"MANAGING RESTAURANTS CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS"

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of public relations in crisis management, focusing on pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases. Many public and private entities, including restaurants, lack effective crisis PR plans. The research centres on American restaurants due to their susceptibility to crises and explores Twitter's role in crisis PR. Guided by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), qualitative data analysis reveals the importance of proactive crisis strategies, crisis teams, and social media expertise. The study underscores the need for anticipating and averting crises through effective planning and online engagement.

Keywords: Public Relations, Crisis Management, Twitter, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, social media.

Introduction:

Public relations (PR) have evolved into a vital component of organizational strategies, responding to the challenges of a competitive business environment and heightened public scrutiny (Grunig, 2009). Originally, PR focused on providing publicity for governmental and private organizations in the United States but has since shifted its emphasis to managing communication between organizations and their publics for mutual benefit (Grunig, 2009). This evolution has seen PR embrace new media tools, including social media, in addition to traditional methods. As organizations face increased public scrutiny and potential crises, PR's role extends beyond brand promotion to crisis management (Sarpong & Davies, 2014). PR plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions through structured and persuasive organizational communication, thereby advancing and restoring legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders (Sarpong & Davies, 2014).

Organizations with social and economic impacts on their stakeholders, like the American restaurant industry, must secure stakeholder support for continued success. PR facilitates and sustains connections between such organizations and their publics, mutually benefiting both parties. However, public perceptions are heavily influenced by mass media, and corporate misbehaviour, particularly when it affects public health and safety, can lead to reputational crises. Organizational crisis communication, executed promptly, sincerely, and objectively, helps pacify upset stakeholders and engage them positively (McDonald, Sparks & Glendon, 2010). Social media, notably Twitter, has emerged as a crucial tool in crisis management within PR, although its full potential remains untapped by many organizations.

PR's role has expanded to encompass crisis management, which is often crucial for maintaining stakeholder support and organizational survival. Recognizing PR's significance throughout the crisis continuum before, during, and after is essential, as it not only fosters public loyalty but also aids in post-crisis recovery (Bowen, 2010). Social media, including Twitter, can enhance PR's effectiveness in creating and sustaining positive public perceptions during and after crises. [3].

Statement of Problem:

The American restaurant industry is sensitive because of its ability to influence the healthof its clients directly through the consumption of the food offered in eating outlets. Restaurants like any other business establishments are prone to both man-made and natural events that can be calamitous and devastating to the business. DiGianfilippo (2018) noted that the restaurant industry has had experienced various public relations nightmares ranging from events such as gun violence, claims of racism, and the distribution of eggs from a farm in North Carolina thatwere suspected to have salmonella. In addition, although social media is widely used in the restaurant industry for marketing purposes, the extent to which the different social media platforms are employed as part of public relation to manage the crises in American restaurants is not well evidenced. In the same vein, Twitter is a social media platform that is effective in promoting electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) among customers because of its ease of application especially using mobile devices and its ability to enable the sharing of photos and videos in addition to textual information. As such, information on Twitter can quickly go viral to reach large masses of people in a short time especially when influencers with many followers are involved in the twitter conversations. However, it is not clear how this powerful tool has been used to avert and manage crises in the restaurant industry in the United States. Therefore, the potential of Twitter as a public relations tool in the management of crises in American restaurants are extensive and requires research attention.

The research questions that will guide this study include:

RQ1: How does Public Relations facilitate the managing of crisis communications in restaurants in the United States?

RQ2: What is the role of Public Relations in restaurants before, during, and after a crisis?

RQ3: How can Twitter be used to manage crises in restaurants in the United States?

Literature Review:

In the realm of public relations, the historical evolution of this field in the United States can be traced back to the early 1900s, where pioneers like Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays laid its foundations. Lee introduced the term "public relations" and advocated for principles like truthfulness and accuracy, while Bernays applied PR techniques to politics and emphasized the interpretation of clients to the public. Over time, PR in the U.S. underwent distinct stages, shifting from a focus on publicity to explanation and eventually to mutual satisfaction. This evolution was influenced by figures like Henry Ford and Theodore Roosevelt, who applied PR principles to advance their corporate and political agendas. Early PR organizations, such as the Publicity Bureau and the Committee on Public Information, played pivotal roles in shaping the profession (Penning, 2008; Russell & Bishop, 2009).

Before a crisis strikes, organizations must prioritize effective crisis management by focusing on prevention and preparation. Stakeholder theory emerges as a critical concept, emphasizing the importance of building strong relationships with various stakeholders long before a crisis unfolds. These stakeholders encompass primary groups like the community and workers, alongside secondary ones like customers and the media. Building goodwill and credibility with these groups is pivotal in crisis readiness, enabling organizations to garner support when needed (Fishman, 1999; Heath, 1997; Sellnow, 1993, 2001).

