurred on 9th January, 2018. It covers the analysis of documents that was used by the KPLC during the crisis period. Using the coding sheet, the researcher coded all the data that was related to reputation of the organization then obtained information from the coded sheet for the purposes of the analysis after which the researcher used own judgement to obtain information from the text data on what the stakeholders.

6. Results and Discussions of the Findings

Crisis Response Strategies Used By the Organization

Kenya Power and Lighting Company own and operate most of the electricity transmissions systems in the country and sells electricity to over 2.6 million customers countrywide. Therefore, without efficient crisis response strategies, the company can ruin the positive image that has been built by the company for over a long period. The adoption of an effective crisis response strategy by the organization builds

up the image of the organization and creates the positive customer perception.

The communication manager at KPLC informed the stakeholders that the organization was not able to inform them of the intended power at the appropriate time for the companies that highly depend on power service to plan for an alternative power supply since the situation was an emergency one. In addition the companies that heavily depend on electric power for their operations would prepare well so that their duties could not lag behind due to lack of power supply. The crisis response strategy was satisfactory to many stakeholders as had been done by the earlier communication for the arrangement of alternative power supply. The strategy used did not reach many heavy users of electricity and the domestic users of power since most customers are not online and do not follow KPLC either on twitter or on facebook. The decision of the KPLC to communicate the intended blackout using an online platform gave a negative reaction to the blackout as analyzed on the facebook by the respondents who expressed their displeasure with the manner in which the response was given by the respondents.

The strategy used by KPLC in exonerating themselves from the liability was the excuse as an element of denial communication response strategy where KPLC denied the intent to do harm to the stakeholders as given in their facebook post. KPLC indicated that a monkey had short-circuited the main power line causing a national blackout, which was aimed at directing the stakeholders from taking the power failure as an intentional act to cause harm to them. KPLC also expressed an apology to their stakeholders through an online platform by indicating that the organization had taken into consideration the delay in power restoration that indeed affected the performance of many organizations, particularly the heavy users that relied much on power for production. That was a good indication that KPLC had the interest of their stakeholders and they would not do anything that could cause harm to their customers. That strategy was good at rebuilding the image of the organization by those customers that had changed their perception and attitude towards the company on the management of services to the stakeholders.

The crisis communication manager at KPLC decided to adopt the ingratiation strategy by thanking their customers online for the customers for their patience using an online platform. This won the hearts of some stakeholders who were already disgusted by the sudden power failure that the organization was aware of the inconvenience caused by the power failure and that KPLC was making every effort to have the power supply return to normalcy. This step showed their perceived value to their many customers throughout the country who depend on their power service as low and in total disregard. The communication department at the KPLC adopted the right communication strategies for communication during the crisis. The crisis response strategy was justifiable and was due to the preparedness and the awareness of the communication department on various response strategies for a crisis.

Finally, the crisis manager reminded the stakeholders that KPLC was also a victim of events that were beyond their control at the time though they were working on the situation to return it to normalcy. The strategy of victimization was adopted by the KPLC communication manager to redeem the guilt and turn the guilt to themselves by convincing the stakeholders that KPLC was also a victim of circumstances. The strategy worked as most of the responses from the online post turned from being harsh and abusive to being polite and inquisitive of when power would be restored.

7. Summary

The study established that KPLC only used information as the communication strategy in the initial stages of the crisis after which it adopted the sympathy and apology strategy. The study findings are similar to a similar finding by Coombs & Holladay (2009), who established that different crisis response strategies affect important communication outcomes, including the organizational reputation and secondary crisis communication. This analysis has given the three crisis response strategies, apology, sympathy and information, based on the strategies as described in the situational crisis communication theory that was not effectively used by the KPLC in communicating the power blackout.

The study established that KPLC used the apology strategy by giving the feelings of pity and sorrow for the victims of power failure particularly to those that rely on power for their production. Schultz et al (2011) established that information refers to the strategy whereby the organization provides information about (the circumstances surrounding) the crisis which was fully and exhausted by the KPLC although some stakeholders felt that the timing of the communication was not appropriate. The study also established that the KPLC communication team made appropriate communication strategy of providing effective communication on the circumstances surrounding the crisis by informing their customers about the power blackout and giving the reasons for the crisis. KPLC crisis response strategy was made was used effectively though not on time in communicating the crisis which gave a good dedication by the KPLC in serving their customers and giving the best service.

The study had similar findings to Coombs & Holladay, (2007) which established that the effectiveness of different image restoration strategies showed that organizations that placed victim concerns over organizational concerns and demonstrated regret for the victims had a higher organizational reputation than organizations that did not as illustrated by the Facebook comments on the KPLC website. In contrast, the study findings also showed that providing information does not positively relationship the organizational reputation. KPLC expected that the apology and sympathy would lead to a higher reputation of the organization than information. However, study results analysed from its facebook post on the crisis did not find a main effect of crisis response strategy on the organizational reputation. In other words, there was no difference between apology, information and sympathy on the estimation of the

organizational reputation. The strategy used by KPLC in expressing the sympathy to their customers through an online platform was good since an organization that takes the responsibility or expresses sympathy with the victims is regarded as more honorable and sympathetic

8. Conclusion

The study concludes that KPLC uses the right strategy for communicating their crisis of power failure although it has often delayed and not delivered on time. KPLC uses the sympathy, apathy and the information strategy in communicating its response on the power failures crisis, which is good as online platform, is the best for crisis response.

Though KPLC maintain its ethical standards when responding to issues raised in there still exist gap where Facebook platform indicating that the company practice its ethics on any crisis. Although KPLC uses the Facebook platform for gathering information, which is helpful in addressing customers' needs, it does not give effective and efficient communication to their online customers.

9. Recommendations

The study recommends for a review of the communication strategy adopted by KPLC and other organization using online platform such as Facebook. The communication strategy adopted should be aimed at exonerating the company from the attribution of liability with respect to crisis and it should also be directed towards improving the company image.

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