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CHANGING TO A DIFFERENT SHADE OF BLUE:
JETBLUE AND THE BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESSFUL CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

by

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B.A. Cleveland State University, 2001

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science
in the Nicholson School of Communication
in the College of Sciences
at the University of Central Florida
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Major Professor: Timothy Coombs

ABSTRACT

On February 14, 2007, JetBlue Airways experienced a major blow to their well-respected reputation when ten planes were delayed with passengers stranded on board for up to eight hours each. Through intense coverage and negative reporting from the media, JetBlue launched a multi-pronged crisis communication response strategy to repair the damage. Using Situational Crisis Communications Theory (SCCT) as a framework, the research in this study demonstrated the importance of crisis communications planning, corporate apoloia, corporate impression management, and image restoration within an organization. A discourse analysis was utilized to identify the types of messages delivered by the media, the crisis response strategies and tactics implemented by JetBlue, and stakeholder reactions to the JetBlue responses. Content from the messages were then placed in appropriate categories identifying the type of strategy and tactic utilized. Category definitions, examples of comments, and the identifying attributes were included to help support that JetBlue was successful in repairing and recovering their reputation.

There are several individuals that I am dedicating this project to as I never would have been able to succeed and persevere without their support, push, and love.

I owe tremendous thanks to my professional mentors, Dianne Owen and Jim Thornberry. Dianne is a mentor that everyone dreams of having, simply because she sees the best in you and won't let you give up on yourself. She also pushed me to complete my Masters for me – no one else. Graduate school would never have been possible without her. Jim Thornberry is my version of Obi-Wan and he lit a fire under me to make graduate school a reality.

My family is my bedrock and my brothers Will and Mike cheered me on every step of the way during my program, all through the hurdles going on simultaneously. They helped me to keep school a priority and for that I am grateful. I'm sorry that my grandmother is not here to see this accomplishment happen, especially since she is the reason that we were able to attend school and never have to worry. I know she is proud, but not as much as my parents. Thank you Mom and Dad for making education a priority for your children. Can't wait to see where my journey takes me knowing that you'll be there with me.

I have saved my greatest thanks for my husband Zachary. We both sacrificed a great deal the past two and a half years, and he made my graduate school experience a joy because of his support. He is my partner and best friend and I don't think I ever would have been able to finish this without him. He is a good sounding board and often served as an informal focus group for my ideas. I love you buddy.

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Thanks to Dr. Jennifer Sandoval for unknowingly planting the seed that pursuing a thesis would be the best choice for me. I had it in my head that a thesis would be too cumbersome, but her class is what inspired me to change my mind. It was by far the best decision I had made in my graduate school experience. She is a great mentor, patient, and roots for you to succeed. These two individuals have made an impact on me that I will always so thankful for.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

February 14, 2007. Ten JetBlue airplanes were grounded at New York's John F. Kennedy Airport for up to eight hours each due to an ice storm. Passengers were unable to de-plane as there were no available gates. Some planes' wheels were frozen to the ground. De-icing each aircraft took at least 30 minutes. What was the impact of this event on passengers? Passengers were essentially stranded in what one individual described as a "sound-proofed coffin" (www.cnn.com, 2007) with poor air circulation, low supplies of food and drinks, and a lack of fundamental communication from the flight crew. Said one stranded passenger, "One of the pilots should get out here and have a mini-press conference. The longer they wait, the more people are going to get upset" (www.cnn.com, 2007). Passengers were eventually able to disembark with buses from the port authority taking weary travelers back to the airport. JetBlue had offered to provide customers with a full-refund and a free future round-trip ticket for those that were stranded more than three hours. But the damage to the customer-organization relationship had already been done. *Consumerist.com* named the crisis one of the top ten biggest business debacles in 2007 (www.consumerist.com, 2007). Pop culture quickly coined it "the Valentine's Day Massacre" (Basulto, 2007).

Media coverage of the flight delay dominated the airwaves almost immediately, with all major networks and newspapers reporting that passengers were stranded and unsure when flights would again resume. Flights were cancelled on a Friday. JetBlue indicated to the media that the normal flight schedule would be in operation that Monday. Then flights were cancelled again, with normal operations not resuming until Wednesday, February 19, five days after the initial

delays. With the media recording and reporting JetBlue's every move, and disgruntled passengers venting their frustrations to both reporters and online social media sites, JetBlue's image suffered even further. The organization knew that they needed to respond to the public with more than one approach, particularly since they had little to no control over what was being communicated about JetBlue on television and radio, in print and online publications, and on online user message boards (Efthimiou, 2010).

JetBlue had been a highly successful and well regarded airline. It benefitted from a positive reputation with stakeholders, including customers. How would JetBlue recover from such a damaging event? How would the organization explain their lack of communication to their stakeholders? As *The New York Times* asked the next day, "Can one very bad week for JetBlue Airways wipe out years of industry-leading customer satisfaction ratings" (Bailey, 2007)?

This study will examine how JetBlue reacted to the crisis situation and worked to recover their reputation with the public, their stakeholders, and their customers. Using Situational Crisis Communications Theory (SCCT) as a framework, the research in this study will demonstrate the importance of crisis communications planning, corporate apologetics, corporate impression management, and image restoration within an organization. In addition to providing support through theory, a discourse analysis of rhetoric from both JetBlue executives and customers will analyze JetBlue's response to the aftermath of the flight delay and how the organization moved forward. Efthimiou (2010) succinctly states that, "although few knew it at the time, JetBlue's

culture of service, teamwork, and creativity would play an integral role in helping the company emerge from its Valentine's Day 2007 crisis" (pg. 120).

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis Communication Overview

An organization's reputation is as valuable to its financial bottom line as any other tangible asset. Maintaining a positive reputation can help an organization prosper both financially and socially. Reputation, though, can change in an instant. When an organization finds that its reputation is in jeopardy, how they react to the crisis can make or break its future. Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) describe an organizational crisis as a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event that disrupts the status quo or day-to-day operations of an organization. Others (e.g., Barton, 2001) have noted that crises can be a threat to organizational reputation. One focal point of crisis communication has been reputation protection and repair.

Crisis communications can be defined as an attempt to control information and avoid damage to an organization's reputation when an unexpected and dramatic event tarnishes its image (Greenberg & Elliott, 2009). Experts in crisis communication are responsible for forecasting potential crises and producing plans for how an individual or organization should respond to minimize damage and enforce recovery (Falkheimer & Heide, 2009). Greenberg and Elliott (2009) continue that at its core, crisis communication is all about the re-establishment of trust.

Crisis response management is divided into two categories: form (what to do) and content (what to say in the message) (Coombs, 2006). Coombs (2006) identifies three form lessons that need to be applied in crisis communication strategy: be quick, be consistent, and be open. Stephens et al. (2005), identify four stages of a crisis that most organizations inherently

follow. Stage one consists of early warning signs, which the organization can choose to address or ignore. In stage two, preparations for the crisis are put in place including any necessary training of crisis response teams. Stage three is damage control where crisis teams attempt to limit and minimize the impact. The final stage is recovery and learning from the crisis as a whole.

Every crisis situation is unique and while an exact procedure can't necessarily be followed for each incident, most crises do follow a similar blueprint. Crisis management plans are living documents and represent contingencies for as many scenarios as possible (Ihlen, 2010). Crisis communication planning includes finding the psychological, political, social, and economic connections in the disaster and planning for all possible "what if" scenarios (Reynolds, 2006). Organizations need to be cognizant though that crisis communication preparation does not oversimplify the situation when the crisis hits (Ihlen, 2010). Ihlen (2010) continues that a narrow vision of utilizing the existing plan should be avoided and flexibility to work within the plan is encouraged. Flexibility is also paramount as media pressure may cause an organization to change its response strategy at any point in the crisis (Ihlen, 2002).

The most critical step for an organization in any crisis is to respond to the situation by communicating with the stakeholders. Seeger and Padgett (2010) recognize that communication is a key emergency management and response activity serving a variety of important functions in pre-crisis, during the crisis, and post-crisis. In a crisis situation, the organization must be able to construct messages and have different systems in place to effectively cope with all phases of the crisis (Ihlen, 2010). A crisis creates high levels of uncertainty with stakeholders demonstrating a

need for immediate communication from the organization (Seeger & Padgett, 2010). A best practice for crisis communication is listening to the people's concerns in order to foster trust and credibility (Sandman, 2006). Selected strategies should also consider the needs of the public at that time (Holladay, 2009). The confusion for many leaders though is how they should respond and what they should say. According to Ihlen (2010):

“Too often what starts out as a relatively minor affair becomes a second-order crisis due to poor handling and communication by the organization in question. Its spokespersons will say ‘no comment,’ ‘this is a private matter,’ ‘we haven’t done anything wrong,’ or the classic that we all know from the schoolyard ‘are-you-any-better-than’” (pg. 108).

A crisis can be a chaotic situation, increasing the opportunity for rumors, misconceptions, and miscommunication to be rampant (Reynolds, 2006). Greenberg and Elliott (2009) state that during a crisis, an organization can rise to the occasion and reinforce its leadership, remain silent, or miscommunicate with the public entirely. Stakeholders also have a variety of channels to access news, making it imperative for crisis communication experts to understand not only how to respond to the crisis, but where to disseminate their messaging (Reynolds, 2006).

Spokespersons for the organizations should make themselves available in the early stages of the crisis and to establish a presence with journalists in order to dissuade others from becoming unofficial spokespersons, such as employees or crisis witnesses (Holladay, 2009). Holladay (2009) states that allowing others outside of the organization to emerge as primary sources of information or spokespersons is risky and can undermine the crisis management strategy. An absence of comments from the organization can be interpreted negatively by the public and will not prevent journalists from covering the story (Holladay, 2009). Consistency in crisis communication is key. It is advised that an organization speaks with one voice throughout

the crisis (Ihlen, 2002). The objective is to create a positive image during the crisis while ensuring consistency with the organization's core values (Reynolds, 2006).

Crisis Communications Strategies

It is critical that an organization choose the right form and content to help respond to a crisis. This can be accomplished by selecting the appropriate crisis response strategy or strategies. The following section describes several different crisis response strategies: corporate apoloia, corporate impression management, and image restoration theory. This section concludes with the explanation of Situational Crisis Communications Theory (SCCT), a method for crisis communication practitioners to utilize in order to help them select the right combination of crisis response and crisis management strategies.

Corporate Apoloia

Apoloia is "a well-established genre of self-defense" and its research was the first to systematically identify crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2006, pg. 176). Hearit (1994) was one of the first to define and popularize apoloia and clarified that apoloia is not necessarily an apology, but a defense that presents a compelling description of the organization's actions. Organizations use apoloia responses to help rebuild and restore their relationship with stakeholders (Coombs, 2006). Apoloia's roots started from an individual perspective and attributes were identified to help individuals accused of wrongdoing address the crisis situation (Tolleson, 2000). Apoloia strategies have since expanded to include organizations because "generally they are perceived as individuals by their stakeholders" (Coombs, 2006, pg. 176). Like individuals, organizations can also experience character attacks and appropriate self-defense strategies need to be implemented in order to appropriately address the crisis. When an

organization finds itself in a crisis, most will defend their reputation by claiming that they did not do it or that someone else was responsible (Greenberg & Elliot, 2009).

For those organizations that do accept responsibility and ask for forgiveness, an apology is not enough. The organization must communicate that it understands the impact of the events and how it will work to make things right again with stakeholders (Greenberg & Elliot, 2009). Organizational apologia is more complex though as whole structures and social processes must be dealt with, not just an individual's ethos (Ihlen, 2002).

Hearit (1994) identified three typical objectives an organization seeks in the midst of a crisis:

1. Present a narrative describing the situation in favorable terms and establishing certain premises;
2. Present a statement of regret to diffuse any hostility and anger toward the organization; and
3. Disassociate the organization from any wrongdoing or blame.

In addition, techniques of denial (no responsibility), bolstering (accepting responsibility while reinforcing something positive about the organization), differentiation (separating the crisis from a larger issue), and transcendence (placing the crisis in a new and different context) are common apologia responses utilized in any crisis situation (Meyer, 2008). Ihlen (2002) argues that Coombs' work in apologia goes further and describes Coombs' seven crisis communication strategies for apologia:

1. Attack. Confront or attack the accuser;

2. Deny. State that no crisis exists;
3. Excuse. Minimize the responsibility by denying intention, claiming no control;
4. Justify. Minimize the perceived damage by downplaying the seriousness of the situation;
5. Ingratiate. Take action to make stakeholders like the organization;
6. Correct. Take corrective action to repair the damage and take steps to avoid the same situation happening again in the future; and
7. Apologize. Offer a full apology.

For organizations that do accept a degree of or full responsibility for the crisis, the apologia responses utilize the following five elements (Hearit, 1994):

1. The organization presents its account of the crisis and its frame for the crisis events;
2. A statement of regret is issued while expressing compassion in the message;
3. Disassociation strategies of opinion/knowledge, individual/group, act/essence are selected based upon the crisis type;
4. The organization commits to identifying and resolving the problem that caused the crisis in the first place; and
5. The organization explains how it has acted to restore its values that were damaged by the crisis.

While corporate apologia is a common strategy in crisis management, there are limitations to its use (Coombs, 2006). Apologia strategies typically will focus on the before and after scenarios of the crisis and not necessarily what the organization should do during the crisis (Oles, 2012). Ihlen (2010) also warns that when an apology is made by an organization, most

often it appears as the statement is made under duress or that they are simply going through the motions. All the more reason that crisis managers not only have to ensure that spokespersons display the right level of empathy and compassion, messages must be delivered consistently and not sound rehearsed in apologia strategies.

Corporate Impression Management

Corporate impression management strategies focus on the legitimacy of the organization and the crisis. Legitimacy in this sense is the stakeholders' view and evaluation that an organization is good, conforming to the stakeholders' social rules (Coombs, 2006). According to Coombs (2006), when stakeholders see a violation of the social rules and begin to question the legitimacy of the organization, a crisis occurs prompting the organization to re-establish its legitimacy. Hooghiemstra (2000) states that impression management is how individuals present themselves in order to be perceived favorably by others. By using corporate impression management strategies effectively, an organization not only can contribute to its reputation, it can handle threats to its legitimacy (Hooghiemstra, 2000).

Like apologia, impression management has its own list of strategies to help crisis managers determine the best way to repair an organization's legitimacy. Allen and Caillouet (1994) are credited with defining the following strategies:

1. Excuse. Trying to reduce the organization's responsibility in the crisis;
2. Justification. When the organization tries to deflect any negatives associated with the organization during the crisis while accepting some degree of responsibility for the situation;

3. Ingratiation. Trying to gain stakeholder approval of the organization through self-enhancing communication (reminding stakeholders of the organization's positive qualities), other-enhancing communication (offering praise and flattery to stakeholders), and opinion conformity (expressing beliefs or values similar to those of the stakeholders);
4. Intimidation. The organization states it has the power in the situation and will use it against stakeholders or condemners, often including a threat;
5. Apology. Accepting responsibility for the crisis and asking for punishment;
6. Denouncement. Blaming an external person or group for the crisis; and
7. Factual distortion. Claiming that statements or descriptions of the crisis are untrue or taken out of context.

Comparing the list of impression management strategies to Coombs' seven crisis response strategies previously listed, corporate impression management helps to expand the list of crisis response options and reinforces the idea that different crisis responses should be targeted to different stakeholders (Coombs, 2006). While these responses can certainly help an organization reinforce its legitimacy with stakeholders, it is only one piece to helping shape a complete crisis response strategy. Other crisis response strategies, like image restoration theory, take the foundations of corporate apoloia and corporate impression management to identify more situational factors that affect the selection of response strategies and create more response options for the organization.

Image Restoration Theory

Protecting an organization's image and reputation is a constant process of constructing, defining, and preserving. When a crisis happens, it is imperative to take the essential steps to

begin repairing it immediately (Oles, 2010). Communication is vital to image restoration and repair and also plays a central role in recovery, rebuilding, and renewal (Seeger & Padgett, 2010). Image restoration theory, the use of communication strategies to repair and restore an organization's image due to its wrongdoings (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000), is a strategy used by crisis communication managers to help the organization explain its behavior in the crisis situation (Coombs, 2006). William Benoit is most widely associated with image restoration theory and developing strategies under this discipline. Benoit's framework is based on the assumption that an organization's reputation and image are valuable commodities and, when a threat occurs, communication can help begin the repair process (Seeger & Padgett, 2010). Erickson and Segovia (2011) state that Benoit created his theory based on the assumption that, because of a negative image, the individual or organization's motivation to restore its image is one of the main goals for communicating with stakeholders. Jung et al. (2011) describes image restoration as a process of winning the marketplace of ideas by interpreting what has happened and who is responsible or at fault. They continue that image restoration can be used as an opportunity, as opposed to a detriment, for an organization to improve and renew its reputation with stakeholders (Jung et al, 2011).

Image restoration strategies are most often associated with organizations that have caused or contributed to a crisis and organizations that have failed to respond effectively to the crisis (Seeger & Padgett, 2010). Benoit and Czerwinski (1997) state that when an individual or organization's image is threatened, there are two critical components that shape the image restoration strategies: the accused is held responsible for an act and the act is portrayed as

offensive. Like apologia, image restoration theory has specific strategies for responding to a crisis and includes (Benoit, 1995) (Len-Rios, 2010) (Coombs, 2006):

1. Denial. When the organization claims that there is no crisis. This strategy also includes simple denial (organization says it did not perform the act) and shift the blame (organization blames others for the crisis);
2. Evading responsibility. When the organization attempts to reduce the responsibility for the crisis through provocation (someone else forced the organization into the crisis), defeasibility (the organization lacked the necessary information or ability to prevent the crisis), accident (a mistake was made), and good intentions (the actions by the organization were meant to be positive);
3. Reducing offensiveness. When the organization makes the crisis appear more positive through bolstering (reinforcing its good traits), minimization (stating the crisis is not serious), differentiation (explains that the crisis is not as bad as similar crises), transcendence (crisis related to achieving a larger goal), attack the accuser (trying to discredit the accuser), and compensation (offering some sort of aid to the victims);
4. Corrective action. The organization takes steps to solve the problem and prevent the crisis from happening again. Corrective action also indicates that the organization is acknowledging that it does bear some responsibility for the crisis;
5. Mortification. When the organization accepts responsibility, apologizes for the crisis, and asks for forgiveness; and

6. Separation. When the organization explains that the act violated its policies, identifies a scapegoat, and takes corrective action.

According to Coombs and Schmidt (2000), the strategy of image restoration begins by identifying the words and actions the organization uses to defend its image. Once identified, the words and actions used are then placed in the appropriate categories listed above. Critics then review whether these strategies were successful to defending the organization's image. Seeger and Padgett (2010) warn that image restoration has the potential to be perceived by the public and stakeholders as spin. Their argument is that strategic responses can appear as a calculated and premeditated activity designed to create a specific outcome. While not the intent of image restoration, this is another concern that crisis communication experts need to be cognizant of when planning. Benoit (2000) also challenges the idea of image restoration and argues that image repair may be a more accurate term as the word "restoration" implies that one's image has been restored to its previous state. In the event of a crisis, it would not be realistic to think that an organization would return to its exact same image prior to the crisis. The image can certainly be similar, but it won't necessarily be exactly what it was before.

The menu of crisis communication response strategies and tactics are abundant, but it can be overwhelming to make the best selection in the midst of a crisis. Below is a summary of these various approaches to help crisis communication practitioners narrow down the menu of strategies to select:

Table 1 Overview of Crisis Response Strategies

Response Strategy	Key Researcher(s)	Overview	Strategies
Apologia	K.M. Hearit	A defense that presents a compelling description of the organization's actions; not necessarily an apology; describes the situation in favorable terms; present statement of regret to diffuse any hostility and anger; disassociate the organization from wrongdoing or blame; focuses on before and after the crisis, not during	Attack Deny Excuse Justify Ingratiate Correct Apologize
Corporate Impression Management	M. Allen and R.H. Caillouet	Focus on legitimacy of the organization and the crisis; how individuals present themselves in order to be perceived favorably by others; can contribute to its reputation and handle threats to legitimacy; only one part to a complete crisis response strategy	Excuse Justification Ingratiation Intimidation Apology Denouncement Factual distortion
Image Restoration Theory	William Benoit	Use of communication strategies to repair and restore an organization's image due to its wrongdoings; helps the organization explain its behavior in the crisis; reputation and image are valuable; most often associated with organizations that contributed to the crisis or failed to respond; accused is held responsible for the act and the act is portrayed as offensive; can appear too calculated and premeditated	Denial Evading responsibility Reducing offensiveness Corrective action Mortification Separation

Situational Crisis Communications Theory

Crisis management leaders need be aware of their various communication options during a crisis. However, effective crisis communication involves more than just knowing the list of possible responses. The larger concern is how to select the appropriate crisis response for the crisis that is at hand. Situational Crisis Communications Theory (SCCT) provides research-based results guided by theory to help organizations appropriately match crisis response strategies with the nature and extent of the specific crisis situation (Coombs, 2006). In SCCT, an appropriate response is defined as one that serves to best protect the organization's reputation. Coombs (2006) further states:

“The crisis situation is the focal point of SCCT. The amount of reputational damage a crisis situation can inflict drives the selection of the crisis response strategy. SCCT holds that the potential reputational damage from a crisis is a function of crisis responsibility and of intensifying factors. A review of these factors sets the stage for a discussion of how to assess the reputational threat posed by a crisis situation” (pg. 243).

Early work in crisis communications theory began in the 1980s and focused on a practical approach for predicting and preparing for a crisis and how to communicate effectively (Howell & Miller, 2010). This early theory argued that a crisis follows a certain life cycle or pattern that could be used as a blueprint (Howell & Miller, 2010). Howell and Miller (2010) continue that Coombs advanced work in crisis communication theory by suggesting that each crisis situation possesses particular characteristics that require the use of specific strategies and avoidance of others.

In a crisis, the organization utilizes different communication strategies to help realign its identity and reputation with the normative expectations of the customers and stakeholders (Greenberg & Elliot, 2009). Coombs (2006) took these crisis strategies even further by

combining corporate apologia, corporate impression management, and image restoration theory to develop an even more extensive list of crisis response strategies for SCCT based upon the level of responsibility of acceptance (very high acceptance to no acceptance). The theory also presumes that stakeholders will attribute the cause of a crisis to the organization and, to some degree, external factors (Ihlen, 2010).

The focus on responsibility reflects SCCT's roots in Attribution Theory. In Attribution Theory, people seek reasons for the causes of an event, especially negative events. People will attribute causes to either the people involved in the event (internal) or to situational factors (external) (Weiner, 1986). People react more negatively when they perceive the cause as internal rather than external. Crises are negative events so people will naturally make attributions about the cause of crises. Stakeholders assign greater responsibility to a crisis when they attribute the cause to internal rather than external factors. In turn, the attributions of crisis responsibility shape how people react to the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

The crisis situation and the degree to which stakeholders associate responsibility for the crisis is the focal point of SCCT (Coombs, 2004). According to Coombs (2004), the crisis increases the threat to an organization's reputation as the attributions of crisis responsibility become more intense. The amount of reputational damage a crisis situation can inflict drives the selection of the crisis response strategy. SCCT holds that the potential reputational damage from a crisis is a function of crisis responsibility and of intensifying factors. A review of these factors sets the stage for a discussion of how to assess the reputational threat posed by a crisis situation.

SCCT utilizes four attributes to help crisis management leaders assess the magnitude of the threat: crisis type, severity of damage, crisis history, and relationship history (Coombs, 2006). The type of crisis will determine what overall strategy the crisis response team will use to address the situation. The severity of the damage “represents the amount of financial, physical, environmental, or emotional harm a crisis can inflict” (Coombs, 2006, pg. 243). Crisis history represents an organization’s previous experiences with crises and the relationship history “refers to the quality of the interactions between an organization and its stakeholders” (Coombs, 2006, pg. 244).

By understanding the magnitude of the crisis, crisis communication experts are able to go further and identify the type of frame to assign. A crisis frame is used to guide individuals’ basic interpretations of the situation and establish which cues should be the focal point for creating attributions of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2004). The crisis type/frame is the first step in assessing the attributions of crisis responsibility created by crisis. Coombs (2004) identifies ten types of crisis frames within SCCT: natural disaster, rumor, product tampering, workplace violence, challenges, technical error product recall, technical-error accident, human-error product recall, human error accident, and organizational misdeed.

These frames are further grouped into clusters providing a more streamlined method for identifying the appropriate response strategies (Coombs, 2004). The clusters crisis communication experts can utilize are victim, accidental, and intentional (Coombs, 2004). Coombs (2004) defines the three clusters as the following: a victim cluster represent a low reputational threat and contains crisis types of minimal crisis responsibility due to external forces

driving the situation (a natural disaster); an accidental cluster represent a crisis type that produces minimal attributions of crisis responsibility and a moderate level of damage to the organization's reputation (technical-error product recall); and an intentional cluster produces a crisis type of strong attributions of crisis responsibility and the potential of serious threat to the organization (management knowingly violating regulations).

Once the basic crisis type is identified, the second step in assessing attributions of crisis responsibility is to analyze the intensifying factors. The intensifying factors increase attributions of crisis responsibility and include crisis history and prior reputation. Understanding the crisis history is integral to identifying the magnitude of the threat. Coombs (2004) states:

“Past crises are a potential indicator of stability because they suggest a particular pattern of behavior. The existence of one or more crises may indicate that the current crisis is part of a pattern (stable) rather than an isolated incident (unstable). Therefore, a history of past crises could lead to stronger attributions of organizational responsibility” (pg. 272).

As Coombs (2004) points out though, information about a crisis history appears to matter most when the organization has a previous unfavorable history with its stakeholders. Coombs and Holladay (2001) coin this the “Velcro effect”: an organization's negative performance history increases the attributions of crisis responsibility while a positive performance history appears to have little to no effect. A history of similar crises can lower the perception of an organization's reputation (Coombs, 2004). Crisis communication managers that account for the effects of a crisis history will be better prepared to create and target messages that more effectively protect the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2004). A negative prior reputation has

a similar affect to past crises. A negative prior reputation will intensify attributions of a crisis and increase the reputational damage inflicted by a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

With SCCT, the fundamentals of the theory propose that as an organization's crisis responsibility intensifies, strategies that reflect a greater sense of accepting responsibility should be selected (Coombs, 2006). The key is trying to determine the strength of the crisis attributions stakeholders are likely to form. The crisis manager is then prepared to take the above information and select the appropriate strategies to most closely match the crisis.

The content selected during the crisis can have serious ramifications for the level of success of the crisis management effort (Coombs, 2012). The key goals for a successful crisis management plan include preventing or minimizing damage, maintaining the organization's operations, and repairing any damage to the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2012). This can be achieved through clear and concise communications, dividing the response content into three different categories: instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation management (Coombs, 2012).

Instructing information "focuses on telling stakeholders what to do to protect themselves physically in a crisis. People are the first priority in any crisis, so instructing information must come first" (Coombs, 2012, pg. 146). Adjusting information helps stakeholders cope with the crisis, providing details of what happened and how the crisis can be avoided in the future. Coombs (2012) states that "stakeholders are reassured when they know that the crisis is being controlled" (pg. 150). Coombs (2012) argues that instructing information and adjusting information are the foundation for any crisis response and if handled successfully, reputation

management strategies, like the ones references earlier, may not be necessary. Crises that do require reputation management strategies, though, must be analyzed carefully to ensure that the appropriate and correct responses are selected. The wrong selection of strategies can damage an organization's reputation further.

Crises in the Airline Industry

Crises in the airline industry are not uncommon. It is subject to minimal to catastrophic disasters due to a combination of technical, human, and weather factors (Coombs, 2003). The airline industry's relationship with crisis management is one of complete vulnerability and having multi-agency responses to a crisis (Coombs, 2003). Most important, it can demonstrate the importance and effectiveness of crisis response strategies:

“The airline industry teaches us how an industry can come together in a crisis and, with effective management, reveal truths about its processes for the purpose of improving conditions to prevent future recurrences” (Ray, 1999, pg. 260).

One of the first major disasters reported was the explosion of the Hindenburg in 1928, killing 48 passengers and crew. A radio announcer covering the arrival of the flight famously cried “Oh the humanity” upon witnessing the explosion. Decades later, and with vast improvements to aviation technology and innovations, the airline industry was still not immune to disasters in the sky. In 1988, Pan Am Flight 103 bound from London to New York crashed into the town of Lockerbie, Scotland, killing all 259 passengers and 11 people on the ground (www.washingtonpost.com, 2012). The cause of the crash was due to a bomb planted on board resulting in one of the most catastrophic airline disasters in history.

While aircraft failure and crashes are catastrophic, airline crises don't always happen in the sky. Labor strikes by the pilots and personnel can have a tremendous negative impact to the airline's reputation. In 2000, more than 10,000 United Airlines pilots went on strike resulting in thousands of flights being cancelled and with more than \$50 million in reported losses for the organization (www.pbs.org, 2000). Customers became increasingly frustrated as the airline did not provide straight answers regarding the situation. Some were told that the cancellations were due to weather and it was communicated to others that the labor union issues did have some impact (www.pbs.org, 2000). In any case, the lack of consistent communication combined with the labor dispute led to decreased revenue for the airline.

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has also been under scrutiny for its treatment of passengers at security screening checkpoints. In 2011, two elderly women filed complaints with the TSA for what they claimed to be invasive and inappropriate personal searches, including the removal of clothing to disclose personal medical devices (www.cbsnews.com, 2011). The TSA did issue an apology, but denied any wrongdoing in these situations and made a commitment to provide refresher training for its employees (www.usatoday.com, 2012).

How do these situations compare with the crisis the JetBlue experienced in 2007? No matter what type of crisis, consistent communication within the organization and with stakeholders is critical. While the "Valentine's Day Massacre" of 2007 in no way compares to the magnitude of the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, it does stand out as a major crisis because

JetBlue clearly was unprepared to handle the flight delay situation and did not know how to communicate.

About JetBlue

JetBlue Airlines was founded in 1999 by David Neeleman and was considered to be the first “mega start-up” applicant in the nation with \$130 million in equity capital (www.jetblue.com, 2012). Neelman came from Southwest Airlines and had experience in starting up several airlines (Maynard, 2008). Based in John F. Kennedy’s International Airport in New York, Neelman said of the airline in 1999, “We want to be New York's new low-fare, hometown airline. JetBlue will bring to the city a superior product at a very affordable price, on average, 65 percent less than current fares on some routes; call it a new shade of blue.” (www.jetblue.com, 2012). Passengers at the time were frustrated with paying then record air fares and slowdowns due to events like pilot strikes (Maynard, 2008). The new airline’s goal was to simply “treat customers great” (Maynard, 2008).

Its inaugural flight took off in February 2000 and by the end of its first year more than one million passengers flew with the airline (www.jetblue.com, 2011). Prior to the crisis, JetBlue ranked high in customer satisfaction among low-cost airlines and was known for its consumer-friendly reputation (Ostrowski, 2010). The airline expanded quickly across the nation, growing 30 percent a year (Maynard, 2008). JetBlue was regarded for its innovations in customer satisfaction on board and its reliability for on-time flights. In 2006, of all of JetBlue’s total flights for that year, only 0.19 percent had flight delays of more than two hours (Bailey, 2007). During the fourth quarter of 2006, it achieved a completion factor of 99.6 percent of scheduled flights versus 98.9 percent in the fourth quarter of 2005 (www.jetblue.com, 2012).

JetBlue was named as the “Best Low Cost/No Frills Airline” for two years in a row by OAG, a global travel and transport information company, beating out 42 other airlines and airports (www.jetblue.com, 2012). In 2006, Conde Nast selected JetBlue as the “Best Domestic Airline” for the fifth year in a row in their Readers’ Choice Awards (www.jetblue.com, 2012). "I'm tremendously proud of the efforts our crewmembers have made in advancing our plan to institutionalize low-cost carrier spending habits and improve revenue overall," said Neelman in January of 2007 about its 2006 performance. He continued that, “We are optimistic about what lies ahead as we seek to further improve our financial and operating performance” (www.jetblue.com, 2012).

JetBlue spent years cultivating a solid and winning reputation for customer service in the airline industry. Then on February 14, 2007, as Matt Lauer pointedly stated during an interview with David Neeleman, their reputation was “flushed down the drain overnight” (www.youtube.com, 2007). Part of what helped JetBlue overcome their crisis was effective public relations between the organization and the stakeholders that had already been in place. As Ihlen (2010) states, organizations that have established positive public relations with their stakeholders can help them weather a crisis, recuperate, learn, and improve.

In the case of JetBlue, the crisis response team identified that this type of crisis warranted communication strategies that went beyond just instructing and adjusting information to reputation repair. The severity of damage in this situation included financial loss for passengers and the organization, physical distress in the form of passengers being stranded in poor conditions on board, and emotional damage to passengers due to lack of communication from the

flight crew and corporate. Prior to this crisis, JetBlue was consistently ranked near the top in service within the airline industry (Bailey, 2007). While JetBlue did not have a previous crisis history, their relationship history was essentially wiped out overnight due to negative press and poor communication between the organization and its customers during the crisis. Not only did JetBlue need to repair their image and re-establish legitimacy, they needed to sincerely apologize to their customers. Their response strategies would ultimately decide the future of the organization.

If crisis researchers are correct, how JetBlue responded to negative media during the crisis could have significant impact on its ability to recover reputationally from the crisis. The first question to ask is:

RQ1: What messages did the media provide to the public following the JetBlue flight delay on February 14?

The second question specifically addresses JetBlue's response and asks:

RQ2: What crisis communication strategies did JetBlue utilize to respond to the negative media and publicity?

An organization's response to a crisis is only part of the equation. An early criticism of crisis communication research is that it was too sender-focused and concerned only with what

the organization said and did after the crisis (Lee, 2004). To fully understand the effects of crisis communication, we must understand how stakeholders reacted to the crisis communication efforts. The stakeholder reactions are indicators of the success or failure of the crisis communication effort. After all, one goal of crisis communication is to have a favorable impact on stakeholders. The third question is:

RQ3: What were stakeholders' reactions to JetBlue's crisis communication responses?

A thorough discourse analysis will answer the proposed research questions and demonstrate whether JetBlue's perseverance in a major organizational crisis was successful.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the proposed research questions, a thorough analysis of customer online comments and JetBlue online comments and responses were the best source of available data to review. Careful analysis of message threads helped to determine which crisis communications strategies JetBlue selected. Reviewing and analyzing the comments helped to explicate the nature of the success the crisis response plan in order for other companies to be successful. Additional comments regarding other crisis events JetBlue experienced after 2007 were analyzed to review its communications success with stakeholders in the long-term.

Data Collection

The data for this paper was collected from several renowned online news web sites and social media sites and is a small subset of all available posts. The data collected are messages posted online by JetBlue representatives and comments posted by online users of those sites. These comments are publicly available and are posted voluntarily on an individual basis.

As this study is a discourse analysis and does not require the identification of users, it was determined to refrain from contacting any moderators or organizational officials for permission to observe their communities. The information included on these web sites is publicly available and to ensure the safety and privacy of users the “Terms of Use” sections of the selected sites have been thoroughly reviewed.

Procedure

A discourse analysis was utilized to examine the collected data. Gee (2011b) describes discourse analysis as the study of how people use language to both say things and to do things. Discourse analysts examine the details of speech or writing that are “deemed relevant in the

context and that are relevant to the arguments the analysis is attempting to make” (pg. 117). Gee (2011) further defines seven building tasks of language to help analysts ask questions, examine lexical choices, and identify patterns within the selected piece of the language-in-use. The building tasks are: significance, practices (activities), identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems or knowledge. The building tasks help to validate this approach by demonstrating that the collected data support the proposed research questions (Gee, 2011).

Following Len-Rios’ (2010) research design of reviewing the image repair strategies selected by Duke University officials in the wake of a 2008 scandal with the school’s men’s lacrosse team, this study also examines the types of crisis response strategies selected by JetBlue and the actual language used by the media, airline spokespersons, and the general public. In Len-Rios’ (2010) study, the effectiveness of Duke’s crisis communication strategy was evaluated by analyzing the local news coverage and attitudinal and behavioral measures. A rhetorical analysis of the crisis response strategies of apologia and image restoration was selected, along with a quantitative content analysis of local news stories published during the crisis (Len-Rios, 2010). As Len-Rios (2010) explained further:

“After initial categorization, the author created a chart recategorizing the message strategies by (1) rhetorical option (e.g., “simple denial”), (2) date, (3) accusation prompting response, (4) rhetor, and (5) the text of what was written/said. In addition, a separate table was developed to determine the number of times a rhetor delivered a response and to identify the intended public” (pg. 274).

Once these categories were defined and organized, further coding categorization for the content analysis included: *story prominence*, *theme of the story*, and *portrayal of actors* (Len-

Rios, 2010). The data collection tables displayed in this analysis followed those identified by Len-Rios.

The data examined in this study was completed by hand as opposed to using word counts and automated key word searches and listings. Analyzing the full context helped to identify connections between the crisis communication strategies and stakeholder reactions.

The first step of this discourse analysis began by using the rhetorical strategies of frequency and intensity to answer RQ1: what messages did the media provide to the public following the JetBlue flight delay on February 14? Twelve headlines from major news outlets including *USA Today*, *MSNBC*, *Fox News*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *Forbes*, and *the New York Times* were analyzed from February 14, 2007 through February 21, 2007. Patterns of frequently used lexicon, word choice, and intensity of the language helped to establish a clear need for JetBlue to address the crisis with the public as quickly as possible. Headlines were examined to search for negative, unflattering, and adverse language.

In order to best answer RQ2 and understand what strategies JetBlue utilized to respond to the negative media and publicity, a February 15, 2007, online message from CEO David Neelman and a February 16, 2007 interview with David Neelman on *The Today Show* were examined. Both videos were accessed through You Tube. Neelman's actual words from his responses were analyzed, including the lexical choices, the frequency that key terms appeared consistently, and the intensity of the word choices. Each of the identified key words and the format of the comments were divided into separate clusters and then into separate categories. In order to define the crisis response strategy categories utilized by JetBlue, the discourse analysis

identified the following as the most frequently used types of word choices and phrases in these posts: *apologies, accepting responsibility, acknowledging a problem existed, corrective action, compensation and damages, and accountability.*

Once the categories were defined, dialogue from the online messages were matched with a particular crisis communication strategy from that category, all identified previously in the literature review. Using the crisis strategies, lexical choices were analyzed looking for key words and frequently used content based upon the type of each response strategy. The collected data from the key word searches was organized and coded under the appropriate crisis communication tactic and strategy. These coding and categorical assignments further explained how and which strategies/tactics JetBlue utilized to respond to the media.

To answer RQ3, a similar discourse analysis was performed to understand what stakeholders reactions were to JetBlue's crisis communication response. Online users' responses to the previous You Tube videos and reactions on the website Yelp, a social networking and customer review site were analyzed. Reviews and comments from Yelp guests were reviewed from February 14, 2007 through February 14, 2008. Each comment in this section was analyzed to determine which crisis communication tactic influenced the discourse provided by the online user. Comments were examined to search for language that was supportive, understanding, and forgiving. Key word and word type searches included: *not their fault, bad weather, still like, other airlines, I'll fly, and accept responsibility.* In addition, the intensity of the comments was analyzed by searching for excessive punctuation and words written in all caps, exhibiting strong feelings about the issue at hand.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

In the aftermath of the February 14 flight delays, the media reported the incident in the frame of a crisis, setting the stage for JetBlue to launch a reactive response. Reviewing headlines from the *New York Times*, *Forbes*, *MSNBC*, *USA Today*, *Fox News*, and *Time*, Table 2 displays a sample of news stories that appeared from February 17, 2007 through February 20, 2007.

The most frequent word choices included: *long*, *delay*, *upset*, *costs*, and *frustration*. By using these word choices, the media attributed blame to JetBlue implying that the airline was at fault, negligent, and irresponsible. Even with a statement provided by JetBlue on the evening of February 14 and despite the uncontrollable weather conditions, the media's lexical choices for their headlines set the stage for the airline to absorb all blame, causing heavy damage to their reputation.

Analyzing the headlines below, these media outlets took an approach that veered toward the negative by selecting word choices including: *mortified*, *survival*, *struggles*, *misery*, *stings*, *snafu*, and *stranded*. The media helped to paint a picture of chaos and confusion even before the organization had the opportunity to respond. It also portrayed the airline as incompetent (*snafu*) and unorganized (*stranded* and *survival*). With headlines like these, JetBlue had no choice but to address the situation as quickly and openly as possible.

Table 2 JetBlue Crisis Aftermath New Stories

Date	Publication	Headline
February 16, 2007	<i>MSNBC</i>	“JetBlue apologizes after passengers stranded “
February 16, 2007	<i>USA Today</i>	“Fliers' misery stings JetBlue”
February 17, 2007	<i>New York Times</i>	“Long Delays Hurt Image of JetBlue”
February 19, 2007	<i>USA Today</i>	“JetBlue cancels more flights into Monday as it struggles with storm aftermath”
February 19, 2007	<i>New York Times</i>	“JetBlue’s C.E.O. Is ‘Mortified’ After Fliers Are Stranded”
February 19, 2007	<i>MSNBC</i>	“More JetBlue flights canceled Monday”
February 19, 2007	<i>FOX News</i>	“JetBlue Cancels Almost a Quarter of its Flights”
February 20, 2007	<i>Forbes</i>	“JetBlue's Survival School”
February 20, 2007	<i>MSNBC</i>	“JetBlue snafu could cost \$30 million or more”
February 20, 2007	<i>FOX News</i>	“JetBlue Says Delays Could Cost \$30 Million”
February 20, 2007	<i>Washington Post</i>	“At JetBlue, a Pattern of Delays”
February 21, 2007	<i>Time</i>	“Can JetBlue Weather the Storm?”

Before they could respond, they had to determine the type of crisis and which strategies would help diffuse the situation best. As Coombs (2004) states, this crisis particular crisis could be described as an intentional cluster, as the events produced strong attributions of crisis responsibility and carried a serious threat to the organization. In this case, JetBlue management knowingly chose not to address the situation as it was occurring leaving passengers and stakeholders in the dark. With the crisis type identified, the next step was to select an appropriate response strategy that would reduce the negative effects of the intentional crisis.

Using the previous definitions and examples of apologia, JetBlue recognized the need to present a statement of regret that included an apology. Apologia alone though would not be a strong enough crisis response strategy. In order to help reestablish the organization's legitimacy with stakeholders, corporate impression was another crisis communication strategy that JetBlue utilized in their plan. Image restoration theory was also selected for the response plan, focusing on tactics to help the organization repair and restore its image due to wrongdoing and explaining their actions during the crisis to stakeholders. This multi-pronged crisis communication approach provide JetBlue with the flexibility to respond appropriately and accordingly in the media.

To answer RQ2, one simply needs to visit the Internet to see how JetBlue responded. In the days following the crisis, David Neeleman issued profuse public apologies on network television, on the video-sharing site YouTube, on newspaper front pages, and on the JetBlue website (www.consumeraffairs.com, 2007). Specifically addressing the JetBlue customers and stakeholders, Neeleman posted a message online called "Our Promise to You" on Monday,

February 19, 2007 (www.youtube.com, 2007) explaining what happened and how they would make it up to their customers, including the introduction of a new JetBlue Customer Bill of Rights. Neeleman next appeared on *The Today Show* on Tuesday, February 20, 2007, to respond to the criticism (www.youtube.com, 2007). Using these two examples, Table 3 displays direct quotes from the messages and demonstrated JetBlue's crisis response category selection. Specific strategies under each category are further identified in the analysis.

Categories for this analysis included: (1) apologia, (2) corporate impression management, and (3) image restoration theory. Based upon the previously defined procedure for this analysis, for apologia tactics, key words and types of words most frequently identified included: *accountable, our system, corporate structure, customer loyalty and experience, making things right, and no excuses*. Corporate impression management tactics key words and types included: *confidence, apology, sorry, transparency, and explanation of events*. Finally, image restoration tactics key words and types included: *thank you, compensation, money, refund, making changes, reassurance, and lessons learned*.

Reviewing the discourse from these two messages, JetBlue utilized more than one crisis response strategy to address the negative media. While there was a clear plan to formulate the content of the crisis response, there was a missed opportunity regarding the form of the response. Coombs (2006) states that in any crisis, the organization must be quick, consistent, and open. Looking at these two different messages, JetBlue was consistent and open in their discourse. Both messages demonstrated sincere apologies, clear explanations for what happened, and how they would correct the problem. This is representative in the word and phrase choices selected

by Neelman for both responses that include: *accountable, right thing to do, confidence, working around the clock, learned a painful lesson, trust, weakness in our system, apologize, never happen again, making major changes, and communicating with you.* Their success with message consistency was attributed to Neelman ensuring that his responses did not sound rehearsed and were more genuine.

It is also important to note that the words *we* and *I* are listed in every response in Table 2. By using these words consistently in the messaging, Neelman did not deflect or try to separate himself from the crisis. Rather, he created a sense of shared responsibility throughout the entire JetBlue organization, trying to absorb most of the blame. Those same words also reflected a more personal situation, working to establish an open line of communication among the organization and stakeholders rather than between. In a nutshell, it was not an “us versus them” situation: it was a more collective “we” situation.

Table 3 JetBlue’s Crisis Response Strategies

Crisis Response Category	Strategy Utilized	Video Clip	Message and Statement from JetBlue
Apologia	Organization presents its account of the crisis	Our Promise to You	“We can ignore it and pretend that it was an operational issue, but it wasn’t.”
Apologia	Statement of regret	<i>Today Show</i> <i>Today Show</i>	“We had a weakness in our system.” “We want to do this [customer bill of rights] because it’s the right thing to do.”
Apologia	Disassociation strategy	Our Promise to You	“We want you to have confidence in us. We’ve been here for seven years and have taken care of you for seven years.”
Apologia	Identify and resolve the problem	Our Promise to You	“We are making it easier to get through the phones and talk to us.”
		Our Promise to You	“We are tripling the size of our main headquarters.”
Apologia	Restore damaged values	Our Promise to You <i>Today Show</i>	“We have people working around the clock.” “We’ve learned a painful lesson. We have this determination to be better than we’ve ever been overnight.”
Corporate Impression Management	Ingratiation	Our Promise to You Our Promise to You	“I ask for your business and your trust.” “We want you to have confidence in us. We’ve been here for seven years and have taken care of you for seven years.”
Corporate Impression Management	Apology	<i>Today Show</i>	“We’re going to make sure we apologize to the customers and explain what went wrong.”
Corporate Impression Management	Justification	<i>Today Show</i>	“We’ll be held accountable by a laser beam focus. We don’t set out to not take care of our customers.”

Crisis Response Category	Strategy Utilized	Video Clip	Message and Statement from JetBlue
Image Restoration	Bolstering	Our Promise to You	“We’re going to be a much better airline for this.”
		<i>Today Show</i>	“This is a defining moment in our company. We have learned a painful lesson. It affected us to our core.”
Image Restoration	Compensation	<i>Today Show</i>	“We are retroacting our new bill of rights for all customers that were affected by these delays.”
		<i>Today Show</i>	“We are paying between \$20 to \$30 million in payback to passengers. We’ll make sure they know we apologize.”
Image Restoration	Corrective action	Our Promise to You	“We are making some major changes in our organization to make sure this never happens again.”
Image Restoration	Mortification	Our Promise to You	“We want to assure you that the events that transpired last week and the way they transpired will never happen again.”
Image Restoration	Full apology	<i>Today Show</i>	“Accountability rests with the CEO. We’re going to be held accountable day in day out for our actions.”
		Our Promise to You	“Thank you, stay tuned, we look forward to communicating with you.”

The organization, however, was not quick in their response. The media reported the crisis that same day. JetBlue delivered its first news release late on February 14, apologizing to customers and calling the day's events unacceptable (Efthimiou, 2010). Yet Neelman did not appear in the media to address the situation until February 19. Had JetBlue executives responded more quickly, the extensive use of apologies may not have been necessary. Tactics like evading responsibility due to the weather, could have been utilized as part of JetBlue's explanation of the crisis if they had responded more quickly, especially while the storms were still in motion. JetBlue was at fault, but a more timely response could have left the door open for other and fewer crisis response strategies. An apology would have been warranted regardless, yet the speed in which they responded only helped escalate an already intense situation.

As part of their compensation and corrective action tactics, JetBlue introduced a new JetBlue Customer Bill of Rights on February 20, 2007 (Jaffe, 2007). Passengers' bill of rights had been something that travelers had been campaigning for, even asking Congress to pass federal legislation to protect customers (Jaffe, 2007). The JetBlue crisis provided the organization an opportunity to both repair its damaged reputation and offer a solution to those fighting for improved passenger rights. The opening of the JetBlue Airways Customer Bill of Rights states (www.jetblue.com, 2012):

“JetBlue is dedicated to bringing humanity back to air travel. We strive to make every part of your experience as simple and pleasant as possible. Unfortunately, there are times when things do not go as planned. If you're inconvenienced as a result, we think it is important that you know exactly what you can expect from us. That's why we created our Customer Bill of Rights. These Rights will always be subject to the highest level of safety and security for our customers and crewmembers” (pg. 1).

This service guarantee provided compensation for customers experiencing cancellations, delays, and overbookings and included specific levels of time delays and a specific compensation amount (www.jetblue.com, 2012). For example, “passengers will receive \$25 off a future flight if their arrival is delayed by 30 minutes, and will receive full credit for a return flight if the delay lasts two hours or more” (Jaffe, 2007). While the Customer Bill of Rights was introduced after the Valentine’s Day crisis, JetBlue retroactively applied the compensation to all passengers affected by the delays, costing JetBlue more than \$20 million (Springer, 2007). Reactions from stakeholders helped to determine whether their \$20 million recovery efforts would pay off.

