

THE CRISIS AS A MANIFESTATION
OF ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Iuliana APETRI

“Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava

iuliana.apetri@usm.ro

Abstract

A crisis can be perceived as a bifacial manifestation of change: on the one hand, it signals an incapacity of management of the resources in a constant flow, under the acute influence of a series of negative (either endogenous or exogenous) factors, and, on the other hand, it may be used as an instrument which determines an organisation to adapt to the influences that affect its state of balance. In order to cope with the crisis, the organisation must use a very wide range of resources which require a higher flexibility and a different perception of things. Our current approach focuses on three elements which are substantially active in the field of public relations: the context, the content and the behavior of the consumer. These aspects define the state of crisis as a transformational phenomenon that can help an organisation to maintain, to rebuild and to intensify its stability and ultimately to evolve. Regardless of the triggering factor, the crisis requires an attitude of repositioning towards the new reality which the organisation has to face.

Keywords: *crisis, communication, public relations, context, content, consumer;*

General framework

The global social, political and economic situation we have been facing since 2020 has brought new challenges to the strategic and tactical communication of organizations. This complex situation has highlighted the aspects that have caused major communication crises, both intra- and intersystemic. The principles and values established in the statute of the organizations, together with the qualities and experience of the specialists employed in the resolution of the critical situation, determine the strategic approach and the engagement of the useful and necessary resources for the purpose of the campaign. The multilateral landmarks of the reference universe are questioned, in an extensive process of identity, value and communicative-strategic reconfiguration subject to constant unpredictable and uncertain inflexions. In this context, the efforts of communication and public relations professionals are

directed towards the reevaluation of the standardized frames of crisis management. The new challenges require new approaches and (re)constructive-operative restructurings, in order for organizations to remain on the market and to continue benefitting from the trust of their publics. According to William G. Egelhoff and Falguni Sen (1992: 444), crises are “produced by events with a small probability of happening, but which generate major effects”. No matter how rigorous the array of tools, strategies and tactics for managing critical situations, an unprecedented trigger can always find open spaces that need to be filled with quick and efficient crisis management actions. Anticipation plays an essential role in the strategic positioning of the organization, but it is not 100% infallible and cannot include all possibilities. Two American special studies, conducted in 1984 and 1992 (Coman, 2009: 143), showed that in proportions of 53% and 56.9%, respectively, companies were prepared to face the crisis, having an elaborated plan after such an experience. Recent research reveals two theoretical models directed at problem management (corporate communication strategies for searching problems and opportunities – inaugurated by Howard Chase, in 1977) and contingency theory (Cancel et alii – 1997 – takes into account the fluctuation of variables belonging to public relations professionals, on the one hand, and the external public, on the other hand – Coman, 2009: 148 and Reber, 2005: 191). Timothy Coombs (2004: 266) proposes the situational theory of crisis communication, in which „public information about past crises shapes its image about current crises and, therefore, they should determine response strategies in order to protect the organization’s reputation”.

Kathleen Fearn-Banks (1996: 1) presents crises as “major events with a negative potential, which affect the organization, the company or the industrial branch, as well as the public, the products, services and their reputation”. Therefore, all the factors involved in the process of communication, marketing, public relations and advertising will experience the systemic effects generated by the crisis. Also, according to Steven Fink, author and crisis management expert, this phenomenon can be defined as “a state of affairs or a period of instability that requires a decision to change which can produce either an undesired result or a desired and positive one” (1986: 5). From this perspective, stability is not guaranteed by the promptness, quality and efficiency of the resulting solutions, but acquires an operational-strategic status of optimal repositioning, based on all the available structures and resources that can be accessed at those moments.

