

ICON 2022

THE POWER OF INFLUENCE

Intersection of the Academic and Practical: Image Repair Theory and its Suitability to a Social Media- Generated Crisis

Dr. James Parham

November 14, 2022 | 3 p.m. CST

Agenda

- Introductions
- About Hiron
- Research Overview
- 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

Dr. James Parham

President, Chief Executive Officer

Hirons

About Hiron

- Full-service
- Public relations, advertising and digital
- Offices in Indianapolis and Chicago
- Employee-owned
- Client portfolio split among commercial and government
- Facebook Marketing Partner
- Google Premier Partner
- Celebrating over 44 years of business



Research Overview

- Primary research conducted to support the doctoral thesis of Dr. James Parham
- 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

BENOIT’S IMAGE REPAIR THEORY (1995)	
STRATEGY	KEY CHARACTERISTIC
DENIAL	
Simple Denial	Did Not Perform Act
Shift the Blame	Act Performed by Another
EVASION OF RESPONSIBILITY	
Provocation	Responded to Act of Another
Defeasibility	Lack of Information or Ability
Accident	Act Was a Mishap
Good Intentions	Meant Well in Act
REDUCING OFFENSIVENESS OF EVENT	
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
CORRECTIVE ACTION	
Mortification	<i>Plan to Solve or Prevent Problem</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

Public Relations

Crisis

Image Repair Theory

Social Media

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.

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

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, apologizing and minimizing the issue.

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 may be transforming how crisis management is handled.

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?

Research Questions

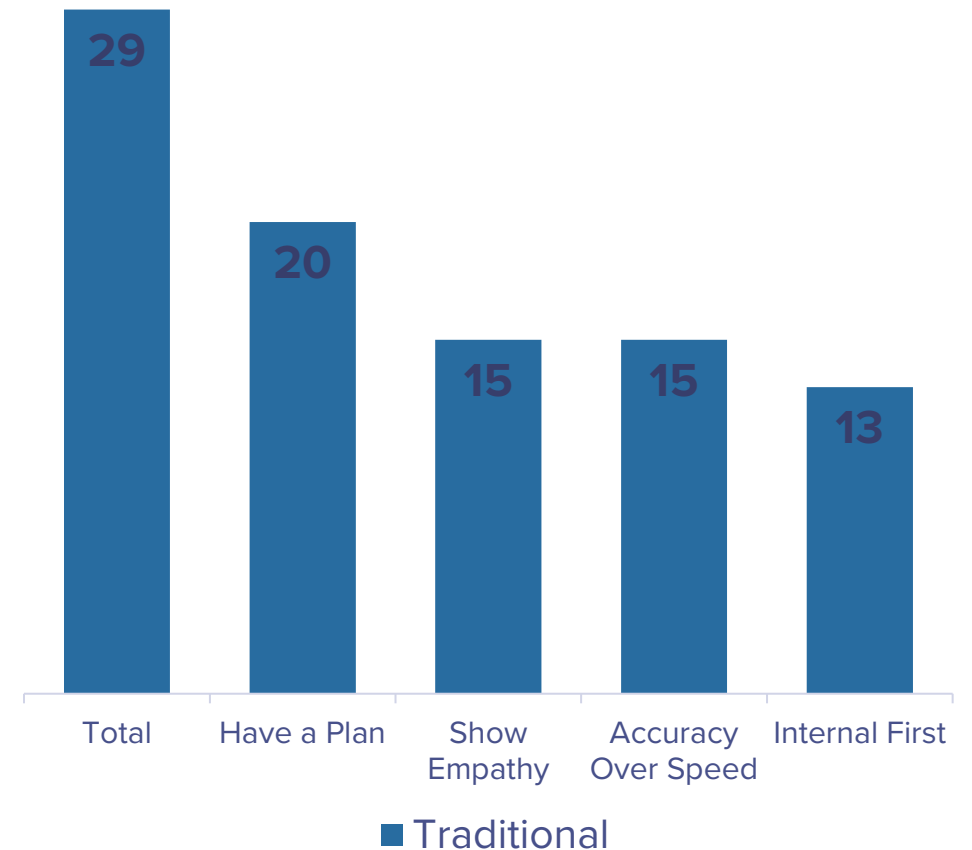
Do traditional PR strategies work?

- 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?