During a crisis, the attribution theory comes into play as people seek to understand the causes of the crisis based on attributes like locus, stability, and controllability. Crisis response strategies aim to influence public perceptions regarding these attributes, with effective communication being paramount in repairing the organization's image (Wilson, Cruz, & Rao, 1993; Brody, 1991; Coombs, 1995).

In the aftermath of a crisis, organizations must continue to communicate to rebuild trust and address lingering issues. Engagement with the media remains essential post-crisis, ensuring transparency and

providing timely updates (Dougherty, 1992).

Real-world examples shed light on the effectiveness of crisis management strategies. Companies like Johnson & Johnson, KFC, and PepsiCo have successfully navigated crises through prompt responses, taking responsibility, issuing public apologies, and engaging with stakeholders. In contrast, Starbucks and Uber faced challenges in managing crises effectively, illustrating the importance of swift and sincere responses. The Bhopal chemical disaster serves as a stark reminder of the complexities of crisis communication for multinational corporations, especially when such crises occur far from their headquarters (Latson, 2014; Crenshaw, 2017; Bold, 2018; Dinham & Sarangi, 2002; Solon & Wong, 2017).

Amid these developments, Twitter has emerged as a transformative force in the field of public relations. Since its inception in 2006, Twitter, as a microblogging service, has combined elements of social networking and blogging. Its unique features include following conversations, retweeting to amplify messages, and enabling real-time two-way dialogues. Retweeting plays a vital role in disseminating information and making topics trend, resulting in exponential growth in their popularity. This new media platform has reshaped the landscape of public relations, making it more socially responsible, dialogical, and globally connected. It allows organizations to engage with stakeholders, scan their environments, and make informed decisions in a rapidly changing digital world (Boyd, Golder & Lotan, 2010).

In sum, the historical evolution of public relations, crisis communication strategies, and the transformative impact of Twitter on modern communication practices collectively highlight the dynamic nature of this field. As organizations navigate an increasingly interconnected and fast-paced world, understanding these facets becomes imperative for effective public relations and crisis management.

Methods:

This article explores the methodology employed in a study that investigates crisis communication within selected American restaurants. It delves into the justification for adopting a qualitative research approach and a case study methodology, discussing the theoretical framework, data collection, data analysis procedures, and the study's limitations. Specific emphasis is placed on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, purposive sampling, and content analysis. Qualitative research, as defined by Yilmaz (2013), is an emergent, inductive, interpretive, and naturalistic approach aimed at uncovering the meanings individuals attach to their experiences in natural settings. This methodology prioritizes understanding 'how,' 'what,' and 'why' questions over quantitative aspects. It allows for a holistic and flexible exploration of social phenomena, emphasizing interpretation and the naturalistic context in which they occur.

The choice of qualitative research for this study is justified by its ability to uncover the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and values that influence human behaviour and firm-stakeholder relationships. The study focuses on public relations in American restaurants before, during, and after crises, where human and social capital play a pivotal role. Qualitative research provides nuanced insights into perceptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, and actions of both restaurant management and various stakeholder groups, enhancing our understanding of these dynamics. The case study methodology is employed to conduct an in-depth exploration of crisis communication within specific American restaurants. This methodology is uniquely suited for in-depth examinations within a well-defined context. It emphasizes the deconstruction and reconstruction of the phenomenon of interest, using cases as the primary units of analysis.

Case studies can be aligned with social constructivist and postpositivist paradigms. The former focuses on the social construction of reality through close researcher-informant interactions, while the latter

centres on protocol issues. Case study research offers flexibility in utilizing various data sources, enabling a multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon. Researchers can opt for a single case to delve deeply into a context or multiple cases to compare different aspects. Typically, two to four cases are recommended for multiple-case studies to ensure depth without dilution. Data sources for case studies can include archived documents, observations, and existing literature. In this study, a multiple-case approach involving two restaurants was chosen, with related literature serving as the primary data source.

The qualitative research approach, underpinned by the case study methodology, proves to be a suitable choice for this investigation into crisis communication in American restaurants. It allows for a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved and offers the flexibility to explore the intricacies of stakeholder relationships and communication practices within the restaurant industry during and after crises.

Results:

In this comprehensive research study, the role of public relations in effectively managing communication crises in American restaurants is thoroughly examined. The research explores crisis management strategies employed before, during, and after crises, with a particular focus on the vulnerabilities within the restaurant industry. Various potential crises are identified, including issues related to food safety, workplace harassment, injuries, and reputation damage. Notably, it is observed that many restaurants lack effective communication plans that integrate public relations practices to mitigate such crises.