In the volume “Crisis Communication. Techniques and Strategies” (2009: 28-29), Cristina Coman distinguishes some constant characteristics of crisis: 1 - a break, difficult or impossible

to foresee, whose effects are major, negative and difficult to overcome; 2 - a need for a change, initially with a negative effect, which subsequently transforms into an evolution factor of the organization; 3 - the absence of safe information regarding the factors that caused the crisis; 4 - the insufficient time for decision making; 5 - the lack of efficient technical and procedural frameworks for crisis evaluation; 6 - the uncertainty of the effects of the solutions and decisions taken; 7 - the production of a state of psychosocial stress.

Crisis can be approached through a convergent and systemic orientation of the three inseparable factors: context, content and behavior, in a permanent dynamic relationship. The specificity of each contributes to the manifestation of the others, so that the complementary flow of information and strategies becomes a multidimensional open sphere of action, always related to the external elements with which it communicates in a specific way.

The Context

The context of war presents an extreme challenge for organizations. This dramatic conjuncture has ramifications on multiple levels, and the medium and long-term effects are unknown, deepening the anxiety of managers from all types of organizations. Communication and public relations professionals are in an unstable informational flow, with marked conflictual notes and clear dissociative tendencies. Humanity is not, for the first time, in a belligerent state; on the contrary, it has experienced, over time, conflicts and destruction, rebuilding and reconfigurations, which have not created enough compassion, empathy and wisdom, leaving a huge space which people will fill with their actions and experiences from now on. As with previous situations, in addition to the complex psycho-social aspects, the challenges are related to the quantity, quality and distribution of resources. In addition to these, an essential role is now played by communication tools through which information is transmitted. The speed of transmission and reception, complex plans for disseminating verbal and audio-visual messages, force us to experience everything at an accelerated rate. These tools help specialists to undertake extensive research on consumer behaviour, in order to maintain their existing audience and attract new customers.

Organizational decisions are influenced day by day, and specialists are confronted with new challenges that keep the crisis cell in a continuous flow. Another important element is related to the phenomenon of migration, which requires a great adaptability in the psycho-social plan, on the already weakened background of a conflict that is escalating constantly. The integration of other customs, needs and behaviours is done over time and accentuates the already

established instability. Regarding the linguistic aspect, sometimes translators are unable to cope with the increased flow of requests. Also, at present many specialists are employed making use of the argument of Russian language knowledge in order to intervene in specific situations.

Social and cultural aspects are already being observed and taken into account by specialists in order to facilitate the integration of those coming from other geographical areas into the work teams of the country they arrived in. The challenges are multiple. For example, “for 6 out of 10 employers, the language barrier is the greatest challenge when teammates do not know an international language of circulation or do not know each other's language. Different collaboration styles, differences in the way of working and integrating into a multicultural team, which can be difficult due to prejudices or negative cultural stereotypes, complete the list of challenges of a team that has Ukrainians in its composition. 60% of the HR representatives who participated in the survey said that the company they work for currently has open positions for Ukrainian refugees and as many said that their employees are open to collaborating with Ukrainians in the same team” (<https://www.smark.ro/articol/59548/bestjobs-angajatii-romani-nu-se-tem-de-integrarea-refugiator-ucraineni-pe>).

The economic implications of rising prices and the lack (current or subsequent) of consumer products directly and acutely affect the survival mechanisms of individuals. In the absence of self-determination, they easily fall prey to the constant infusion of fear, panic, shock, anger, hatred and disorientation. These emotions will lead people to maintain conflictual situations and prevent them from rising above the dramas they are facing.

The socio-political and economic instability affects profoundly the mobility and flexibility of the populations affected by the effects of war. Some people have chosen to leave with their entire family to other places, others were forced to leave with their family incomplete, leaving behind the longing for home, stability and memories that will ease the pain of forced changes, which they would never have thought possible. The uncertainty of tomorrow, the lack of hope, the acute need to adapt to a new culture, to learn a foreign language and the necessity to find a job are the main challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees. Many companies and non-governmental organizations in Romania have started collaborations to support these people with a wide range of services, from translation, food and accommodation, to integration into the job market.