To answer RQ3, Table 4 displays direct quotes from You Tube users that viewed the interview with David Neeleman on *The Today Show*, days after the crisis. In addition, customer quotes from the website Yelp, a social networking and customer review site, provided reviews and comments from Yelp guests in the days following the crisis. Comments displayed also show each individual’s user identification.

Reviewing the data below, it can be argued that the crisis communication tactics utilized by JetBlue influenced stakeholder responses and comments. The analysis demonstrated that more favorable comments appeared on these websites instead of less favorable comments, affirming the public’s trust with JetBlue was restored or remained favorable. As the results show, those with favorable comments were determined to be defenders of JetBlue in response to the February 14 crisis. The collected data was then organized into categories assigning each online respondent one of the following types of defender: *attacker* (one who deflects blame or fault to someone other than the affected organization, using excessive punctuation and strong

language), *loyal customer* (one who still loves the brand and would continue to do business), and *new customer* (one who will try the brand in the future).

Several online responders recognized the organization's apology and compensation tactics, applauding their efforts to be open with the stakeholders. The range of online user comments supports JetBlue's decision to utilize more than one crisis response tactics to get their message across. The organization recognized that they needed to tailor their responses and messaging to more than one audience. For example, while the apology from Neelman was considered by many public relations experts as unprecedented, their communications team experts acknowledged that perhaps an apology wasn't enough for all stakeholders. Rather, others may have been more interested in JetBlue's compensation efforts. JetBlue's plan to utilize a multi-pronged communications strategy afforded them the opportunity to implement a range of tactics, helping to address stakeholders varying concerns and complaints.

Table 4 Public Reaction to JetBlue’s Crisis Communication Strategy

Website	User Responses and Comments	Crisis Communication Tactic Identified with Response	Defender Type
<i>Today Show</i> (You Tube)	“The FAA doesn't allow planes to back into a terminal. Jet Blue didn't have a choice. The plane that was stuck on the tarmac was told several times that they would be able to take off soon. (so i heard) Give them a break, they are still a great airline.” - DLun203	Organization presents its account of the crisis	Attacker
<i>Today Show</i> (You Tube)	“TSA doesn’t apply to why the plane was STUCK because of ice? Since when did humans control the weather? It was an ice storm... it didn’t just happen to JetBlue..it happened to other airlines. I mean..my GOD! Did Mother Nature Really just pour ICE on JetBlue!” - ibabylopor	Organization presents its account of the crisis	Attacker
<i>Today Show</i> (You Tube)	“Go start your own airline, if you are so unhappy! Stop being a complainer! Be a problem solver!” - CStepFan	Organization presents its account of the crisis	Attacker
<i>Today Show</i> (You Tube)	“So how many airlines would pay their customers for a delay? NONE!” - <u>billabug</u>	Compensation Corrective action	Attacker
<i>Today Show</i> (You Tube)	“JetBlue has a perfect safety record compared toairlines like Valujet...” - <u>SkyFox98</u>	Disassociation strategy	Attacker

Website	User Responses and Comments	Crisis Communication Tactic Identified with Response	Defender Type
<i>Today Show</i> (You Tube)	“So what is better? American? Oh please! I'd fly with JetBlue over American anytime mate!” - jetrc2008	Disassociation strategy Restore damaged values	Attacker
<i>Today Show</i> (You Tube)	“This is pretty awesome! I've never flown on jet blue but now I want to.” - jetrc2008	Restore damaged values Bolstering	New Customer
<i>Today Show</i> (You Tube)	“Brave CEO being honest about the business weakness. Sad reality the world does not want to hear the truth. Maybe the haters should fly ‘FRESH AIR’ for their ‘HOT AIR’ and bravado. All businesses face challenges. And if this reshaped the service levels in the US, so be it. David Neeleman, I appreciate you being direct and honest. It’s the ethical thing to do.” - jamiroquai101	Organization presents its account of the crisis Full apology Mortification Bolstering	Attacker
Yelp	“C'mon every service has delays.” – Daniel S.	Organization presents its account of the crisis	Attacker

Website	User Responses and Comments	Crisis Communication Tactic Identified with Response	Defender Type
Yelp	<p>“I don't care what kind of PR Jet Blue has been getting lately. I still love them. And any time I have to fly, Jet Blue is always my first choice.” - Nicole L.</p>	<p>Disassociation strategy Restore damaged values</p>	Loyal Customer
Yelp	<p>“Aside from the embarrassing incident from earlier this year in which folks were stranded for hours on end due to a huge communication and mechanical problem, I still like JetBlue. We're all human and humans make mistakes. I think JetBlue was very classy to at least honor all the folks traveling with roundtrip airfare, their money refunded, and a formal (yet personal) apology letter addressed to all of JetBlue nation.” – Jando S.</p>	<p>Apology Compensation Identify and resolve the problem Corrective action</p>	Loyal Customer
Yelp	<p>“I have been a loyal customer since the beginning about 6 years ago. I was sorry to hear about their difficult weeks in the winter but you know what, the terminal is popping now, here at JFK, the site of hundreds and hundreds of customers sleeping and then forced away during that time. Why is the terminal popping? Because customer service counts for an awful lot more than a missed trip to Palm Springs.” – Sean S.</p>	<p>Disassociation strategy Identify and resolve the problem Restore damaged values</p>	Loyal Customer

JetBlue had its share of supporters and defenders in the aftermath of the crisis. The majority of the respondents in the results were identified as *attackers* with a handful identified as *loyal customers* and *new customers*. Several of the online participants made a point to defend JetBlue by using comparisons to other airlines' service to get their points across. Others directly addressed online participants that posted disparaging and critical comments against JetBlue, once again taking a stance of defending the organization. One comment directly addressed the performance of Neelman, lauding him as a "brave CEO being honest about the business weakness." Reviewing all comments on YouTube and Yelp during this time period also displayed negative comments. However, approximately 80 percent of the You Tube comments were positive and 60 percent of the Yelp comments were positive.

JetBlue had spent years developing a brand loyalty among its customers. While these examples of crisis tactics influencing stakeholder responses are relevant, it cannot be ignored that brand loyalty was also a factor in their recovery efforts, which were successful. As the following section demonstrates, the airline was able not only to recover, but also thrive in the aftermath of the crisis.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Forbes Magazine ranked JetBlue as the third “most reliable” airline in 2008 after reviewing five years of data that included punctuality, cancellations, complaints and mishandled baggage (Phillips, 2008). In 2009, JetBlue was named at the top of J.D. Power’s annual customer service survey for airlines for the fifth consecutive year in a row (Gunther, 2009). That same year, the airline posted a second quarter profit of \$14 million when many of its competitors collectively lost more than \$1 billion (Gunther, 2009). As the previous examples indicate, even with the catastrophic events of February 14, 2007, JetBlue continued to rise above its competition. By accepting responsibility, apologizing, and compensating customers, JetBlue’s crisis response strategies helped the organization maintain its reputation for service and continue to be profitable.

JetBlue was also lauded in the public relations industry for their crisis response strategies. As Richard Levick, President and CEO of Levick Strategic Communications, said at the time, “Most CEOs run away. Neeleman took control. He's everywhere apologizing, and he's doing more than promised. He's putting the company's money where its mouth is” (Weiss, 2007). Levick continued, “JetBlue has run to the crisis, taking responsibility not just for itself but for the entire industry” (www.consumeraffairs.com, 2007). Jonathan Bernstein of Bernstein Crisis Management said, “People see through it when the typical CEO hides behind the podium or the press release. Neeleman gave the public ample face time and did so with passion in his voice. He talks the talk of everyman, which is exactly what he needed to do” (www.consumeraffairs.com, 2007). The airline also received praise for using social media technologies, like You Tube, to

speak directly with customers and being “more relevant to how modern audiences consume information” (Goldhammer, 2007). Crisis management experts took from JetBlue new ways to expand social media channels, like Twitter, to communicate with customers and stakeholders in future crises leading to new rules in crisis responses.

The results from the discourse analysis demonstrated that JetBlue was prepared to manage future crises. In 2010, a JetBlue flight attendant made headlines when he exited the plane through the emergency chute after an altercation with a disembarking passenger (Newman & Rivera, 2010). The flight attendant was arrested for criminal mischief and reckless endangerment and was released the next day. JetBlue immediately issued a statement reinforcing that passenger safety was not compromised at any time (Newman & Rivera, 2010) and essentially distanced itself from the flight attendant in question, a common crisis response strategy. Headlines in the media focused more on the actions of the “fed-up” flight attendant as opposed to the actual airline. *The New York Times* used this incident to discuss the hostile relationship between airlines and passengers including Air France and United Airlines (Newman & Rivera, 2010).