The study emphasizes the power of Twitter as a vital social media platform for customers to share their dining experiences, making it a valuable tool for crisis management in American restaurants. The research aims to provide insights that will assist restaurants in formulating robust crisis management plans that incorporate Twitter as an essential public relations tool. Throughout the research, qualitative data collected through document studies are analyzed, utilizing the Situational Crisis Communication Theory as a guiding framework. This theory underscores the importance of evaluating the circumstances surrounding a crisis and the corporate reputation before devising and executing crisis response strategies.

Key Findings and Insights:

1. Crisis Management in Restaurants: The study underscores the critical role of effective crisis management in restaurants, highlighting that poorly managed crises can lead to significant reputation damage and financial losses, affecting customer loyalty and acquisition.

2. Responsibility and Transparency: The research emphasizes the importance of restaurants taking responsibility for crisis situations promptly. Avoiding cover-ups and responding transparently are essential steps in maintaining public trust.

3. Proactive Crisis Preparation: Restaurants are advised to be proactive by establishing crisis management teams and plans in advance. This preparedness reduces the risks of crises and ensures a swift, coordinated response if one occurs.

4. Post-Crisis Recovery: The study highlights the significance of post-crisis management, emphasizing the need for restaurants to reflect on their crisis management processes, address weaknesses, and implement long-term corrective measures.

5. Leveraging Twitter for Crisis Management: Twitter is recognized as a potent platform for crisis communication in the restaurant industry. It offers real-time monitoring, timely responses, and the opportunity to control the narrative during crises.

6. Engaging with Customers: Timely and sincere engagement with customers on Twitter can help restaurants turn negative situations into positive PR opportunities. Establishing a brand-owned hashtag and proactively addressing customer concerns are recommended practices.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this research underscores the critical importance of effective crisis management in the American restaurant industry, emphasizing the significant role played by public relations and the powerful tool of Twitter in navigating the complexities of crisis communication. The key takeaways from this study emphasize the need for restaurants to promptly accept responsibility, respond transparently, and engage in proactive, accountable crisis communication. These principles are essential in an age when news can go viral within seconds, and a restaurant's reputation can hang in the balance. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of comprehensive crisis management strategies that encompass the phases before, during, and after a crisis. Anticipating and preparing for potential crises, along with adopting SCCT-guided crisis response strategies, can contribute to reputation restoration. Twitter emerges as a valuable platform for crisis communication, provided restaurants employ proficient social media experts to monitor conversations, engage with customers, and control the narrative effectively. Owning brand conversations and creating relevant hashtags are essential practices.

The recommendations offered here provide actionable steps for the restaurant industry, emphasizing the integration of Twitter into crisis plans, proactive public relations, and transparent communication. Additionally, the importance of post-crisis reflection and improvement is underscored. Looking ahead, future research in crisis communication can explore corporate communication practices, the evolving role of social media experts, comparisons across various social media platforms, and cross-industry and international analyses. These endeavours will continue to advance our understanding of effective crisis management in the digital age.

Ultimately, this research contributes valuable insights and practical guidance for American restaurants seeking to enhance their crisis management capabilities and safeguard their reputations in an ever connected and rapidly evolving communication landscape.

This research underscores the pivotal role of public relations in managing crises in American restaurants, with a particular focus on leveraging Twitter for effective crisis communication. It provides valuable insights and recommendations to help restaurants proactively prepare for, respond to, and recover from crises. By adopting these practices, restaurants can safeguard their reputation and maintain customer loyalty in the face of unforeseen challenges. Overall, this study contributes to our understanding of crisis management within the restaurant industry and offers guidance for future research in this field. It emphasizes the importance of integrating social media, especially Twitter, into crisis management strategies to effectively navigate the challenges posed by today's interconnected and digitally driven world.

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"إدارة اتصالات الأزمات بالمطاعم: دور العلاقات العامة"

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الملخص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في دور العلاقات العامة في إدارة الأزمات، مع التركيز على مراحل ما قبل الأزمة، والأزمات، وما بعد الأزمة. تفتقر العديد من الكيانات العامة والخاصة، بما في ذلك المطاعم، إلى خطط العلاقات العامة الفعالة للأزمات. يركز البحث على المطاعم الأمريكية نظرًا لتعرضها للأزمات ويستكشف دور تويتر في العلاقات العامة في الأزمات. مسترشدًا بنظرية التواصل في الأزمات الظرفية(SCCT) ، يكشف تحليل البيانات النوعية عن أهمية استراتيجيات الأزمات الاستباقية، وفرق الأزمات، والخبرة في وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. وتؤكد الدراسة على ضرورة توقع الأزمات وتجنبها من خلال التخطيط الفعال والمشاركة عبر الإنترنت.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العلاقات العامة، إدارة الأزمات، تويتر، نظرية الاتصال في الأزمات الظرفية، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي.