



How PR practitioners in Indiana apply traditional and emerging response strategies and tactics

# **Social Media- Generated Crises**

Presented by: James Parham, Ph.D.

# Agenda

- Welcome
- About Hiron and This Research
- Understanding Key Terms
- In Managing a Social Media-Generated Crisis
  - Do Traditional PR Strategies Work?
  - Traditional Crisis Communications Tactics Used
  - How Response Channels Are Chosen
  - Relevance of Benoit's Image Repair Theory
  - Influence of Age, Gender, Experience
- Implications for PR Practitioners
- Discussion



▶ **Introductions**

James Parham, Ph.D.

President, Chief Executive Officer



▶ **About Hiron**

- Full-service
- Advertising, public relations and digital
- Employee-owned
- Client portfolio split among commercial and government
- Facebook Marketing Partner
- Google Premier Partner
- Celebrating 42 years of business



▶ **Crisis Management Experience**



Indiana University Health



## About This Research

- Primary research conducted to support the doctoral thesis of James Parham, Ph.D.
- Title: Protecting a client's reputation: Image repair theory and its suitability to a social media-generated crisis
- The problem addressed by this study was if Benoit's (1995) image repair theory was still applicable and appropriate when dealing with a social media-generated crisis in 2020

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Key Characteristic</i>
<i>Denial</i>	
Simple Denial	Did Not Perform Act
Shift the Blame	Act Performed by Another
<i>Evasion of Responsibility</i>	
Provocation	Responded to Act of Another
Defeasibility	Lack of Information or Ability
Accident	Act Was a Mishap
Good Intentions	Meant Well in Act
<i>Reducing Offensiveness of Event</i>	
Bolstering	Stress Good Traits
Minimization	Act Not Serious
Differentiation	Act Less Offensive
Transcendence	More Important Considerations
Attack Accuser	Reduce Credibility of Accuser
Compensation	Reimburse Victim
<i>Corrective Action</i>	Plan to Solve or Prevent Problem
<i>Mortification</i>	Apologize for Act

## ▶ **Research Approach**

- **Who?** 31 public relations professionals in Indiana across a mix of gender, ages, and experience who had experience with social media-generated crises in the past two years
- **What?** 30-minute, qualitative in-depth 1:1 interviews
- **When?** October 1 – November 6, 2020
- **Where?** Zoom video conference meeting
- **How?** Recruited via email from PRSA Hoosier Chapter and other practitioners in Indiana

# Understanding **KEY TERMS.**



▶ **What is Public Relations?**

- Targeted communication designed to create and maintain credible relationships between an organization and its stakeholders.
- A management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with the public interest, and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.

*Etter et al., 2019  
Cutlip & Center, 1958, p. 5*



## What is a Crisis?

- A crisis is a significant threat to a company, organization, government, or individual that can have negative consequences over differing periods of time.
- Crisis has several defining characteristics:
  - Specific, unexpected, non-routine events or series of events
  - Create high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization's high priority goals

