

# Crisis Communication in the Digital Age



# Crisis Communication in the Digital Age:

*Manage or Rampage*

By

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface .....	vii
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction	
Changing the Rules of the Game .....	2
The 4 New Pillars: Credibility, Authenticity, Transparency and Responsiveness.....	3
Cornerstone of Public Relations .....	8
Interconnected Ties of Trust, Credibility and Reputation .....	18
A Riskier World.....	20
Reputation at Stake .....	26
Chapter Two .....	29
Crisis Management	
The Four R's of Crisis Communication: Recognition, Rehearsal, Response and Recovery .....	31
Extent of Threat .....	33
Data Collection .....	35
Chapter Three .....	39
Study I	
Interview Reflections: Crisis Management Types and Strategies.....	39
Pre-Crisis.....	39
Crisis Response .....	40
Post- Crisis .....	42
Age of Apology .....	44
Strategies Used in Restoring Image .....	45
Assessing a Crisis in the Digital Age.....	47
Categorizing the Crisis.....	49
Crisis-management Checklist .....	55
Post Check .....	57
Risk Analysis Action Steps.....	58
Measures .....	61
Crisis Preparedness .....	61
Survey I.....	61

Key Findings.....	64
Survey II.....	66
Chapter Four.....	71
Study II: Watsons-Turkey Case Study	
Unfolding.....	71
Phase I. Prodromal Crisis Stage.....	72
Need for Crisis Preparedness and Prevention.....	73
Phase II. Acute Stage.....	75
Phase III. Chronic Stage.....	76
Allegations of Infraction and Abuse.....	77
Phase IV. Crisis Resolution Stage.....	78
Incompetence in Management: Problems Due to Characteristics, Attributes and Bad Decisions.....	78
Chapter Five.....	81
Discussion	
Conclusions.....	83
References.....	87

## PREFACE

In recent years, in countries with high crisis expectation and risk probabilities, such as Turkey, partially due to external forces beyond their control and partly due to internal factors caused by managerial failures, a significant rise in the incidence of crises can be noticed. These crises cease corporate actions as they threaten general objectives and strategic goals in the long run. As crises are urgent situations disrupting the normal functioning of business operations, in crisis times the major goal of crisis intervention is to resolve the situation immediately so as to sustain business continuity. A single risk or uncertainty treated as trivial or simply negligible may incite a series of negative consequences for the business, employees, society and even an entire nation. Subsequently, irrespective of scale, from the first day of establishment all firms have to scan for all kinds of risks and develop precautions accordingly. What is essential for firms is not to look for ways to cope with a crisis, search for solutions or find ways to dodge it but to ward it off, and preferably prevent it from ever happening; however, in order to do this one has to be prepared for it. If prevention is out of the question, then the objective should be to overcome the turbulence with the minimum damage possible and strategize to convert the disadvantageous situation into an advantage, but this can only be achieved by pursuing an effective crisis-management strategy.

Crises do not last for a long time; they fade after a while, but this does not mean that they do not have effects. In fact, crises impose various negative impacts on organizations and employees. These repercussions can be grouped under three main occurrences, namely: inclination toward centralized decision making, unrest and fear among employees, and reduction in the quality of the decisions made due to slowing perceptions and diminishing responsiveness. Once these impacts are triggered, it is all downhill from that point on. It is necessary to note that there are variances in periods with respect to when crises occur and when their effects show; while some crises erupt out of the blue, some take long periods to show their ugly faces, and while some have lingering effects, some have short-lived backlashes.

On the one hand, even if firms create dynamic strategic plans, carry internal and external factor analyses, adopt a flexible corporate structure, and set up early warning signals just to ward off or guard against crises, coming face to face with one may eventually be inevitable because one cannot anticipate or prevent all crises; that is neither necessary nor possible. On the other hand, while some firms may detect signals they may fail to read and interpret them correctly, fall short in evaluating research findings, pay little attention to detail or show total neglect. In that case, the business will head full-speed into crisis, as all of this will hinder the firm in question from giving effective responses. Regardless of the reason, seeing past the crisis is not too drastic; there are certain techniques and skills, as well as methods companies can use, to foresee the full range of problems one might encounter and create strategies to lower their susceptibility as crisis-preparedness gives companies competitive advantages to overcome a larger number and wider variety of difficulties than the firm has come across previously. From this standpoint, preparedness can be stated to work as a primer for success as organizations with effective crisis-response strategies are more likely to stay in business longer. It is necessary to highlight that the role and influence of public relations is largely overlooked in crisis studies. Public relations are instrumental in crisis management as they serve an important role in preparing communication plans, sustaining information flow, and protecting the corporate image and reputation in the perceptions of publics. Marked by the onset of the digital era, public relations professionals are perplexed in the face of this constantly evolving media ecology that is comparatively more complex, diverse, dynamic and expects participants to throw out information in ways that are a lot more transparent and interactive than ever before.

In today's global age, thanks to advances in web development, organizations can integrate the internet into their strategic planning and carry effective two-way communications via digital means. This helps them not only to recognize and grasp the changes in demand but also to fully benefit from the tools offered by the new media channels. If organizations fail to disseminate accurate, honest and fast information in a systematic way, gossip, rumors and second-hand inaccurate, unreliable information will fill the gap fast, tarnishing the image as well as the reputation of the brand name in the eyes of its publics. This is a major issue because once a crisis hits its backlash effects accelerate immediately due to globalization and networking. Moreover, as it is difficult to keep up-to-date with the constantly evolving digital world, brands look for ways to use information communication technologies in a cohesive and effective manner to



generate more value by creating competitive advantages through corporate practices.