The Content

The content is the organization's interface, the calling card that speaks to the public about consistency, value and trust. The true success of a campaign launched now is to ensure the factors that sustain survival mechanisms and transcend them, leading the receiver onto a wider terrain, allowing them self-determination, balance and security. The quality of the content is validated by the attention and the level of receptivity of the public it reaches. Therefore, the focus of communication and PR specialists is on creating effective content, starting from the deepest knowledge of the receiver's needs. Conscious or not, these are the ones that generate the consumer's behavior. His attention will be directed towards the objects and situations that respond to his needs. We can speak of a priority order, but it is determined by the major impact of the overall critical situation, in this case, by the context of the war.

Silvia Luican (founder of the IZI Data company) states that "the mantra of 2022" is the simultaneous existence of innovation and stability. We cannot speak of creation and innovation without a stable foundation on which they can manifest. This trend goes beyond the mentioned calendar year and extends to a permanent attitude of the organization. These two values converge harmoniously, through quality content, dynamic and complex, towards the generous and specific objectives that the organization sets for itself. The complexity of the technological mechanisms ensures creators of content with extended and rapid mobility to express themselves. Content creation is not a simple scheme of transmitting ideas, but becomes an art of multidimensional communication, which uses all possible means to attract attention and to arouse the interest of the receiver. To captivate them, organizations build and maintain, continuously, stable frames and adapt their resources to the needs of potential customers. The degree of accessibility of users to modern technological tools increases the speed and efficiency with which the organization must create and transmit messages. The speed with which information is propagated and the quick access to the company's products and services will generate its trust rate in the company.

The effective content of messages sent during a crisis should take into account some fundamental principles, such as: promptness of intervention, correctness of information, credibility of the source, empathy, respect, and orientation towards concrete solutions. There are some risky situations that contribute to the emergence of a crisis: intensification of an existing state, entering the attention of the press, affecting the image, reputation and credibility of the organization, which will have a major impact on the confidence coming from the audience.

The design of the content will be subordinated to the operational and reputational objectives of the organization, both being equally important. Operational objectives aim to minimize the time spent in a crisis, to resolve it and to regain control, as well as to minimize the impact of the crisis on the organization. Reputational objectives aim to reduce the impact of the crisis on the company's reputation and on the systems with which it interacts. In both cases, the messages sent should take into account some aspects: a – research, observation and study of all information; b – evaluation of immediate and non-immediate repercussions; c – rapid, prudent and argued reaction; d – empathic, generous and respectful manifestation; e – taking into account a possible rise of the negative path; f – avoiding rigidity; g – appealing to storytelling; h – looking for advantages and constructive effects for the organization; i – consistent investments in social media and in creating quality content (written and video); j – coagulation of a community and building a solid communication with it. All these elements mean saving time, avoiding huge subsequent costs, preserving and optimizing resources, as well as avoiding an irreparable fall.

The Behavior

Currently, according to statistics carried out until April 2022, 63% of the world's population use the internet (approximately five billion people), the number being in a constant increase of over four percent per year. Trends show that almost two thirds of the entire world population will be connected to the online environment by mid-2023 (<https://datareportal.com/global-digital-overview>). This leads “to the modification of people's purchasing behavior, most of them preferring to make purchases predominantly online”. This means not only that information reception is carried out through numerous digital platforms, but also that users have transferred their actions from real life to the online environment, given the facilities it offers. Time, space and displacement economy, as well as challenges related to deepening the generalized crisis, will maintain and increase the consumer's option for online activities. Without making now any specifications regarding the quality and validity of the transmitted content, as well as of the entities that disseminate it, we underscore the role, importance and influence of the technological support, as a factor of support and propagation of information on a large scale.

If we refer to the crisis prior to the war, “audiences’ online interests during the pandemic, according to NielsenIQ, (...) [were focused on] ideas of wellness and financial security – mental & physical wellness, stress management, relaxation and sleep methods, professional and

financial security, interpersonal relationships and emotional support, sustainability, online courses, local travels, work locations and studios” (ibidem).

A survey conducted by the recruitment platform BestJobs (between April 21 and May 9, on a sample of 1,054 internet users from Romania), showed that “60% had considered moving to another country and before the military danger appeared. 14% said they had already taken the first steps towards leaving Romania, another 14% had begun to learn the language of the country where they intend to move, 10% had begun to save money for the move, and 20% said that they personally do not wish to emigrate but their family is making efforts in this direction”. (...) “The main reasons to move to another country are: the desire to change the environment and the country in which they work (38%), personal and family safety (24%), the desire to access a higher income, which is not possible in Romania (21%), the need to have more professional development opportunities (14%) and the desire to work in a more secure field, unaffected by war (4%)”. Other reasons are “closeness to relatives or acquaintances (27%) and distance from the war zone (24%)” (<https://www.smark.ro/articol/59734/bestjobs-un-roman-din-doi-s-a-gandit-sa-emigreze-dupa-declansarea-razboiului-din>).

The relationship between context, content and behavior in the *Farmec* campaign

Farmec, one of the largest Romanian companies, has launched the CSR platform “Farmec from the Heart for Those Around”, through which it will implement long-term actions to support Ukrainian refugees in Romania. The program will involve both partner non-profit associations and consumers. (...) Farmec launches a call for solidarity and to the customers of its own stores, and encourages blood donation, a stringent and permanent need both in our country and in Ukraine. Thus, the company rewards each blood donation, regardless of destination, with a voucher worth 30 lei in all 30 of its brand stores in the country, offered on the basis of the donation receipt, in March and April (<https://www.smark.ro/articol/59007/farmec-doneaza-60-000-de-produse-de-igiena-personala-prin-campania-farmec-din>).

With the launch of the CSR platform “Heart Charm for Those Around”, the Romanian company Farmec aims to achieve long-term objectives to support Ukrainian refugees concretely. Linguistically, the terms “Heart” and “Those Around” reveal the explicit manifestation of this organized and premeditated support. The chromatic spectrum selected for the creation of the image that accompanies this campaign includes the colors of the Ukrainian flag, and the gestures of the illustrated characters suggest the delicacy and sharing of compassion. The central lower part is occupied by the silhouette of a child, whose hair strands

are intertwined chaotically, which entails the idea of the absence of order and harmony. The perspective from the right is enriched with the image of a white dove flying symbolically towards peace, although this message is not expressed explicitly.

The Farmec company is well known to the general public and now appears in the role of a savior that directly and concretely supports the war victims. The message explicitly refers to these “support actions”, and the company is committed to being a real support “in the long run”. Collaborators who will be part of the support team are targeted, in a note of “solidarity”, but also “the consumers of their own stores”. The latter are invited to actively participate in the conduct of these humanitarian acts by donating blood in March and April, the reward being a 30 lei voucher.

What we observe here is that the organization does not flaunt its values, expecting its audience to applaud its goodwill, but involves consumers in this humanitarian act. The company's communication and actions thus take two directions. The first focuses on operational objectives, to declare identity values and to use its own resources. The other direction concerns the reputation objectives, where the company mirrors itself through the proposed actions, declaring that this is “an important mission”. In this way, it reaffirms its devoted role to humanity, which reinforces its position even more in front of the public, expressing values such as peace, solidarity and gentleness. Through all these, the company appeals to the consumer's conscience, anticipating their supportive, compassionate and empathetic capacity. The expected reaction is of support, of sacrifice, of active participation, of effective involvement. The compensatory actions are meant to strengthen the public's role as saviour.

As PR Manager at Farmec, Liliana Popa states that one of the fundamental values of the company she belongs to is social engagement: “We have always tried to help where we have identified the greatest need and where we could effectively contribute with our resources. We also believe that we have an important mission in the humanitarian crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine, which affects us all at all levels. Thus, we have designed this long-term CSR platform, through which we not only contribute with material resources to improve the situation of those directly affected, but also encourage civic involvement of people, rewarding them in our stores”.