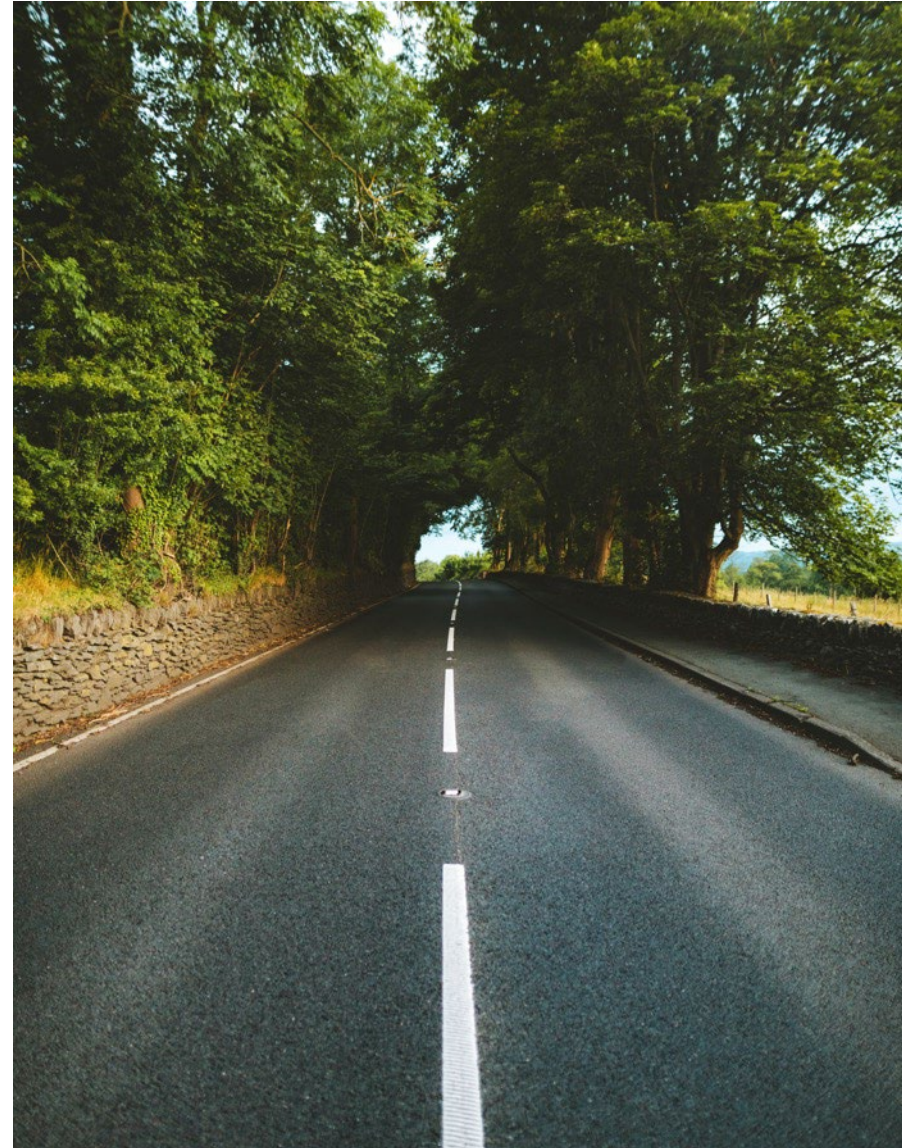
*Bundy, Pfarrer, Shortz & Daniels, 2017  
Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998)*



▶ **What is Image Repair Theory?**

- Image repair theory studies response strategies to crises and includes admitting guilt, denying if innocent, shifting blame, proving lack of control, reporting corrective action, and minimizing the issue.

*Coombs, 2016*



## ▶ What is Social Media?

- A collection of digital, internet-based programs and applications that allows the creation and use of user-generated content.
- The growth of social media in worldwide communication has been rapid and profound, and these technological advancements are transforming how crisis management is handled.

*Zha et al., 2018  
Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011*



## ▶ **Research Questions**

In managing a social media-generated crisis:

- Do traditional PR strategies work?
- What traditional crisis communications strategies are used?
- How are response channels chosen?
- Is Benoit's continuum of response strategies relevant?
- Does age, gender or experience influence the approach?



Do traditional PR strategies  
**WORK?**

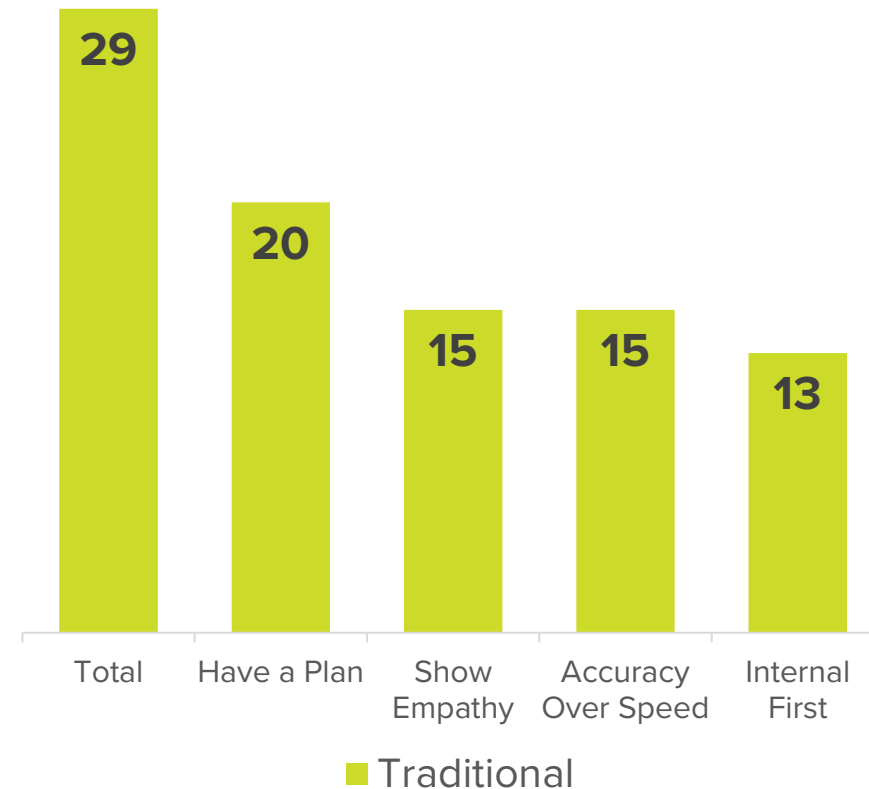
## Do traditional PR strategies work?

- Most public relations practitioners interviewed use both traditional public relations strategies and newer, non-traditional strategies when facing social media-generated crises.
- While traditional PR strategies work, they are not sufficient in a social media setting.



## Which traditional PR strategies are used?

- Many traditional PR strategies do work in a social media setting.
- Notably PR professionals shared the importance of:
  - Having a crisis management plan
  - Showing empathy for the individuals or organization creating the crisis
  - Taking the time to be accurate before rushing to respond
  - Sharing the response to key internal audiences before responding publicly



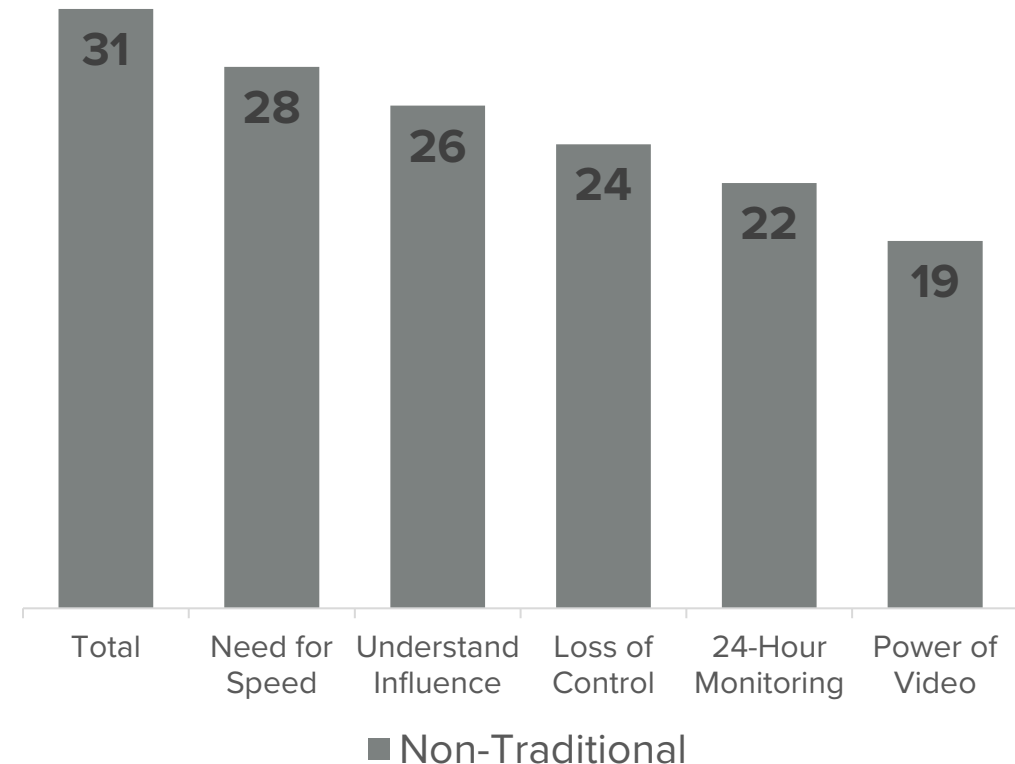


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I think having a plan in place before you face that (crisis) is making sure that **everybody in your organization** knows that plan and understands.

## Which non-traditional strategies are used?

- PR professionals are even more likely to use non-traditional strategies in a social media setting.
- Key themes include:
  - The need for a speedy response
  - Understanding the influence of the individual and their reach among your key stakeholders
  - Managing the loss of control and unpredictable nature of social crises
  - The need to monitor around the clock
  - The power of video, although many would like to use it more than they do



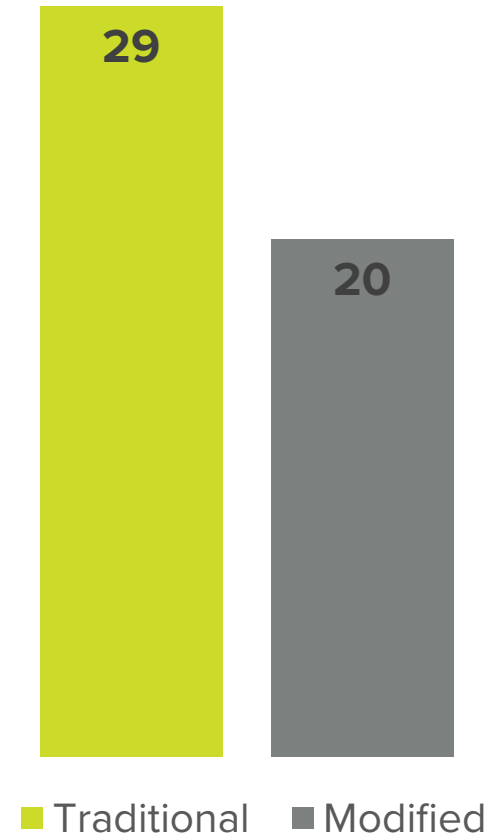
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Even if we don't have anything to say, **we want to respond.**

What traditional crisis communications strategies are **USED**?

▶ **What traditional crisis communications are used?**

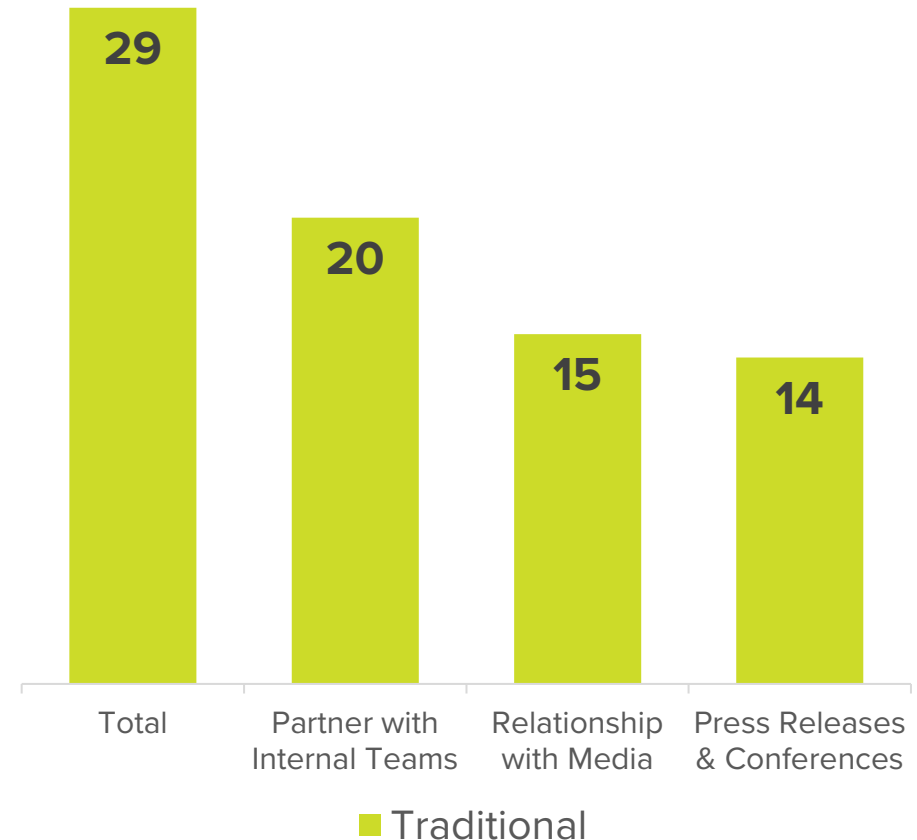
- Most public relations practitioners interviewed use both traditional crisis communications tactics and modified traditional crisis communication tactics in social media-generated crises.



▶ **Which traditional crisis communications are used?**

- Many traditional crisis communication tactics are used in managing social media-generated crises.

- PR practitioners look to:
  - Partner with leadership, legal, operations and other internal teams to develop messages
  - Rely upon strong relationship with media partners
  - Utilize press releases and press conferences

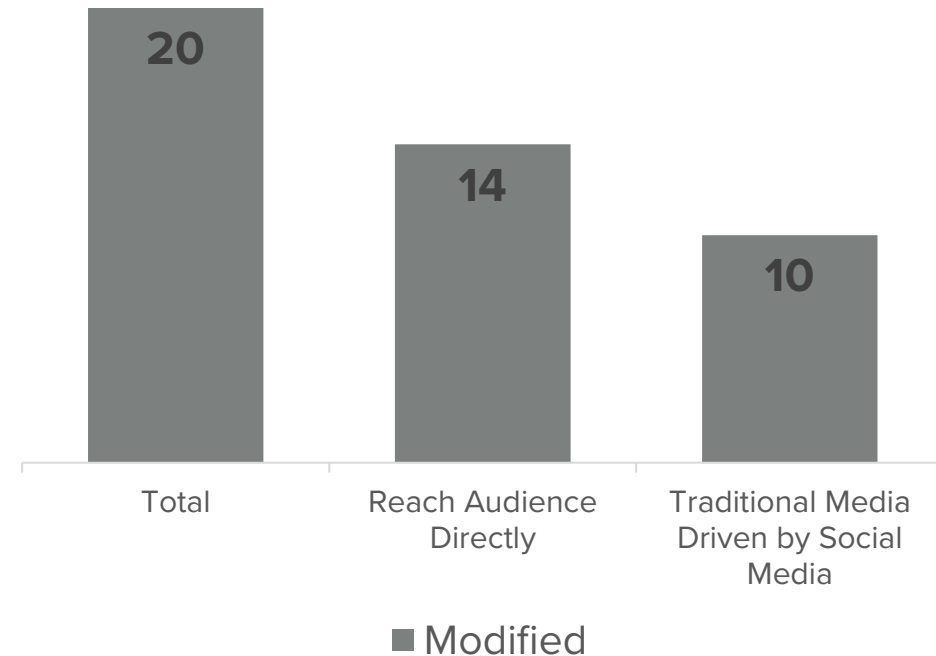


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When something does flare-up, I can call them (subject matter experts) urgently to **sit down all at once** and go through what the truth is, what we can say.

## What modified crisis communications are used?

- PR professionals often modify their crisis communications tactics in managing social media-generated crises.
- Social media itself is leveraged as a method of reaching their target audience directly to address a crisis.
- Traditional media also follows the organization's social media and can be driven indirectly.





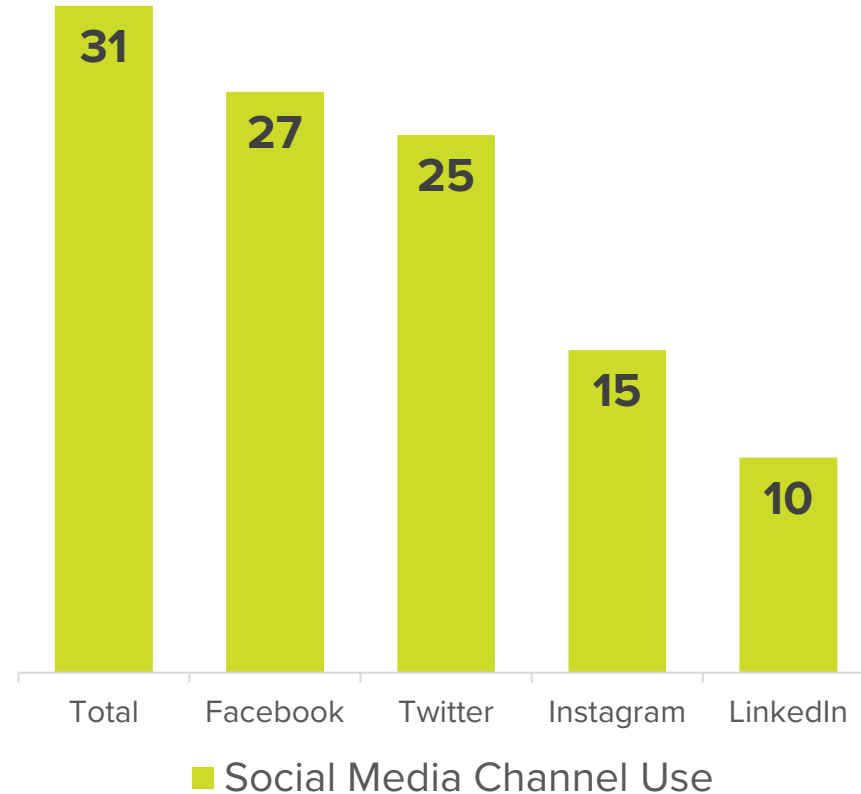
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Social media really gives you a chance to quickly say it yourself and take out that **middleman**.