Since current crisis practices are incident specific, since the role of public relations is largely overlooked, and since crisis communication studies in non-Western cultures are scarce, this book attempts to fill these gaps by introducing two studies. Study I highlights crisis-management types and strategies by reflecting on interview as well as survey responses collected from 35 different sectors and sub-sectors in Turkey. While interview findings will help serve as theoretical conceptualizations that identify the strategical know-hows regarding how to shift from crisis to opportunity in times of turbulence, elicited responses will reveal how practitioners perceive and respond to crises in the contemporary media landscape, which will help question how applicable traditional theories are in today's social media age. Finally, while survey results will reveal the extent of crisis preparedness, Study II will present the latest upheaval caused by Watsons Turkey as a case study analysis to make a scholarly contribution to the vital pursuit of public relations in crisis studies.

Broadly stated, the first chapter of this book first provides a comprehensive literature review highlighting the various conceptualizations differentiating a crisis from a non-crisis situation. It presents a synthesis of notable findings in contemporary literature in the form of a summary, spotlighting the intricacies involved in crisis management and crisis communication, introducing the new pillars of brand communication, pinpointing the interconnected ties of trust, credibility and reputation as well as stressing the role of public relations in attaining trust. The second chapter delves further into a literature review on crisis management then presents the “4 Rs” of crisis communication, namely: recognition, rehearsal, response and recovery. This section will be followed by an overview on assessing crises on the basis of extent of threat and will then provide a detailed account of data collection methods; then the third chapter will be introduced. In the third chapter, findings for Study I will be elaborated on by grouping interview reflections into pre-crisis, crisis response and post-crisis categories. An elaboration of details regarding how apologies can mend a damaged corporate image is covered along with methods used in measuring crises across digital platforms as well as assessments employed in determining the level of risk. Last but not the least, in the third chapter a checklist for crisis management is provided accompanied with action steps employed in executing risk analyses on the basis of social media metrics. After providing a table for communication strategies from the lenses of type of media, crisis strategy and tactics, survey findings will be presented

to pinpoint crisis preparedness across the Turkish industry and a situational analysis will be presented to shed light onto the current landscape. Finally, details of Study II will be presented in the fourth chapter, then the book will wrap up with conclusions, limitations and recommendations for further research.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, disruptive changes witnessed in national and international environmental conditions can be seen to have made an impact on organizations' strategic management as well as organizational effectiveness, making firms more liable to risks, uncertainties, threats and complicated crisis situations. In the late 20th century, the period known as the transition to knowledge societies, technological developments in information communication technologies speeded up the transition to an information society. As advances in new communication technologies ramped up and social networks became increasingly more widespread, the communication landscape changed dramatically. In this new ecology of communication, introduction of the digital landscape packed with information and knowledge resources enabled participants to capture, create, and exchange information and experience as well as thoughts and know-how on all kinds of matters anytime, anywhere via second screens simply with one click. In this respect, the internet can be argued to be both a friend and foe. On the one side of the coin, while the internet offers a wide variety of uses and provides great benefits for nearly all aspects of our lives, such as serving as an excellent means for disseminating information and providing instant access to vast amounts of connections across networks of people, on the other side of the coin increased speed and ease in the dissemination of content have come to present some challenges and drawbacks that can be seen in serving as a conduit of publication of false and negative news often put to use to make fabricated accusations or arbitrary attacks, or simply to spread rumors and gossip. This can be stated as one of the negative repercussions brought by advances in communication platforms; anyone can be a content producer. Subsequently, with the surge of social media, the number of instances of one's reputation coming under attack by rumor or gossip is on the rise.

## Changing the rules of the game

In today's business world where change is experienced at an unprecedented rate, companies have difficulty keeping pace with the micro and macro environmental changes. The scale and scope of globalization is further extended day by day, competition is growing increasingly fierce, and all the while companies strive to sustain operations under various crisis threats. The rapid speed of information dissemination has led to a reduced window of response time for organizations. The significance of response time is stressed in research findings and testimonials of professionals highlighting that a failure to provide a quick response leaves organizations susceptible to attack (Coombs 2007a; Barton 2001; Breakenridge 2012; Hearit 2006). As the foundational blocks of social media are grounded on dynamically generated content, there is an increasing demand by the public for up-to-date entries, and this expectancy heightens even more in an emergency or crisis situation.

The new ecology of communication gives everyday citizens great power in the construction and framing of reality, empowering them to serve as watchdogs, citizen journalists and photojournalists, but this can also pose a threat to organizations strategizing on information control as paramount to effective reputation management. Social media gives everyone a voice, enabling people to speak up, and speak out, making it easy for people to demand justice immediately. Of course, organizations may not prefer to make the crisis visible to the public eye by posting written information about it on social media platforms. This can in fact work as a strategical move if the crisis is small and if publics are not likely to hear about the news over some other source; however, this would be highly unlikely in today's wired world. Due to the expectation of dialogue and engagement, corporations are encouraged to shift from the classic one-way, message-oriented strategy to the two-way interaction model in communicating with their publics. Literary circles assert that in selecting tone of voice "corporate speak" should be avoided and, instead, an authentic, sincere conversational human voice should be adopted (Kelleher and Miller 2006, 409; Kelleher 2009, 184; Sweetser and Metzgar 2007, 342; Romenti, Murtarelli, and Valentini 2014; Dijkmans, Kerkhof, and Beukeboom 2015; Kellerman 2006; van Noort and Willemsen 2012; Lee, Hwang, and Lee 2006, 331; Seltzer and Mitrook 2007). Especially in times of crisis, as engagement is fundamental, social platforms must be used as a platform for two-way dialogue rather than a medium solely for bombarding messages to targeted masses.

Kelleher (2009) argues that communications that carry dialogic human tones are favorably associated with trust, satisfaction and commitment in public perceptions. In line with this statement it can be proposed that, especially at times of crises and following post-crisis, corporations can greatly benefit from utilizing a conversational human voice in their internal as well as external communications. This is supported by research findings highlighting that establishing dialogue for engagement is fundamental for organizations before and during difficult as well as non-routine times (Taylor and Perry 2005, 212; Ford 2011; Kelleher and Miller 2006; Perry, Taylor, and Doerfel 2003; Taylor and Kent 2007). Similarly, there are study findings such as Yang, Kang, and Johnson (2010, 473)'s revealing that recognized interaction and engagement are associated with favorable post-crisis attitudes and behaviors (Coombs and Holladay 2012; Jin et al. 2014; Sweetser and Metzgar 2007; Kelleher and Miller 2006). Some of the most profound works in literature pinpoint the essentiality of quick, constant updates, continuous two-way flow of communication and an exchange of open, true, accurate, honest, candid information, proposing that communications that carry such traits inspire trust (Schultz, Utz, and Göritz 2011; Yang, Kang, and Johnson 2010; Yang and Lim 2009; Kelleher 2009; Westerman, Spence, and Van Der Heide 2014; Briones et al. 2011), satisfaction (Walters 2008; White, Vanc, and Stafford 2010; Dawar and Lei 2009) and commitment (Ruppel and Harrington 2000; Park and Reber 2008).

### **The four new pillars: Credibility, authenticity, transparency and responsiveness**

In the literature there is a growing number of findings illustrating open and transparent communications leading to a heightened sense of trust. Professionals suggest that customers want loyalty and brands need loyalty. It is the requisite for finding the mutual benefits in the relationship. At the heart of mutual benefits lies trust, which necessitates transparency and honesty (Edelman 2015); however, there is more to it. In today's wired world trust calls for continuous, transparent and even passionate communications, which serve as a fundamental key to success in the business environment (Edelman 2015, 2). Transparency is also necessary from the standpoint of employees; they need organizations with a culture of transparency. Transparency matters because it impacts employee experience and engagement. Providing open and honest communication, putting both the good and the bad out in the open, presenting facts with materials that are clear and understandable is invaluable in today's

business environment. The vital role of transparency is further stressed by research findings pointing to a strong positive correlation between transparency and trust (Rawlins 2007; Nayar 2009; Ovaite 2007; Grimmelikhuijsen 2012; De Fine Licht 2011; Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013; Bauhr and Grimes 2012; Chong et al. 2011).

Trust is essential in maintaining a well-functioning society at all levels and is specifically fundamental to the practice of public relations. One cannot establish credibility without earning trust; moreover, trust is the key to strong relationships. Taking into consideration the fact that the objective of public relations is to establish and cultivate relationships with key stakeholders through a variety of public relations practices, trust is imperative to the successful implementation of public relations practices. To attain the trust of one party, one must also trust that party. This is needed because trust is complementary. The party striving to establish trust must also be trustworthy, which is determined by that person's extent of competency, integrity, goodwill, and whether that person is open and reliable. While looking to the needs of others, being honest, acting with integrity, and being reliable and dependable boost trustworthiness, attempting to manipulate or pressure people to pursue personal needs and interests damages trust. Trust does more than just improve the financial status of an organization, however; acquiring trust necessitates years of consistency in acts and conducts. Trust works as a cushion against suspicion, anger, cynicism and disappointment; thus it can be stated to increase the speed of businesses and reduce costs because when trust levels increase the speed of doing business elevates due to the acquired rate of returns, and this in return makes costs decrease. Similarly, when trust levels dip the speed of doing business goes down and expected costs start to build up (Covey and Conant 2016). Covey and Conant (2016) highlight that the rate of return in highly trusted brand names is three times higher than the rate of return of poorly trusted names. Additionally, let us not forget that trustworthiness comes with added benefits such as better employee retention and higher recruitment, more reliable stock prices, greater investor confidence, stronger customer relationships with lasting loyalty, chances for partnering, enhanced risk-bearing capacity and entrepreneurship. All of this contributes to making the organization in question a stronger brand.

As stated above, trust is earned over the course of time, and when one establishes a reputation of being trustable it can safeguard in the face of a crisis and/or when smeared with criticism. While the literature presents broad guidelines on how to attain and sustain trust, such as fundamentals

for building trust with stakeholders, advising professionals to be on the lookout for shared opinions or interests, being transparent, receptive, honest and more adaptable to change if necessary, and suggesting balancing different stakeholder views and demands, as the key to building and preserving public trust, there is little research on exactly what produces trust. In this respect, Golin's (2003) work is striking in breaking down the extent of trustworthiness on the basis of traits, attributes and actions. Accordingly, Golin (2003) outlines the percentages indexing to the behaviors that generate trust, pinpointing to the overall percentage making up overall reputation grade as follows: assuming responsibility and accountability accounts for 60%; showing customers that you care in a personal and apparent manner 60%; sticking to abiding by the rules of ethical conduct 58%; communicating openly and at regular intervals with publics 56%; and managing crises situations more efficiently, candidly and without prevarication 51%. Moreover, he stresses the need for a forthright approach and commitment to keeping stakeholders updated about every news item, whether good or bad, which is necessary to sustain integrity.

There is also a section in Golin's work on how companies can rebuild trust. Golin (2003) states being open and honest in business practices accounts for 94%; communicating more persuasively, clearly and forthrightly 93%; showing interest and consideration for employees 83%; taking away CEOs' rights of immunity 50%; and engaging with the audience population 50%. Golin (2003) also suggests classifying the vulnerabilities of the company with respect to trust issues and attending to these issues before they surface as a complication. Being more humane with employees and stakeholders—in other words, dropping the arrogance, acting with more humility and, finally, prioritizing trust over profits when making decisions and taking actions. Moreover, he asserts that brands should just tell the truth. He argues that the greatest risk is introduced by the damage caused by hiding, rejecting, or omitting the truth.

Stress should not be placed on whether a mistake is made but how one deals with it (Golin 2003, 47). It can be observed that companies that are truly great in converting a crisis into an advantage cope with reality by acknowledging that they make mistakes, accepting responsibility and, if actually responsible for the damaging consequences, waste no time in recruiting their people to produce better results. Spin cannot save face because when statements do not match actions they fail the SMELL test, and then credibility gets the first blow. Developed by Dr. John McManus (2004), the SMELL test is designed to help weed out reliable information in any medium. McManus states SMELL is an acronym for "source",

“motive”, “evidence”, “logical” and “left out” (2004). “Source” helps one question how credible or reliable the source is. Can one even identify the presenter of the information? Then there is “motive”, which serves to answer why the information is being presented. Is it intended to inform or to persuade? “Evidence” is another variable of the test, and it refers to factual support within the information itself. How is the information verified? There is also the “logical” component, which means asking whether the information makes sense. Does the evidence actually support the conclusions presented in the information? Finally, there is the final variable, stated as “left out”, which questions whether the information is complete. Is only one side of a story presented or supported? If so, why, and what are the intentions behind this?

Professionals are well aware that trust is essential to surviving in today’s complex and interdependent society as it impacts the bottom-line goals of any organization. Such an environment provides a huge advantage for brand names but also poses a huge survival risk. Businesses run on reliability and trust. While managing the reputation and perceptions of trustworthiness of a given organization is the responsibility of the communications department and even more precisely the duty of the reputation management unit, not all brands have an in-house reputation management department; hence, they pass it to the public relations division. It is the motive of public relations to build goodwill with the company’s key publics by feeding them information. The role of public relations in reputation management is evident in its functions that cover: 1) press relations—distributing positive news and information about the company and its products to the press, 2) product publicity—publicizing specific products through sponsorship, 3) corporate communication—using internal and external communications to improve the understanding of the company by its several publics, 4) lobbying—attempting to influence decisions made by legislators and other government officials in order to change legislation and regulation, and 5) counseling—advising management about public issues and company image.

Public relations practices are increasingly about communicating clearly, confidently and—more importantly—credibly with publics that include media analysts, policymakers, policy influencers, customers and shareholders. As these stakeholders impact business results, the role of public relations is instrumental in boosting and communicating the power and value of an organization’s offerings to all stakeholders. Increasing awareness, understanding and commitment by way of public relations practices is typically employed to sustain and raise standards of



performance and credibility. Public relations can be used to achieve a variety of objectives both to external and internal publics. Examples of external objectives include building awareness of the company and its offerings, attracting investors and building good relationships with the local community. Internal objectives include keeping employees informed about company activities, creating a sense of belonging and generating the sharing of values between collaborators. Some of the public relations objectives can also affect both external and internal publics; these include improving the credibility of the company and its products, stimulating the sales force, and preventing and minimizing the impact of possible crisis scenarios.

Trust has always been fundamental in carrying out public relations practices effectively. Review of the scholarly, trade and popular publications on the notion of trust in business operations associates trust with effective handling of public relations practices. Not only is trust essential for any kind of social relationship, it is also particularly important for the attainment of other essential credentials if one wants to be successful in public relations, namely: good credibility and strong relationships. Managing the company's reputation and maintaining positive third-party relations is the job of public relations professionals. It is necessary to note that one of the components of trust is reliability. This is evident in how industry professionals define trust: the belief and expectation that someone is good and reliable or that something is safe and true. Actions are more important than words; thus, previous actions and interactions tell whether the communicator of the message is reliable to work with or not. Needless to say, trust is an intangible asset and it is not earned easily; it starts to develop when the behavior of one party meets the other party's expectations, and, in time, consistency in acts and conduct generates the level of trust desired to be attained. Trust is also the key to interpersonal relations and instrumental in group interactions because it determines the extent of communication and cooperation. Moreover, it is the strongest predictor of consumer satisfaction (Rawlins 2007) because trust produces plenty of organizational benefits such as stronger investor confidence and share price, hiring employees with better qualifications and skills, better relationship with customers, stronger customer loyalty and more innovation, all of which indicate a powerful brand in the market. Trust should therefore be carefully examined and measured, and necessary adjustments should be integrated when implementing communication efforts.

## Cornerstone of public relations

In public relations terms, credibility relates to the accuracy and truthfulness of the messages perceived by the audience. So, it means that if the audience does not trust the brand all efforts to design and create effective communication will be useless; therefore, the most important value to have for a brand is credibility. As credibility is gained through trust, it serves to be essential in order for brands to survive. Establishing trust is also the key function of an effective public relations practice. In order to build strong trust, a brand should be honest and transparent in business practices, show how it makes its employees feel valued, use clear and straightforward communication techniques, and get involved in its community through donations and/or supporting local teams. Trust is also the core of founding good relationships between brand names and their stakeholders. Public relations strategies and tactics, however, do not focus much on the output of messages; what they are interested in is the outcomes of messages that enable public relations executioners to play a vital role in constructing relationships that provide sustainable mutual benefits to businesses.

What happens when a decline in trust occurs—yet worse, when a brand loses trust? Will it never be the same even if mistakes are fixed in some way, somehow? A study conducted by researchers in the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania argues that trust can be regained (Wharton School 2006). According to the results of the study, damaged trust due to former dishonesty in communications and actions of a brand can be restored through the conduct of consistent trustworthy acts and behaviors. Admitting the mistake sincerely and expressing an apology for what is done contributes to the recovery process of trust. Making a promise and not breaking it also helps the brand rebuilt trust. If consumers register consistency in honest actions and transparency in acts and conducts, the recovery of trust level accelerates. Rawlins (2007), argues that in the literature there are a number of operational definitions of “trust” defining the term as 1) strongly believing in the reliability and ability of a person or the truth of something, 2) accepting a statement as true without any proof or inquisition, and 3) the state of being responsible for someone or something. One can notice that throughout the literature “trust” is used interchangeably with synonyms such as “liability” and “reliability”. As stated by Rousseau et al. (1998), even though these words are interconnected, and they are part of the conceptualization of trust, studies claim that trust has multiple dimensions (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995). While in the literature there are an array of proposed dimensions of

trust, Robbins's (2005) five key dimensions seem to be the best in terms of understanding the dimensions of trust in a public relations context. These dimensions are: integrity, competence, consistency, loyalty and openness. Integrity is the first dimension of trust as it means being honest and truthful, which can be stated as the core of trustworthiness. Competence is also fundamental in acquiring trust as it denotes relying on someone or something with respect to doing something successfully or efficiently. While consistency signifies reliability and predictability, loyalty points to willingness to advocate or support, to show adherence and/or display an emotional bond, all of which are crucial in attaining trust. Finally, there is openness as a dimension of trust; it relies on the source to provide the receiver the full truth.

As stated by Gray (2015), trust comes in three levels. The weakest level of trust, also referred to as "One Strike and You're Out Trust", is when the trustee receives some form of harm by the trusted. At this level of trust, with simply one strike the trust gets tarnished. At the medium trust level called "Knowledge and Understanding Trust", trust is grounded on expert knowledge and understanding. In other words, the more people work together, get to know each other and understand how they interact with one another, the more they develop this kind of trust. When this kind of trust is established, mistakes are forgiven more easily and trust does not get broken with one strike. On the other hand, the highest level of trust is "Advocating Trust" and it has all five key dimensions in it. According to Gray (2015), successful leaders are able to develop this type of trust with their coworkers or whomever they interact with through interpersonal relationships at both emotional and social levels. This type of trust communicates that someone covers another's back. Ideas can be exchanged freely, and even heated debates can be carried out. Directing and controlling are not necessary because participants know and understand team dynamics and functioning and how they work interdependently. When advocacy is needed, participants advocate for the organization's success and the team's success, and they celebrate individual successes; they want to have the full truth, and this helps them to be proactive in getting the results they aim for while also helping to deal with the unexpected in the most efficient way possible.

Building and maintaining trust in public relations practices is fundamental on two levels. Firstly, public relations practitioners must have credibility as they serve as messengers in communicating activities designed to develop and sustain an organization's image and relationship with its public. Secondly, trust plays a critical role in public relations with respect

to establishing and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders. This is specifically vital for organizational survival as the success of the organization depends on creating good relationships with publics. Credibility is an invaluable asset in building strong brands. Industry professionals define credibility as the overall rating of the trust to a brand as perceived by the consumer. Since credibility is a complex construct, it is most often described through its pillars, namely: honesty, trustworthiness and goodwill. These are relevant when personal relations are concerned, but when organizations are considered these pillars are replaced with integration of knowledge, competence and experience. Honesty and integrity build a foundation of trust. Companies should be more honest today than they were in the past as the truth can reveal itself anytime anywhere via second screens; word travels in the speed of light and thus anyone can come across pieces of information and post them in no time. It is necessary to highlight that trust, credibility and reputation are tightly interwoven. When one is missing, it is not possible to build a foundational base. Trust, credibility and reputation do not get earned overnight; it takes years to build, seconds to break and forever to repair these commodities. Once repair is needed it will be time- and money-consuming beyond measure.

Public relations is grounded on trust and credibility. This is evident in the three stages that the practice went through over time. The field's earliest manifestation, which is called the "publicity" phase of public relations, reveals it all. During this stage of development practitioners were mainly interested in creating awareness and building recognition for a given name. The publicity phase of public relations worked hand in hand with advertising and promotion, and the primary focus was making sure the crafted message reached out to as many audience groups as possible. Dissemination of messages served as the core purpose, and good media relations functioned as the primary means. Trust in this model was of pivotal importance in gaining credibility with the media and, more importantly, the audiences they reach. Since the objective of public relations can be described as presenting the client's story in a positive light, credibility is a must because audiences want to have confidence in the accuracy and truthfulness of the message delivered. It is necessary to note that though closely related, credibility is not a synonym of trust. As stated by Rawlins (2007), some scholars argue that to be credible one has to be believed. Literature reviewed reveals that credibility is closely associated with communicator's extend of believability (Stacks and Watson, 2007, 69). This believability depends on the trust established between the organization and its stakeholders, which is in high correlation

with the reputation constituting of the beliefs, or opinions held about the communicator and the power of influence which is brought about by good relationships.

As the public relations mindset shifted from the publicity phase to the “explanatory” phase, more emphasis started to be given by the practitioners of the field on presenting more complete information; moreover, practitioners started to push clients to clearly express the reasons behind the acts and conducts so that their stakeholders could understand, sympathize with and patronize the organization in question. Simply making sure the message reaches out to as many recipients as possible was not enough. Audiences had to trust they were getting the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth and that they could believe in the messenger as well as the sender as the medium of communication. Since trust is believability and believability brings credibility, one can understand why public relations is anchored on these two constructs. Without trust and credibility the chances of getting and maintaining clients or their target audiences are slim to none.

After over one hundred years, the practice is now said to be in the “mutual satisfaction” phase, which is also referred to as the “two-way symmetrical model”, wherein the public relations practitioner is no longer in the role of a persuader. In this model, the practitioner is a kind of negotiator between the organization and key publics, and the primary objective is to create benefit not only for the organization but also for all the parties involved in the communication exchange; hence the term “symmetrical”—it implies mutual benefits. To practice a strong two-way symmetrical model is not as easy as it seems, however; it needs dynamic relationships. The flow of information, incoming from and outgoing to external third parties, depends on effective communication with them. The organization’s mission and aims should be clearly explained to all stakeholders to encourage support and input from them while the organization provides a similar extent of support and input for the stakeholders to balance their needs. Collecting, giving and sharing information are the drivers of the two-way symmetrical model. This type of public relations seems to be the most ethical as parties benefit from one another. In this stage, public relations practitioners encourage clients and their publics to adapt to one another and to make complementary adjustments and even compromises so that both can benefit from the relationship. Today’s practice can be stated to involve engaging in one-on-one interpersonal conversations with clients and helping them to deal with mass audiences across media outlets. Now practitioners are not only responsible for crafting and delivering messages

but are also expected to deal with incoming messages and information so that they can give advice to the management on up-to-date public opinion.

Ironically, even though today's public relations is said to have evolved into an "all parties must benefit" model and seems to have strayed far away from early practices of spin aimed at duping the audience, or attaining publicity with a focus on building awareness through hype, it is still not the so-called ideal two-way symmetrical model it is pledged to be. In the face of a profit-lusting environment and shareholder greed when seven-figure bonuses are in question, justice, balance and the whole relationship thing stand to be fancy constructs carefully crafted to make a juicy bait. In fact, there are research findings to support this statement, pointing to the diminishing credibility of public relations practitioners. Scholars recognize credibility and its counterpart, trustworthiness, as the key attribute necessary in communicating persuasive messages. Without credibility, gaining understanding and support for your clients, as well as trying to influence opinion and behavior, would be slim to none (O'Keefe 2002; Perloff 1993). Unfortunately, unlike how it should be, public relations' credibility is increasingly diminishing. One can come across a number of studies involving public opinion surveys and source credibility experiments pinning practitioners as dubious spokespersons, classifying them as less credible than pollsters, student activists and even funeral directors. Despite the practice's decreasing credibility, Callison (2004, 371) draws attention to the fact that these findings are manipulated by statements of inappropriate research procedures, mistakes made in ensuring reliability and validity of measurement, and use of unrepresentative participant pools stressing that public relations practitioners are not judged more critically than other affiliated sources. Callison (2004, 372) proposes a correction by presenting his research findings revealing that information sources associated with a given organization, or on whose behalf they speak, are perceived more negatively than sources that are unassociated.

Most people get perplexed when asked "What is credibility?" or "What are its dimensions?" Similar to trust, credibility is a complex construct that depends on a number of factors. It is necessary to note that there is a good amount of research suggesting a variety of dimensions most crucial in establishing credibility. Interestingly, the literature presents similar attributes of source credibility to those that Aristotle had introduced centuries ago. What Aristotle called *Ethos* (character and integrity), *Logos* (expertise and competence) and *Pathos* (likeability or charisma) contemporary research calls "expertise", "trustworthiness" and "attractiveness" (Ohanian 1990) as dimensions of source credibility. Contemporary research presents

empirical support for these dimensions. When one takes a look at available literature on the effect of trustworthiness on credibility, criteria for assessment seem to point to whether the conveyor of information is speaking the truth or whether he or she is honest (Callison 2004). As stated by Rawlins (2007), for example, while early research stressed competency, status, dependability and expertise (Anderson 1971), other studies made reference to trustworthiness and competence as vital attributes of credible sources (Hovland and Weiss 1951; Dholakia and Sternthal 1977; Ohanian 1990).

On the one hand, while there are studies spotlighting expertise and trustworthiness as two most reliable and valid dimensions of credibility (O'keefe 2002), on the other hand, some propose trustworthiness and being honest as greater criteria for accuracy compared to the communicator's know-how, expert skill or knowledge, experience, clarity, justness, likeability or charisma, and motivation (Priester and Petty 2003). More or less so, judging on the basis of above details, it can be argued the literature evaluates extent of trustworthiness on the basis of competence and integrity; however, as stated by Rawlins (2007), more research should be conducted to measure the effect of other aspects of trust like kindness, openness, transparency and reliability in building credibility. Even though there are definitions of trust such as the most notorious conceptualization from Hon and Grunig (1999, 2), referring to trust as having confidence and showing willingness to open oneself, identifying its dimensions as integrity, dependability, competence, credibility and trust, these constructs are so semantically interwoven that it is tough to clearly differentiate one from another. Consequently, once differentiation cannot be achieved, testing between the variables to reach a meaningful set of data becomes close to impossible.

Throughout the literature, one can come across several studies measuring extent of trust on various subjects. Some adopt from inventories, measurements, scales and barometers to measure trust at different levels as well as across a number of variables. Some of the most renowned scales can be cited as Rotter's (1967) Interpersonal Trust Scale, which is also referred to as the General Trust Scale that measures an individual's inclination to trust others, and Larzelere and Huston's (1980) Dyadic Trust Scale designed to analyze assessments of goodwill, integrity, sincerity, reliability and fairness in relationships. There are also a number of inventories. Among them, there is Cummings and Bromiley's (1996) Organizational Trust Inventory (OTI), which measures the relationship between individuals and groups in organizational settings. This inventory

tests whether individuals trust entities by asking whether people in the organization act in accordance with commitments, are honest in the negotiations leading to the commitment, and do not attempt to take advantage of others, even if they simply can. There is also Butler's (1991) Conditions of Trust Inventory, introducing a number of prerequisites to attain and sustain trust, namely: availability, competence, consistency, fairness, integrity, loyalty, openness, overall trust, promise fulfillment and receptivity. Most scholars note irreproducibility of results. This should come as no surprise; as indicated above, unless a clear definition can be made for the variables to be tested results cannot be valid or reliable, and hence replicability of findings would be out of the question.

Does trust precede credibility or vice versa? This is similar to the chicken-or-egg paradox. Trust precedes credibility; however, to establish trust relationships need to be built, yet for long-term relationships communication and credibility are also a necessity. The practice of public relations not only builds up credibility and trust but also functions on these two constructs. Credibility is a must for effective media relations as the client's messages are disseminated through the channels of the media. If credibility cannot be acquired, the message will not be regarded as newsworthy; hence, it will not be published or broadcast as news by the intended mass media outlets. In the profit-seeking world, however, as credibility seems to be a trophy to a greater cause, which is about developing and maintaining reciprocally beneficial relationships with publics that serve as the key to an organizations' success, the foundational element of trust makes itself even more evident. Trust is the key to achieving effective relationships with publics. This is supported by research findings highlighting trust as a crucial element of satisfactory relationships forming between organizations and their key publics (Hon and Grunig 1999, 2). Trust fosters openness, engagement, investment and dedication in a way that impacts the ways in which relationships sprout, develop and are maintained. In line with this logic, trust can be proposed to generate loyalty toward the organization from key stakeholders. It would be fair to mention that without a strong trust an organization's survival can be strictly under jeopardy because a low trust score not only stops investors from investing money but also hampers drawing in goodwill, gathering support in the form of alliances or advocacy, and saving the reputation from getting tarnished in one strike as trust boosts tolerance during a disruptive event.