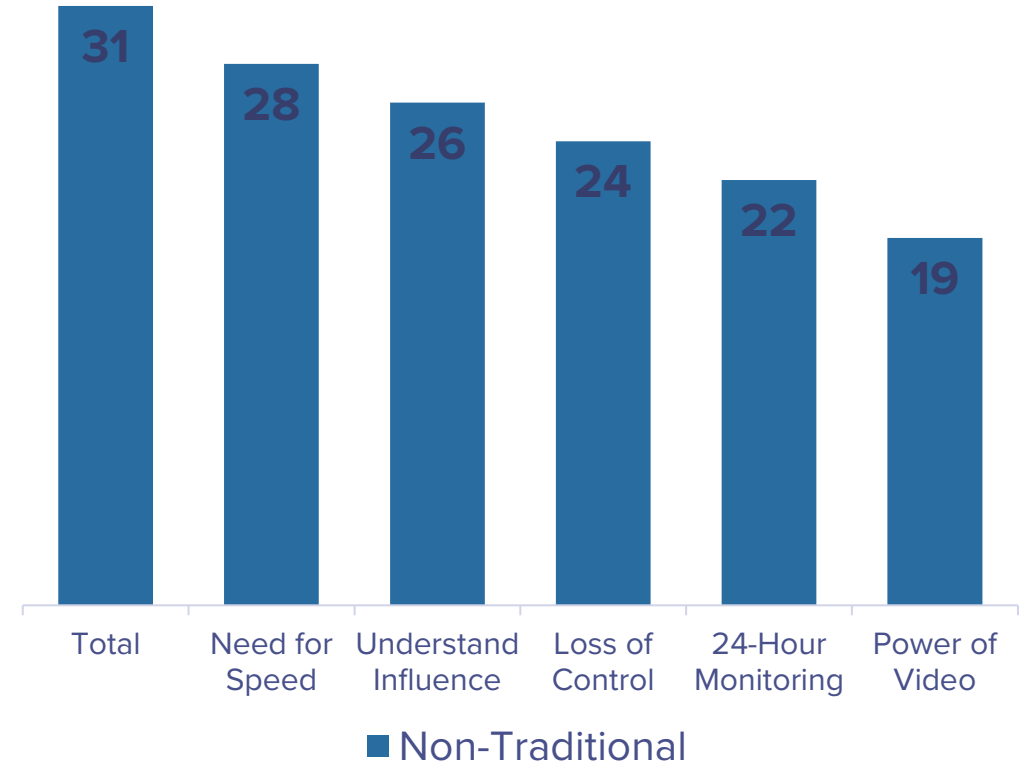
- Many traditional PR strategies do work in a social media setting.
- Notably, PR professionals shared the importance of:
 - Having a crisis management plan
 - Showing empathy for the individuals or organization creating the crisis
 - Taking the time to be accurate before rushing to respond
 - Sharing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



“ 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



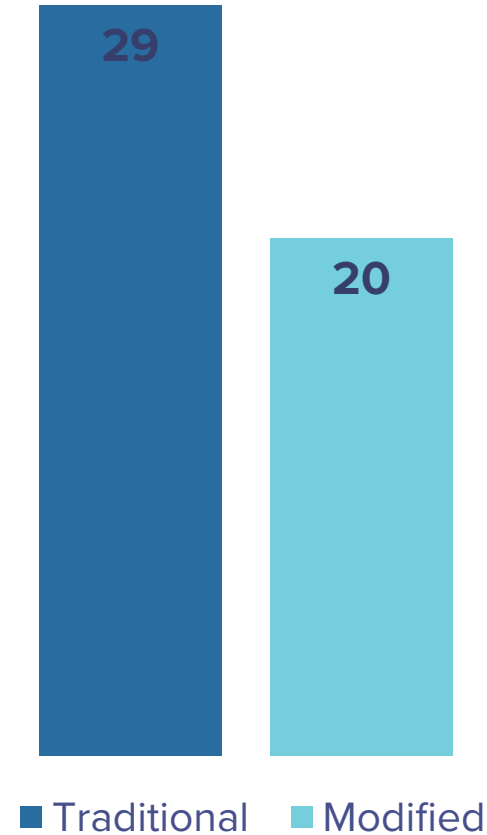
“Even if we don't have anything to say,
we want to respond.”

