

Examining Facebook Message Strategies during a Crisis: A Case Study of Susan G. Komen's Announcement to Defund Planned Parenthood

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Purpose: A case study of Susan G. Komen's announcement to defund Planned Parenthood was conducted to understand how an organization communicates with its publics during a crisis using Facebook. Using the contingency theory of accommodation in public relations as framework, a content analysis was conducted on the organization's Facebook posts from a month before and after the announcement. As possibly the only study examining the contingency theory of accommodation on Facebook, this study provides insight into how one particular organization moves along the continuum from advocacy to accommodation and what Facebook features were used to assist with the messages disseminated.

Literature: *Contingency Theory of Accommodation:* The theory posits that moderating, mediating and antecedent variables lead an organization to take either an advocating or accommodating stance (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997). There are 87 variables that fit into a matrix of factors that affect the stance type undertaken by public relations practitioners.

Social Media Adoption during a crisis: Social media provides organizations an opportunity to provide updates and interact with key publics in real time especially during a crisis situation (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Facebook is an online medium that allows users to interact with each other by sharing information about themselves through personal profiles (Conroy, Feezell & Guerrero, 2012). If used correctly, Facebook is an optimal tool for practitioners to engage and interact with key publics during times of crisis.

Susan G. Komen's Announcement to Defund Planned Parenthood: In 2007, Komen granted money to pay for clinical breast exams and mammograms at the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and affiliates (Cordes, 2012). On January 31, 2012, Komen decided to sever ties with Planned Parenthood, citing a congressional investigation and a newly created internal rule about not funding organizations under any federal, state or local investigations (Goldberg, 2012). One of the main avenues that Susan G. Komen announced the defunding and the reversal was on their Facebook page.

Method: The content of Susan G. Komen's Facebook posts ranged from January 3, 2012 to February 29, 2012, capturing all posts from the month prior to the month after the announcement was made (January 31, 2012). A total number of 38 Facebook posts created by Susan G. Komen in that date range were analyzed.

Hypothesis and Research Questions:

- H1: Susan G. Komen's "stance" will move up and down the advocacy/accommodation continuum over the life span of the crisis.
- RQ1: What Facebook features will dictate the "strategies" Susan G. Komen takes during the crisis when communicating on Facebook?

- RQ2: What contingent factors appear to influence the “stance” of Susan G. Komen when communicating on Facebook?
- RQ3: How does the “stance” Susan G. Komen take affect (a) number of likes, (b) number of comments, (c) number of shares?
- RQ4: How does the “strategy” Susan G. Komen takes affect (a) number of likes, (b) number of comments, (c) number of shares?

Results: Susan G. Komen used more accommodating messages (67%) compared to advocating messages (31%) overall. However, before the announcement, Susan G. Komen used more accommodating messaging, then changed to a more advocating stance immediately after the announcement, then back to an accommodating stance a couple of weeks removed.

After the announcement, messages featuring disclosure showed significance against corrective action strategies, history showed significance against excuse and cooperation strategies, mission statement showed significance against justification, corrective action and cooperation strategies, and administrators showed significance against denial strategies and corrective action strategies.

External public characteristics and organizational characteristics showed significance between advocating (8.3%, 50%) and accommodating (76.9%, 11.5%) stances.

Only number of likes showed to be significantly affected by stance type. But, number of likes, number of comments and number of shares all showed to be significantly affected by strategy type.

Discussion/Implications: This research represents one of a few studies to test the contingency theory of accommodation in a social media setting and possibly the only one to test it on Facebook. Susan G. Komen moved along the continuum depending on the date of the announcement. And, depending on the stance, Susan G. Komen used the contingency factors public characteristics and organizational characteristics most. Facebook’s capability for users to share links, post photos and videos also appeared to be an important attribute for an organization to decide which type of message to use. This study also provides insight in what crisis strategies an organization uses on Facebook, and how a specific stance affects the public’s perception (based on the likes, shares and comments numbers). These findings illustrate that Facebook can be an appropriate dissemination tool for organizations when facing a crisis.

Limitations and Future Research: As only 38 messages from one organization were used, future research could compare the messages and stances of multiple organizations facing similar crises. Also, testing the contingency theory of accommodation on other social media platforms may provide insight into which social media tool is best for a specific type of situation. Lastly, examining the nature of comments and replies will provide an understanding of how the organization’s stances and messages affect the public to whom they are communication with.