Public relations have come a long way; however, even from the first days of the practice it has always been about relationships. This is still true in



the digital age we live in now. Shifting focus from outputs of messages to outcomes of the practice, public relations is all about creating and sustaining reciprocally beneficial relationships that aid organizations in achieving their objectives. Instead of a top-down, asymmetrical flow, communications have become a tool brands use to start, develop, maintain and repair mutually productive relationships. Consumer cynicism, and loss of consumer trust and confidence, is the trademark of the massive economic downturn we have been experiencing. In today's conversation economy, onset by globalization, competition and growing complexities introduced by the wired world, business reputations seem to be more fragile than ever. With the surge of second-screen platforms there is a 24/7-available, on-demand culture providing instant access anytime and anywhere to products and services that can be called upon on demand. It has become part of daily lives to "like", "comment on" and "share" what one speaks of. It has changed the way people converse and has influenced consumers' expectations of experiences with businesses. Fueled by the power of word-of-mouth, social media not only encourages dialogue and engagement but also depends on it, enabling users to create and curate content, and encouraging spectators to comment, contribute and join in. As consumer-related and/or product-related topics are freely discussed among consumer circles in brand conversations, the power of truth and transparency have become even more crucial for businesses.

Minnium (2016), proposes that the key to attaining trust is to market with authenticity. Minnium states that authenticity has the power to attract trust because authenticity breaks through the clutter. This is great for getting a brand noticed. People disregard corporate communication efforts and discard personal spam messages but they have an intuitive appeal for genuine, unique content and reward it with attention. Authenticity also makes a deeper connection as it is intertwined with truth and it resonates powerfully with people. Additionally, let us not forget that authenticity differentiates from the non-authentic. This serves to be especially handy if one considers advertising clutter and near-product parity; standing out gets increasingly harder. Finally, authenticity goes viral as it instigates sharing. Because of these reasons the concept and practice of business authenticity has become an important factor of business success. It is necessary to note that some researchers also use the term "believability" instead of "authenticity", defining the former term as "the extent to which advertising evokes sufficient confidence in its truthfulness to make it acceptable to consumers" (Chiu, Hsieh, and Kuo 2012, 265; Beltramini 1982). Authenticity is associated with genuineness, reality and truth (Grayson and Martinec 2004). Something is perceived as authentic if it appears to be

original or the real thing. Rhetoric, used as a marketing strategy, is deeply rooted in authenticity; if an organization wants a community of fans and followers, authenticity is the key because it brings about auras of believability. This is crucial for businesses because when people believe in something they belong or want to belong to the community with people sharing certain values, priorities, attitudes and interests.

Contradictions, photoshopped images and confusing messages earn no credit in today's business. What is important is the alignment between the image and the identity, and coherence in all messages and actions of the brand. Consistency in messages is the core of trustworthiness. If messages are inconsistent, violating the core brand values, the brand will lose consumer trust because consumers will not know what to believe, and the audience will start to question the disconnected messages and the brand's credibility. Since believing is the main driver of credibility, and credibility primarily depends on trustworthiness, competence and honesty, the brand's reputation gets the first blows. Over a short period of time, reputation starts to be lost as trust and credibility start to fade away.

It can be argued that there is a connection between authenticity and storytelling. Brands are no longer what they claim to be but what their key stakeholders say about them. Now companies are increasingly relying on storytelling as a strategic tool to target consumers via content in digital and social media to provide holistic communications for members of the community that connect members and keep them in touch. This tool is called a "strategic brand narrative", and it uses the emotional and logical connections to make sense and have meaning. The power of narration lies in the fact that you take something that is meaningless—in other words, something that has no value—and convert it into something meaningful. Patrick Hanlon (2016) notes that this tool is proven to create and attract people to a brand or organization's community. Creating a community of interconnected networks of influence and attracting members is vital because when people feel they belong to one community, and not another, they prefer the brand whose community they belong to and ditch the other choices. This serves to generate trust, advocacy and support. It is not about products or services anymore, it is about moments and conversational exchanges.

Hanlon states that brands are given legs by brand narrative through social media as well as digital and other communications over the moments and experiences a community has together (2016). Brands have to give their communities something to connect with, something to talk about, share,

like, pin, download, link, tag and post. Storytelling has been central to human existence, it is an innate quality and it is part of our being; for every known culture, storytelling and oral tradition is significant in preserving culture. Storytelling is such a powerful medium for meaning making that we have a tendency to detect story patterns even when they are not there. Storytelling involves a symbiotic exchange between the narrator and the listener. Stories are recognizable patterns, and in those patterns we find meaning, make sense of our world and share that understanding with the people with whom we interact. While storytelling is rooted in our ancient heritage, in the business environment it is still relatively new. It gained momentum in 2001, when executives of IBM, Xerox and the World Bank hosted a seminar called “The Storytelling Passport to the 21st Century” (Koester 2012). As stories help us make sense of the world, they also help people make sense of the organizations. Storytelling has a role in almost every aspect of the organization. In fact, organizational storytelling is now recognized as a distinct discipline supported with research findings elaborating on the value of storytelling in organizational change, specifically pinpointing the importance of the narrative in branding (Brown, Groh, and Prusak 2005; Randal and Martin 2003; Gabriel 2000; Bal 1997; Wilkins 1984).

By way of storytelling, organizations can deliver intended messages in the form a story that is usually told by the product or service itself or by word-of-mouth or by a credible third party. Stories are more human-like compared to the pushy, cold, profit-seeking corporate speech. The significance of storytelling and its central role in branding is supported by the fact that there is a growing organizational use of stories as a public relations and marketing tool (McLellan 2006). This is not surprising when one considers public relations’ heritage in storytelling. The invaluable role of public relations in the art of immersion is evident in the discipline’s ability to convey abstract ideas, complex notions and messages in a clear, unforgettable and persuasive way. Given the proficiency and skill public relations have in providing two-way conversations, creating connections through relationship- and trust-building and mastery in meaning making, storytelling can be stated to be at the core of public relations. While public relations’ role in branding is often argued to carry undertones of commercialism, in today’s marketplace, characterized by a consumer-driven conversation economy, organizations have no option but to alter this misconception and instead shift emphasis onto what an organization gives back and drop pushy efforts to take in. In the face of deep media, organizations have no place to hide.