What traditional crisis communications strategies are used?

Research Questions

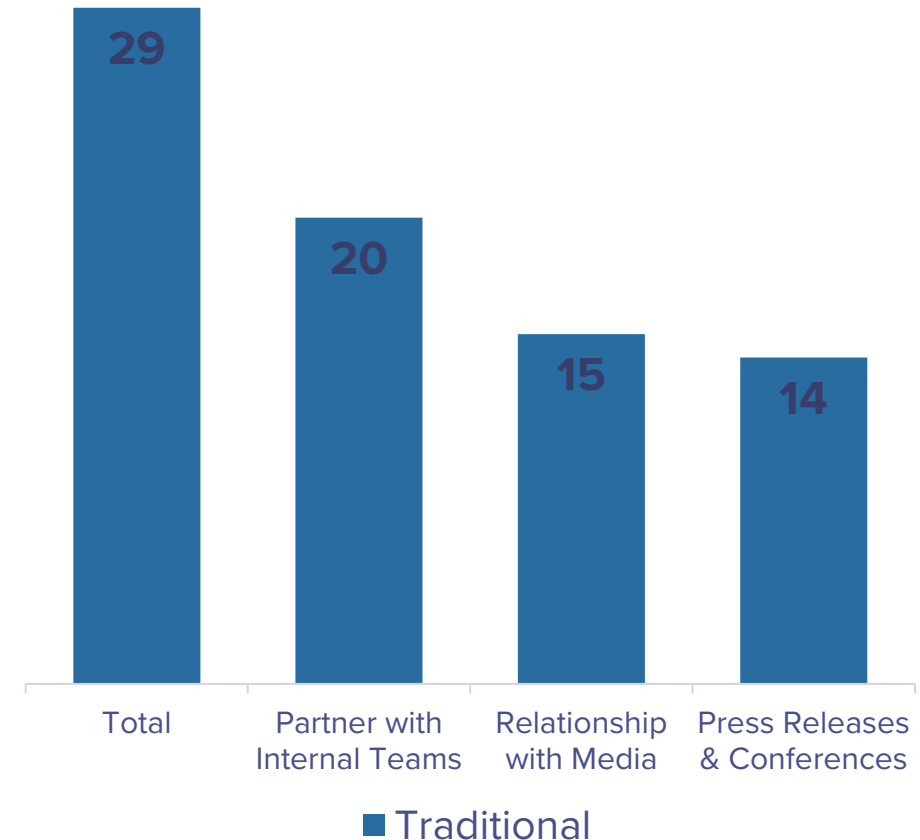
What traditional crisis communications are used?

- 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?

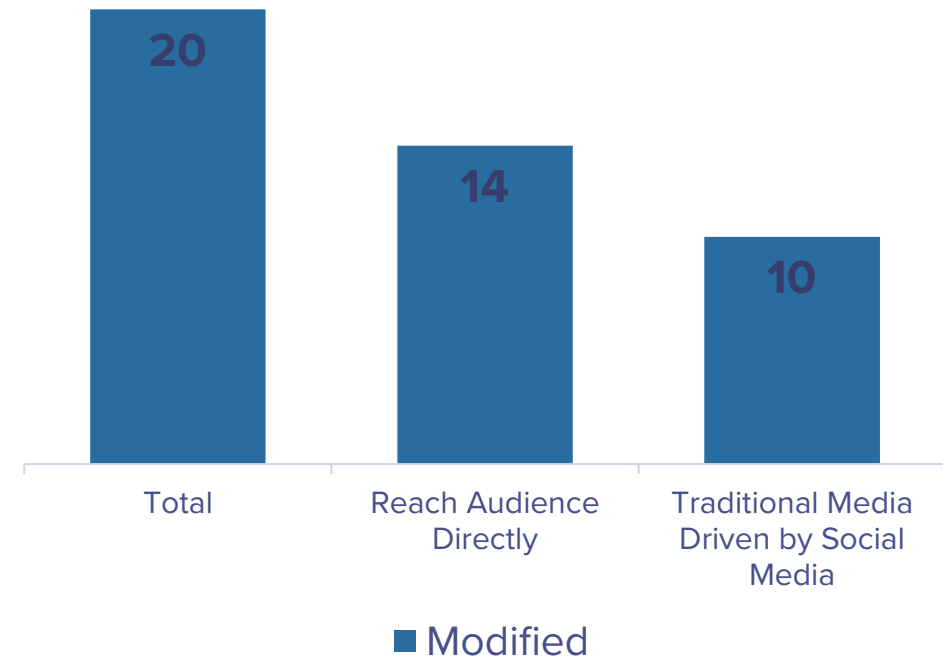
- Many traditional crisis communication tactics are used in managing social media-generated crises.
- PR practitioners look to:
 - Partner with leadership, legal, operations and other internal teams to develop messages
 - Rely upon strong relationship with media partners
 - Utilize press releases and press conferences



“ 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.





Participant Commentary

Chad Mertz

Strategic Communications Director

Energy Sector

Question: “Can you describe how social media impacted a crisis you were involved with?”

Participant Commentary



Chad Mertz | Strategic Communications Director, Energy Sector

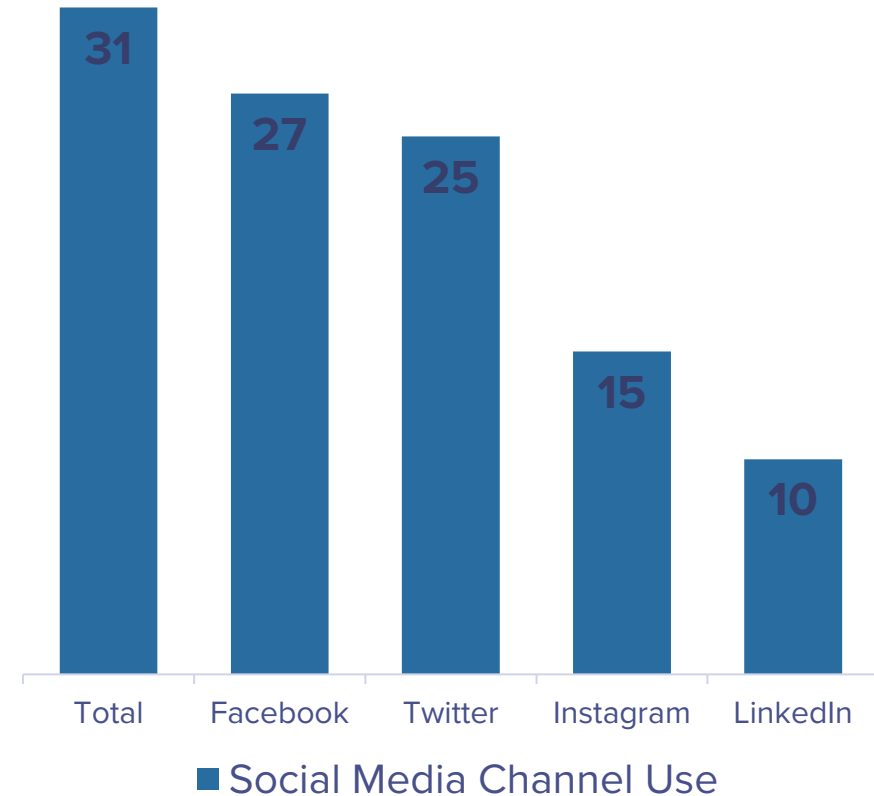
“Social media really gives you a chance to quickly say it yourself and **take out that middleman.**”

How are response channels chosen?

Research Questions

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.



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



Participant Commentary

Abdul-Hakim Shabazz

Attorney, Political Analyst and Publisher

Indy Politics

Question: “What do you think of social media as a tool?”