Source: <https://www.smark.ro/articol/59007/farmec-doneaza-60-000-de-produse-de-igiena-personala-prin-campania-farmec-din>.

Conclusions

Digital informational flow operates extremely quickly, by means of platforms on which users can select their content preferences, after which they will receive specific notifications, depending on the pre-set settings. This phenomenon is directly correlated with the evolution of consumer consciousness, with the latter being able to modify their behavior at any time, depending on external events or the ability of message creators in certain campaigns that aim to do just that.

The attention and adherence of the consumer can only be oriented according to the context in which it is located, which implies all the psycho-affective, material, socio-economic and political factors that define the spatio-temporal perimeter at the given moment. It is not possible to create a consumer profile without deciphering and reflecting external influences, since these determine, directly and indirectly, the apprehension and positioning. The most extensive knowledge of the context can help professionals to observe the needs of the market and can lead companies to increase their notoriety. In the absence of this action, organizations can enter into a rapid and even insurmountable decline.

The dynamic triangle formed by the socio-economic, cultural and political context, the content and the consumer's behaviour is constantly traversed by the influences of the adjustable

characteristics of the three factors. As we have seen in the example provided by the Romanian company Farmec, the three instances, context, content and behavior, operate actively and are in a relationship of interdependence that serves both operational and reputation objectives. In this case, the company has focused on a humanitarian goal, coupled with strengthening its own image and notoriety. The consumer is directly involved in the objectives of the campaign, being invited to support the refugees by donating blood, “a stringent and permanent need”, both in our country and in the one directly affected by war. Through these actions, the Farmec company has shown commitment, promptness, empathy and generosity and has made its presence felt through humanitarian participation alongside other collaborators and its consumers.

Bibliography

- Cancel, Amanda E., Cameron, Glen T., Sallot, Lynne M., Mitrook, Michael A., (1997), “It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations”, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, Taylor and Francis (Routledge), 9(1):31-63.
- Chase, W. Howard (1977), ”Public Issue Management: The New Science”, *Public Relations Journal*, 33(10): 25-26.
- Coman, Cristina (2009), *Comunicarea de criză. Tehnici și strategii*, Editura Polirom , Iași, 2009.
- Coombs, Timothy (2004), “Impact of past crises on current crisis communications: Insights from situational crisis communication theory”, *Journal of Business Communication*, Sage Publications, 41: 265-289.
- Egelhoff, William G., Falguni, Sen (1992), “An Information-Processing Model of Crisis Management”, *Management Communication Quarterly*, Sage Publications, 5(4): 443-484.
- Fearn-Banks, Kathleen (1996), *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey.
- Fink, Steven (1986), *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable*, American Management Association, New York.
- Plottu, Eric (1998), “Les crises et leur gestion. Typologies et temporalités du processus de résolution”, *Science de la société*, nr. 44, Lyon.
- Reber, Bryan H., Berger, Bruce K. (2005), “Framing analysis of activist rhetoric: How the Sierra Club succeeds or fails at creating salient messages”, *Public Relations Review*, 31(2): 185–195.

WEB Sources:

<https://www.iqads.ro/articol/59123/creative-power-silvia-luican-coexistenta-dintre-inovatie-si-stabilitate-aceasta>, accessed on May, 30, 2022.

<https://datareportal.com/global-digital-overview>, accessed on June, 1st, 2022.

<https://www.iqads.ro/articol/59891/cum-si-de-ce-s-a-schibat-comportamentul-consumatorului-de-content-online-in>, accessed on May, 31st, 2022.

<https://www.smark.ro/articol/59734/bestjobs-un-roman-din-doi-s-a-gandit-sa-emigreze-dupa-declansarea-razboiului-din>, accessed on May, 30, 2022.

<https://www.smark.ro/articol/59007/farmec-doneaza-60-000-de-produse-de-igiena-personala-prin-campania-farmec-din>, accessed on May, 31st, 2022.