As times have changed, the role of public relations specialists can be stated to have changed significantly, specifically due to the contraction of major media outlets onset by weakening sales, the rise of citizen journalists, and the power of social media as well as blogs. Now, businesses not only leverage public relations to introduce and promote new products and services but also use it in developing and distributing strategic messaging. In this sense, the role of the public relations specialist can be emphasized to serve the role of igniting conversation by building a strategic narrative and providing opportunities for a given medium to spread or promote the content to be conveyed to facilitate conversation. In the old days, irrespective of earned (public relations) or paid (advertising) media, media placements used to be regarded as more credible by consumer groups; earned media was credible because the people trusted gatekeepers to weed out the un-newsworthy information, and paid media was reputable because capital was correlated with an increase in a company's offerings' perceived value—if the value was perceived to be high then the company in question must be favored by consumer groups. The flow of logic is that this was associated with high sales, reliability, trust, loyalty and reputation. While glorifying artifice, deep media created a longing for authenticity. Rose (2011) calls this “the lure and blur of the real”. People want to be immersed; they want to get involved in a story, to carve out a role for themselves, to make it their own, and sometimes they want to be immersed in something that is not real. The lure and blur presented by technological advancements enabling mechanical reproduction replace the real with the surreal and made authenticity a scarce commodity. Onset by mechanical reproduction, the aura disappeared in the modern age because art become reproducible, losing its aura, its uniqueness—in other words, authenticity. In a time of scripted reality TV and Photoshop, value has become a scarcity. Luckily, we can turn the tables around and use technology to detect pretense and the tools to spread the word.

### **Interconnected ties of trust, credibility and reputation**

With an increasing expectancy for regular updates, dynamic engagement and conversational human communications, social platforms urge communications to be more transparent than ever before. This is necessary as transparency leads to credibility as well as trust, and in order to acquire credibility responses to inquiries have to be faster and more accurate, open and consistent. In today's age of transparency, organizations are expected to convey accurate information and deliver open and candid communications

to the media as well as the public at large. Conveying that a given corporation commits to doctrines of honest, open, transparent, credible, humane, authentic and compassionate communications in all of their practices helps to build powerful relationships with the public. In fact, this is how corporations should communicate at all times, embracing these codes of conduct as the norm for their communications strategies. Building positive relationships with publics is especially fundamental because in the face of a disruptive event there will be a handful of advocates ready to defend the brand name. Needless to say, this requires the relationship to be fully rooted and already blossoming prior to the negative event. Building positive relationships with the public before the onset of a negative event comes in handy especially in times of crisis as it serves to create a sense of goodwill, trust and credibility, acting as a cushion against impairment of acquired brand value, minimizing the damage that could severely harm the reputation of the brand name. With this method, there will be room to maneuver to rebuild one's image once the crisis fades. Since third-party testimonials tend to be perceived as more objective and thus more credible, testimonials of brand advocates get to be evaluated as more trustworthy in comparison to the top-down communications made by the brand name under the spotlight.

The demand for greater transparency as an absolute must can be tracked back to Ivy Lee's "Declaration of Principles", renowned as his most important contribution to the development of modern-day public relations (Heath and Vasquez, 2004). Originally proposed as a solution to improve the relationship between businesses and the general public, Lee's declaration stresses that the basic obligation public relations practitioners have to the media and the public is to provide an in-depth explanation of an organization's acts and conducts to the media as well as to the public, spotlighting the essentiality for true, accurate, open, frank and candid communications between the parties involved in the information exchange (Heath and Vasquez, 2004). In fact, Ivy Lee, information media and 24-hour news—and, of course, the internet—can be argued to have triggered a change in crises and responses. To elaborate in detail, in the late 19th century, at a time when the media was left completely in the dark, when corporations and media remained separate, Lee developed a publicity policy to help businesses attain better public understanding. He called this policy the "Declaration of Principles". He believed carrying out business functions behind closed doors and dodging conversations with the press was not good for corporations opting for support, trust and public understanding; thus, he made a call for an open, honest and transparent communication to further develop a relationship between the parties

involved in the information exchange, marking the starting point of modern public relations.

The call for quicker, more accurate, open and uniform responses to questions was also necessitated by the introduction of mass media. Onset by vertical integration, the media, serving the role as gatekeepers and agenda setters, determined when, where and how the content would be delivered. Instead of hiding in the dark, businesses had to address inquiries directed by media, otherwise alternative sources would be resorted to in order to fill the information vacuum; thus, a quicker, more accurate, open and consistent response to demands and questions had to be provided. In 1980, the introduction of an all-day news cycle dedicated to delivering news around the clock supported this need. An all-day news cycle called for a quicker news production, and an increased demand for constant updating shortened the anticipated window of response for businesses. Finally, the internet, with its impact on speed, spread, direct access and two-way dialogue, can also be stated as having triggered a change in corporate communication, having brought changes to the crisis-communication landscape (Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer 2010). Thanks to these advances, corporate control of the content to be delivered has been lessening with the help of gatekeepers and agenda setters and powerful prosumers. In this new communication landscape, user-generated content, interactivity, engagement, two-way communications, transparency, vast and instantaneous connections, flourishing online presence and corporate visibility affected not only how crises grow and develop but also how corporations approach crisis communications. An era of antiquated communication models that exercised a one-way, top-down message dissemination directed from an individual producer to audience groups is long gone. In this new ecology, which permits both one-way and two-way forms of communication, people now engage individually and collectively in content generation as well as creation, and the system actually encourages audiences to take on an active role in engaging in the narrative, as the medium is dependent on this participation.

### **A riskier world**

Since the onset of the relationship-marketing era, brands have been striving to connect with customers through authentic and personalized messages, and they can now communicate instantly to a seemingly limitless audience. There are more sources available; there is less reliability, no fact checking, a demand for fast information and a tendency