

An impact of Situational crisis-communication theory on the efficiency of investigations in the field of crisis communications

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Paper received 23.01.17; Accepted for publication 29.01.17.

Abstract. The hybrid warfare with the application of powerful informational component has become the factor that led to a systemic crisis in the Ukrainian informational space. In such situations it is important to find the mechanisms of counteraction against informational aggression and to build our own informational strategy. It is the task assigned to crisis communications and to the Situational crisis-communication theory, being a tool for crisis communications research. The article focuses on application features of Situational crisis-communication theory in the field of crisis communications. The components of this theory and methods of their integration into the national anti-crisis communication practice are examined. The algorithm of interaction of this theory with other related branches in PR is specified and the example of application method of this theory in relation to the informational crisis in Ukrainian informational space is given.

Keywords: crisis communication, situational crisis communicational theory, approach to investigation, hybrid warfare, informational war.

Introduction. Nowadays Ukrainian society is going through a period of transformation of almost all important sectors of social life. In addition, today Ukraine is the object of both, direct and informational aggression and actually is in a condition of "hybrid warfare". In this situation, society is in a difficult position because there is rather heavy pressure both, of informational and social matter. An important component of this problem is to develop an effective response to informational aggression in order to improve moral and psychological condition of population. An effective anti-crisis communicational policy is such important component. Since the establishment of effective crisis communications requires a plenty of research elements, Situational crisis-communication theory, which proved to be an effective approach to investigate crisis communications in Western Europe and the US, can assist in the organization of anti-crisis communication strategy.

An analysis of papers written by foreign scientists who have researched the problems of using Situational crisis-communication theory in the field of crisis communication has served as **the scientific basis for our research.**

The objective of this article is to research the main features of Situational crisis-communication theory using on practice.

Basic material presentation. Situational crisis-communication theory (SCCT) was developed by T. Coombs and his colleagues in 1995. The authors suggested the hypothesis that participants of crisis always have a psychological attitude to the crisis (attribution) and this psychological attitude will affect on how concerned parties interact with the organization in crisis [5]. The SCCT is able to highlight people's perception of crisis, their response to the actions of crisis management and audience response to the organization and its prestige during the crisis. The nature of the crisis situation creates audience perception, in other words its attribution. Using this theory, scientists try to identify different behavioral characteristics of people during the crisis. The SCCT, as the theory, helps to identify the factors, which form the crisis and threats that can be caused by crisis situation [5].

The SCCT offers two evaluation stages of crisis threat. The first stage is the classification of the crisis. The SCCT deals with three types of crises: victim of crisis, accidents,

intentional act that led to the crisis. According to the SCCT classifier, all types of crises have different degrees of responsibility. After determining the type of crisis we determine the main type of threat. The second stage is to determine additional factors of threat. Intensifying factors change the attribution of crisis responsibility and raise the level of threat from the crisis.

Strategies for the crisis response in the study of SCCT:

1. Denial: administration states that there is no crisis;
2. Responsibility shifting: administration blames the subject outside the crisis;
3. Prosecutor attack: administration blames somebody outside the organization and tries to shift the responsibility to it;
4. Excuse: administration tries to minimize the crisis responsibility, claiming that they control everything, but at the same time they do not want to cause harm;
5. Argumentation: administration tries to minimize the damages, caused by crisis;
6. Flattery: administration praises the concerned parties and/or reminds people of previous achievements of the organization;
7. Care: administration takes care of the victims of crisis;
8. Compassion: organization expresses its condolences to the victims of crisis and compensates material damage;
9. Anxiety: administration indicates that it is concerned about the crisis;
10. Apology: administration takes the full responsibility for the crisis and apologizes for the situation that occurred.

There are two additional intensifying factors – crisis history of the organization and previous negative reputation. Crisis history indicates whether the organization faced the crisis before. If such cases took place, it increases the risk of crisis occurrence [6]. Previous reputation indicates the character of image, organization had in the past. If the previous reputation of organization was negative, its responsibility for the crisis will be higher [11].

The SCCT investigates not only reputational aspects of crisis communication. There are also other aspects of research, such as the crisis impact and behavioral intentions during the crisis. Scientists have also conducted a number of studies which analyzed the relationship between crisis

and anger. [12] Thus, using SCCT, a number of crisis incidents and their ability to generate sympathy, anger and malevolence were considered. The most obvious result was a strong anger during the awareness of a high level of responsibility. Also with this theory the behavioral intentions were studied. [16] Most scientists were interested in the impact of negative statements about the crisis and everything connected with it. Since the negative statements are particularly problematic, they may increase the negative effects of the crisis. For example, messages in the Internet can always remind people of the previous crisis and cause certain feelings; they are also able to raise an upsurge of indignation and cause a new crisis [11]. The idea is that crisis anger increases the possibility of new negative messages and reduces the desire to buy a product or service of the company which is in crisis.