How are response channels **CHOSEN?**

▶ **How are response channels chosen?**

- Facebook is the primary social media channel utilized by participants, primarily for consumer audiences.
- Twitter is almost as commonly used, primarily for media or industry audiences.
- Some utilize Instagram to share more visual content in their response.
- For those looking to reach B2B audiences, LinkedIn is leveraged.



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We use all of those platforms. It's almost by topic and where its' getting the **most traction** already.

Is Benoit's continuum of crisis  
response strategies **RELEVANT?**

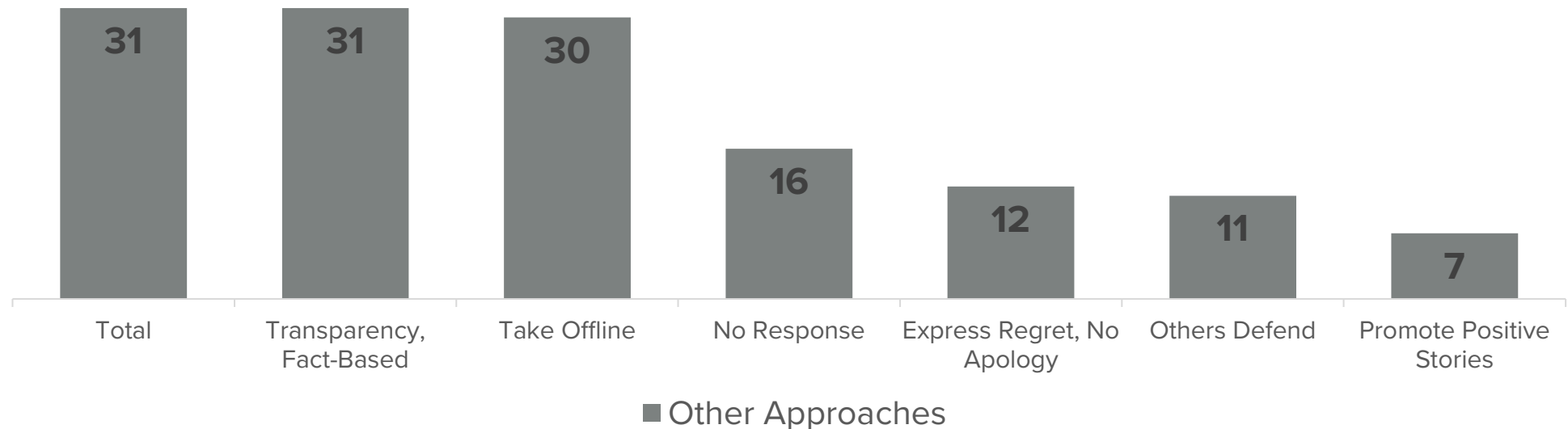
▶ **Is Benoit's continuum of crisis response strategies relevant?**

- Most PR practitioners (28 of 31) utilize at least one of Benoit's IRT approaches.
- Corrective action is the most prevalent.
- Few deny or evade responsibility unless there is clear misinformation.



## What other image repair approaches are used?

- All PR practitioners in this research report being very transparent and fact-based in their response to a social media-generated crisis.
- Most seek to take the conversation offline as soon as possible, and handle on a one-to-one basis.
- About half choose not to respond depending on the reach and severity.



Does age, gender or experience  
influence the **APPROACH**?



▶ **Does age, gender or experience influence the approach?**

- Generally speaking – no, based on this research.
- Only two notable differences:
  - Those in PR agencies less likely to use 24-hour monitoring
  - Younger PR professionals are more likely to use traditional crisis communication tactics of press releases and conferences
- All other areas were directionally similar across age, gender and experience.

# Implications for **PR** **PRACTITIONERS.**

## ► **Implications**

In managing a social media-generated crisis:

- Benoit's 1995 study is applicable, but denial and evasion are not preferred.
- Silence is an option favored by PR pros – whether quickly taking the conversation offline or ignoring the online dialogue altogether.
- The social media platform selected for response was based on audience analysis/fit.
- Social media is viewed by PR practitioners as a one-way communication device vs. a two-way dialogue as the literature suggests.
- A near-immediate response is required in social vs. the traditional response timeline.

Let's **DISCUSS.**

Be **BOLD.**