Participant Commentary



Abdul-Hakim Shabazz | Attorney, Political Analyst and Publisher, Indy Politics

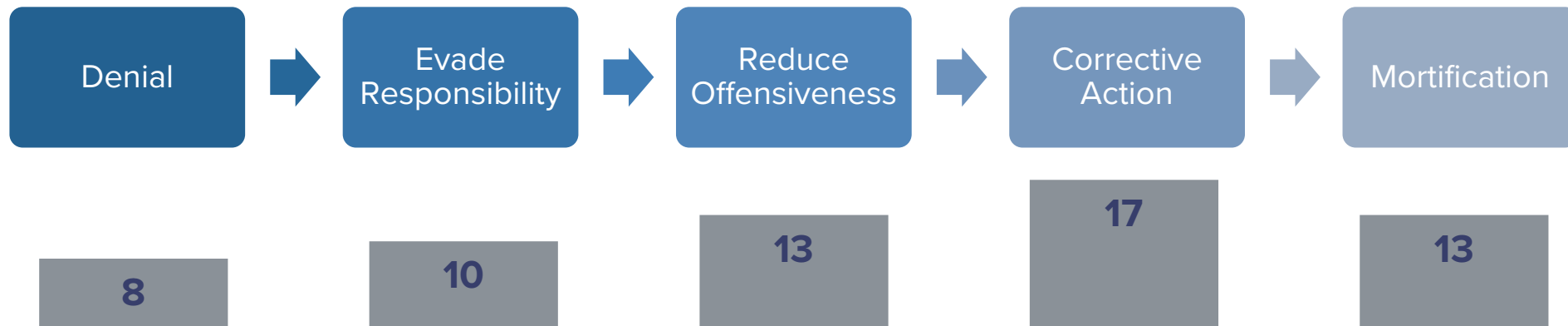
Is Benoit's continuum of crisis response strategies relevant?

Research Questions

Is Benoit's continuum of crisis response strategies relevant?

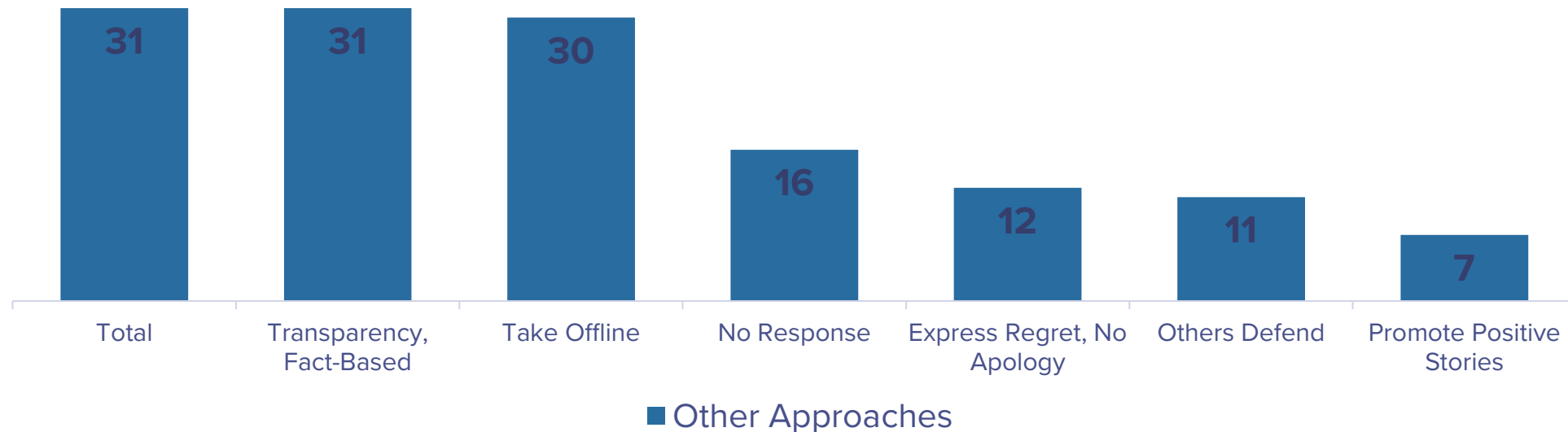
- Most PR practitioners (28 of 31) utilize at least one of Benoit's IRT approaches.
- Corrective action is the most prevalent.
- Few deny or evade responsibility unless there is clear misinformation.

Is Benoit's continuum of crisis response strategies relevant?



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.





Participant Commentary

Abdul-Hakim Shabazz

Attorney, Political Analyst and Publisher
Indy Politics

Question: “Have you seen people start with denial then social media heats up and they change their position to say they are sorry?”

Participant Commentary



Abdul-Hakim Shabazz | Attorney, Political Analyst and Publisher, Indy Politics



Participant Commentary

Chad Mertz

Strategic Communications Director

Energy Sector

Question: “What has your experience been with clients when you suggest Benoit’s strategies such as denial?”

Participant Commentary



Chad Mertz | Strategic Communications Director, Energy Sector

Does age, gender or experience influence the approach?

Research Questions

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.

Q&A

Discussion



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