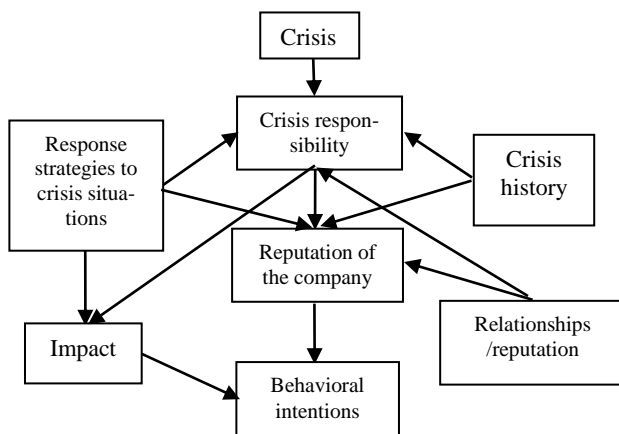


Figure 1.1 The model of theoretical variables of situational crisis communication [4].

In case of negative communication dynamics in respect to the organization, these messages spread faster than positive communication messages.

With the SCCT crisis managers determine the level of threat in order to respond to the crisis most effectively. According to the SCCT each crisis response must begin with the advisory and regulatory information. Advisory information notifies the participants of the crisis process about how to protect them from the crisis. For example, this information is on how to return the defective thing to the store, or on how employees must evacuate during an industrial accident. Regulatory information helps participants of the process to cope with the crisis psychologically. This group includes the expressions of concern or compassion, provision of information about the crisis, as well as any corrective action to prevent the repeat of the crisis. [17] After delivery of advisory and regulatory information, crisis management experts begin to act towards the restoration of reputation. There are three basic strategies of SCCT response: the refutation of facts, the minimization of impact and the recovery of reputation; additionally there is a strategy of reinforcement. Applying a strategy of facts refutation, the organization tries to prove that it does not take responsibility for the crisis. In the strategy of impact minimization they try to reduce the level of company's responsibility for the crisis and/or to decrease the negative perception of the crisis. The strategy of reputation recovery is very adaptable, with it's assistance they try to improve the per-

ception of organization by means of apologies and financial compensation. The strategy of reinforcement tries to enter the positive information about the organization into informational space. Reinforcement can occur in different ways, they can recall of past achievements, for example. Reinforcement strategy is not effective if it is used as a primary one [7]. The effect from it will be the highest if it is used to support one of the three main strategies. The strategy of reinforcement is also promising when the organization has a positive previous reputation.

The choice of the strategy to respond to the crisis depends on the threat it carries in itself. With the increase of threat, crisis experts should use more adaptive response strategies.

We can deal with the victims of various types of crisis using advisory and regulatory information. At antropogenic crisis, excuses or apologies via regulatory information can be used. At the expected or antropogenic crisis, apologies and damage compensation are added to the advisory and regulatory information. [9]. Today, some studies confirm the compliance of strategy of crisis response with the crisis threat.

It should be pointed out, that SCCT is still being developed as a theory. As the scientist from Boston College of Communications A. Schwarz [17] noted, there are other aspects that can be introduced into this theory.

As to the theory of unforeseen circumstances (*Contingency theory*), it is quite extensive, and examines the way the organization must adapt and protect itself in a crisis or conflict situation [2]. H. Cameron made the most significant contribution into this theory. Contingency theory seeks to explain how the public relations function as a whole. More specifically, it helps us to understand what controls the decisions, taken by the organization in connection to the the objectives, regulation, ethics, PR-promotion and other aspects, at the political level [1].

The recommendations of SCCT to respond to the crisis.

1. All the victims or potential victims should receive advisory information;
2. the sympathy should be expressed and any information on actions of injury treatment and relief of the crisis consequences should be provided to all victims;
3. during the crisis with minimum responsibility advisory information will be enough;
4. during the crisis with minimum responsibility, but with additional reinforcing factors regulatory information is added to advisory information, such as apology, for example;
5. during the crisis with a low level of responsibility, but without additional reinforcing factors, advisory information is used;
6. during the crisis with a low level of responsibility and with reinforcing factors regulatory information in the form of financial compensation is added to advisory information;
7. during the crisis with a high level of responsibility for the crisis the strategy of excuse is used in addition to advisory information and regulatory information in the form of compensation and apologies;
8. compensation strategy can be applied at any time when required by the situation;
9. the strategy of organization reminder and compli-

ments from the organization as gifts can be used as a supplement to any response;

10. denial and attack are the most effective in protection from gossips.

The Contingency theory has been adapted for the development of researches in the field of crisis communications. The position of organization is a key variable in the theory of circumstances. The position of the organization is the way it responds to competition and conflict with other parties. The ability to adapt and to defend is the main factor here. Defense is the organization's ability to protect its own interests, while adaptability is the ability of organization to adapt to changes in the external and internal environment. The position of the organization should be changed, depending on the nature of the situation. In some situations, the organization must be adaptive; in others it must use protection [2].