In October 2011, JetBlue experienced another tarmac delay for more than seven hours due to an unexpected snow storm. The airline immediately posted updates and critical information on their website, Facebook page, corporate blog, and Twitter site to keep passengers informed. The Chief Operating Officer for JetBlue issued an apology through their YouTube site and ensured customers would receive compensation for the delays (www.youtube.com, 2011). While the incident made headlines through the major media outlets including NBC, CBS,

ABC, and CNN, some publications like *USA Today* reported in their headlines that American Airlines also had significant delays sharing the spotlight with JetBlue (Yu, 2011). A review of JetBlue's Facebook page from October 30, 2011 through November 1, 2011, demonstrated a wide range of comments from the irate to those defending the actions of JetBlue (www.facebook.com/jetblue, 2011). As one Facebook fan posted, "I love how all of these articles talk about JetBlue, yet American stranded a 767 on the Tarmac at the same airport for 7.5 hours. It could not be avoided. I think the FAA should be charged \$27,000 per passenger for diverting flights to an airport that could not support them. Blame the government guys, not JetBlue" (www.facebook.com/jetblue, 2011).

Both of these events indicated that JetBlue learned from the events of 2007 by being quick, being open, and being consistent. Statements from the organization were issued immediately with detailed information about the incidents being provided to the media and posted on their social network sites. While these two events are completely different from one another, their crisis communication team was able to select the appropriate crisis tactic(s) and implement them immediately. In both of these events, some of the major media outlets did not immediately report the negative aspects of the crises as they did in 2007. JetBlue's open and constant communication strategies helped them to recover more quickly from these events. Also helping JetBlue quickly recover from these events was their ability to avoid the "Velcro effect" (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Their positive performance in responding to the 2007 crisis helped reduce the threat of an ongoing unfavorable reputation and attributions of crisis responsibility.

JetBlue's 2007 crisis opened up new opportunities and channels for crisis communications strategists to utilize in any crisis situation. From a theoretical perspective, JetBlue's use of SCCT's response strategies not only were correct but it brought the "controversial" tactic of openness to a new level (Coombs, 2006). Openness in this situation meant being available for comments and updates on the crisis and also providing full disclosure (Coombs, 2006). Full disclosure can be a costly tactic from a monetary perspective, but JetBlue recognized the critical need to restore their reputation no matter what the price. This is in line with SCCT's proposition that an organization should select strategies that reflect a greater sense of responsibility as the situation intensifies (Coombs, 2006). Organizations can learn from JetBlue the importance of not only selecting the best tactics to respond to the crisis, but also the importance of not shying away from full disclosure and apology strategies. Supporting the key goals for SCCT, JetBlue was successful in minimizing the damage, returning to normal operations, and repairing damage to their reputation (Coombs, 2012). As stated earlier, every crisis situation is unique. A simple apology communicated immediately can go a long way and protect the organization's reputation.

The 2007 crisis also brought attention to the value of social media as a crisis communications response channel. JetBlue's use of You Tube helped with damage control in 2007. "The communications landscape has since changed" (Simon, 2009) and social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, and blogs have become popular crisis management tools. This helps to explain why JetBlue did not receive the same damaging press during the tarmac delay of 2011 as it did in 2007. Social media channels helped the airline follow SCCT's form lessons of be quick,

be consistent, and be open (Coombs, 2006). As the strategies and tactics of SCCT continue to evolve, so too do the variety and accessibility of communication channels. Organizations should glean from JetBlue the critical value of having several crisis communications blueprints based on the apologia and image restoration strategies discussed earlier. The 2007 crisis demonstrated that a successful execution of SCCT not only includes matching the response strategies to the crisis, but also matching the strategies to the communications channels.

The methodology in this research demonstrated the importance of moving beyond word counts and automated key word searches and listings. It is imperative to examine the full context of the message. By analyzing the full context by hand, as opposed to automated searches, this study was able to identify connections between the organization's crisis response strategies and the stakeholders' reactions. If the methods required an automated key word search, the research could have missed out on the complete and full context of the message opening the door for misinterpretation and incorrect assumptions. In addition, the video messages provided an opportunity to examine both the text of the messages and the actual delivery by David Neelman, helping to further define the sincerity and consistency of the content.

While the user comments in this study were helpful to identify general response patterns from stakeholders, it would have been valuable to obtain feedback from the passengers that were directly involved in the February 14 incident. The message board comments do not identify whether the respondents were involved in the event or are even JetBlue customers. Interviewing the affected passengers and assessing their feedback regarding the airline's crisis responses could have helped provide greater accuracy in determining JetBlue's level of success.

As the discourse analysis showed, the stakeholder responses were gathered from the online sharing sites, You Tube and Yelp. Since 2007, social media sites have exploded in popularity and usage, particularly Facebook and Twitter. When this crisis occurred, social media was not as prevalent as it is today. In this study, there was not as much dynamic online user feedback available as there is today. The discourse analyzed in this study certainly provided enough support to demonstrate that JetBlue implemented a successful crisis communication plan. However, greater participation in and availability of social media sites could have offered more opportunity to further analyze how the crisis tactics influenced stakeholder responses. In addition, a larger sample size of stakeholder responses would have been preferred.

While JetBlue was commended for being open, honest, and apologetic throughout the crisis, at some point will stakeholders and customers become numb to this type of discourse? Could the crisis communication tactic of a full apology eventually turn in to lip service and be less meaningful? It is imperative that organizations keep their crisis communication plans current and relatable to the mass audience. Research studying how crisis communication experts keep these strategies and tactics relevant would be beneficial to organizations facing a crisis, ensuring that their stakeholders do not tune out the messages being sent. Genuine sincerity in Neelman's messages and the compensation tactics helped JetBlue to overcome this crisis. Is compensation going to become an expected component of a crisis communication plan? It would be helpful to understand how and when organizations determine to utilize compensation in their planning. Is it truly warranted or is the organization buckling from stakeholder, media, and legal pressure?

It would be prudent to expand research studies about social media usage to understand how organizations incorporate this in to their crisis communication planning. News feeds are instantaneous, whether from the actual media or from eyewitness accounts. The media does not always wait to report a story and also utilizes social media channels. Organizations need to have a thorough understanding and high level of preparedness when it comes to social media technologies like Facebook and Twitter. Best practices and investigating which outlets are the most effective could help crisis communication experts implement a more targeted social media approach, saving valuable time when the window to respond is already so limited.

Since 2007, JetBlue has experienced some significant changes. David Neeleman, founder of the airline, stepped down as CEO in 2007 (Maynard, 2008). Accused of growing too fast too soon, the airline has since re-focused its energies on providing customers with a value flight combined with exceptional service (Maynard, 2008). New aircraft have been added to their fleet, new destinations have been added to their itineraries, and a major overhaul of their terminal at JFK Airport re-opened in 2008. The most significant change is their efforts toward communicating with their customers. Efthimiou (2010) states that even with crisis plans and emergency communication command centers, an organization must rely on its people, their most invaluable asset, to manage the threat. Regardless of a crisis situation, JetBlue utilizes a variety of communication channels to keep customers informed at all times. This is an important takeaway for any organization – no matter what crisis hits the organization, crisis communications planning is paramount to recovering quickly.

When it comes to any type of organizational crisis, communications will always be an important and critical component of the containment and recovery plan. Technologies for social media channels will continue to grow. The media will continue to find new ways to satisfy the public's need for instant gratification by reporting information as quickly as possible. Airlines will continue to have mass flight delays. What will also continue is the need for organizations to share information as openly, honestly, and quickly as possible. JetBlue has since built a solid blueprint of crisis communication for other organizations to follow. The question remains whether organizations in trouble will learn from JetBlue or suffer a similar fate to the 2007 Valentine's Day Massacre. Organizations that follow JetBlue's lead will be successful, knowing that a solid crisis communication plan with a multi-pronged approach of selecting a variety of response tactics is the best and most effective weapon against a threat to the brand image.

JetBlue re-wrote the book on crisis communications (Simon, 2009). Can they re-write the customer service experience in the airline industry as David Neeleman originally intended for JetBlue? If the organization's track record in crisis communications is any indication, the sky is the limit.

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