Contingency theory is based on more than 80 variables that help to predict the position to be used in a given situation. Favorable variables form the initial positive reaction to the situation and form an open position as to the particular event. They also include organizational and PR-characteristics and individual features of the organization which affect the situation as a whole. [3] Situational factors, if strong enough, can change the position of the organization. These situational factors can be divided into five external factors and seven internal factors [3]. The complexity of Contingency theory lies in the attempt to understand the relationship between these variables. Here are internal and external factors of Contingency theory. Internal variables are: characteristics of the organization; characteristics of PR-department; management characteristics; individual characteristics; characteristics of relations. External variables are: threats to the organization; the internal environment in the organization; general social, political, economic, cultural environment.

Contingency theory is actively applied in the study of crisis communication [15]. This theory, in its methodological range, overlaps with the theory of recovery and the SCCT. All of them consider the adaptability of organization as the base criteria. But at the same time, Contingency theory considers threats differently than SCCT. It uses the model of threat evaluation, analyzes the threat type and its duration in order to determine its level. Type of threat does not depend on whether the crisis is internal or external, as well as on the duration of the crisis, whether it is short, medium or long term. Scientists from the University of California Yu Jin and G. Cameron [14] found that internal, long-term threat is the most dangerous and in this case the organization must adapt to crisis the most actively.

Threat evaluation also includes the analysis of the emotional component in the communication process in crisis. Resembling the SCCT, Contingency theory offers a number of additional variables, which are to be considered defining the most appropriate response to the crisis. [13]

Contingency theory offers a useful integrating framework with its own set of variables. However, SCCT, as the theory of medium-term planning, is also equally effective for the interpretation of studies involving, for example, the influence of the audience on crisis communication. To be precise, the SCCT can be used for processing

of data, defined by Contingency theory in the context of crisis communication research. Interestingly, the variables of Contingency theory will vary depending on their application. The SCCT helps to investigate more conceptual aspects – effective for practical use and for determination of variables in crisis communication.

The Contingency theory widely uses two aspects: positioning and threat. Positioning in Contingency theory is based on the conflict, but at the same time, it should be noted, that not all of them are derived from the conflict. For the crises arising from the conflict, positioning provides a corresponding set of communicational options, while the crisis response strategies will be more effective if the conflict is not a major factor in the crisis.

Although the Contingency theory and the SCCT are aimed to assist in crisis preventing and neutralizing, they are different in nature. Using the Contingency theory, researchers found that external threats create more situational requirements than internal crisis, while SCCT determines that the internal crisis can be more dangerous than external. [14] The difference lies in the nature of the threat and the type of crisis. The Contingency theory considers the threat in terms of situational analysis, while SCCT focuses on the reputation threat that comes from crisis. For the study, researchers from the University of California, Yu Jin and G.Cameron used the demonstrations of activists as foreign threat and rumors inside the organization as an internal threat. The results showed that according to SCCT rumors are easier to accept than to use to solve the problem.

The theory of dispute resolution is the most dominant among theoretical approaches to the study of crisis communications. Generally, problem solution refers to any matter, including crisis communications, which may influence the image of the organization. In this case, monitoring and analysis of trends among key public opinions, which may affect state policy and regulatory or legal limitations, are often used [18].

Rhetorical approach is also considered to be the most widely used among theoretical approaches to the study of crisis communications. It is usually used to analyze the messages on crisis management to identify the peculiarities of communication strategy of the company. Rhetorical approach largely originates from the theory of apology, which helps to explore the most effective defensive communication and rhetorical techniques [18]. The linguistic style of statements and the rhetoric of messages of organization are the main object of analysis. Some scientists have created a certain classification of strategies to respond to the crisis. For example, the theory of recovery of W. Benoit contains following communicative classification of responds: avoidance of responsibility, decrease of public anger, actions of strategy regulation and staff calm. [10]

T. Coombs and S.Holladey [8] offered a system of categories and types of crisis for SCCT. According to SCCT, some types of crisis will generate some attributions as to the responsibility during the crisis. Since the attributions of crisis responsibility are growing, crisis experts should use strategies that will reduce the level of responsibility for the crisis. Basically, SCCT is grounded on attribution theory in social psychology, which provides important conceptual principles (stability and controllability of at-

tribution) of investigation in order to verify the cause-and-effect relationship of some phenomena in the process of communication during the crisis.

Conclusion. Crisis communication is quite specific knowledge branch in the field of public relations and social communications. Its particular nature is that all communication events are forced and decisions on tactical actions should be taken much more quickly than usual. Situational crisis-communication theory is designated to assist in resolving complex contradictions in crisis resolu-

tion. This theory is most appropriate in terms of technology study of the phenomenon of communicative crisis. In our opinion, SCCT is the most effective approach to the solution of the crisis issues namely in Ukrainian version. Given the fact that hybrid warfare includes both, system informational war and matters of informational aggravation, exactly the SCCT will be the most effective. It makes it possible to determine the risk level and ways to overcome the crisis, including tactical operations.

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