

# Building Trust in the Midst of Crisis: Brand Communication Strategies in the Digital Age

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## Abstract

*The digital age is full of challenges, crises that can occur so quickly and spread more widely than ever before. In the midst of a situation like this, a brand's ability to rebuild trust becomes very important. This research aims to analyze effective crisis communication strategies in building and maintaining public trust through a qualitative approach. The theory used is situational crisis communication theory (SCT) to explore how a brand's communication response can influence public perception and consumer loyalty during a crisis. By conducting in-depth interviews and case study analysis, the research explored how transparency, speed and empathy played a key role in shaping the brand's image amid the crisis. The research confirms that brands adopt a proactive approach to crisis communications, by establishing clear protocols for rapid response, building an authentic digital presence, and engaging brand leaders directly to show genuine commitment. With an approach that emphasizes humanistic communication, crises can be an opportunity to demonstrate core brand values and increase loyalty. In the midst of a crisis, brand communication actors are expected to uphold proactivity, speed in responding, and the importance of authenticity in communication so that trust in the communicated brand is maintained.*

**Keywords:** Crisis Communication, digital era, brand, transparency, loyalty.

## Introduction

Advances in technology and social media have revolutionized the way businesses communicate with their audiences, enabling faster, more direct and more personalized interactions. Until recently, communication between businesses and consumers was one-sided, limited to traditional media such as print, television and radio advertisements. But thanks to the presence of digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, businesses can now interact in real time, answer questions, address complaints, and build closer relationships with consumers (Hasan et al., 2023; Wardani, 2023). In addition, digital platforms play a major role in accelerating information dissemination. Positive information such as campaigns and new product promotions can spread quickly and improve the company's reputation, but conversely, negative information such as criticism or controversy can also spread quickly and reduce its influence (Imamov & Semenikhana, 2021). This means that companies must be more sensitive and proactive in maintaining their image in cyberspace.

Companies face great challenges in maintaining their brand image as information changes rapidly and consumer expectations are higher than ever (Gemilang & Yuliana, 2023; Xiayu et al., 2024). Consumers are now more critical and vocal on social media, making it easier for them to express their opinions publicly, both positive and negative (Sugandini et al., 2019; Sundararaj & Rejeesh, 2021). Moreover, since information can spread instantly, a small mistake in communication or service can quickly turn into a reputation crisis (Coleman, 2020; Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). Building a good reputation is essential to combat these threats. A good reputation not only helps companies overcome crises, but also creates long-term consumer trust and loyalty (Rachman et al., 2024). To maintain a positive image in the eyes of the public, companies must actively communicate, address problems transparently, and respond to consumer needs and opinions (Maryam et al., 2024).

Crisis communication is a key element in responding quickly and effectively to crises and mitigating negative brand impacts (T. W. Coombs, 2018; Widawati & Elbana, 2024). Timely and transparent crisis communication can help companies control the narrative before the crisis gets worse and creates negative perceptions that are difficult to recover from. The basic concepts of crisis communication include a quick,

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honest, empathetic and structured response that shows the company is taking the issue responsibly and seriously (Riana et al., 2024). By providing accurate information, admitting mistakes where necessary, and explaining steps to improve the situation, companies can begin to rebuild public trust (Zuhdi & Ayuningtyas, 2024). Effective communication also helps maintain consumer loyalty by demonstrating the company's commitment to customer satisfaction and safety, thus strengthening long-term relationships even under difficult circumstances (Doorley & Garcia, 2015). (Sheehan & Quinn Allan, 2015).

Social media acts as a double-edged sword in crisis communication (Maal & Wilson-North, 2019; Snoussi, 2020). On the one hand, these platforms allow businesses to respond to crises quickly, reach a wide audience in seconds, and disseminate accurate information and education instantly. On the other hand, if social media is not handled well, it can make matters worse as negative complaints, criticisms, and rumors can easily go viral, spreading bad perceptions and increasing the impact of a crisis. Therefore, it is important for businesses to have a proper crisis communication strategy on social media that includes quick and sensitive responses, transparency and empathy. Companies should consistently provide up-to-date information, proactively respond to feedback, and maintain a calm and professional tone of communication to minimize escalation. These strategies help control the narrative on social media and limit the negative impact of the crisis on brand image (Vistbacka, 2017).

Some companies are clear examples of how an effective or failed crisis communication strategy can have a significant impact on brand image. A successful example is the 2018 incident where a racist incident occurred at one of Starbucks' branches. Starbucks quickly responded by issuing a public apology, closing stores for racial sensitivity training, and transparently communicating the actions taken on social media. This step allowed them to restore their image and maintain customer trust (Jain & Jain, 2024). (Jainism and Jainism, 2024). In contrast, the United Airlines incident in 2017, where passengers were forcibly removed from the plane, showed a failure to address the communication crisis. Instead of responding with empathy, the company's initial reaction was perceived as defensive, causing public outrage and damaging their reputation (Tian et al., 2022). These two cases demonstrate the importance of a quick, transparent, and confidential crisis communication strategy to control the situation and minimize damage to brand image.

The urgency of this research lies in the increasing vulnerability of brand reputation to crisis in the digital age, where information can spread very quickly and uncontrollably. In an increasingly dynamic business environment, a crisis can quickly impact public perception and destroy consumer trust. This study is important because companies must now be more vigilant and responsive to crises by using appropriate and effective communication strategies. Business trends show that companies with strong crisis communication strategies can better manage difficult situations, maintain customer loyalty and restore their image more quickly. Therefore, an in-depth understanding of how to respond to digital-age crises is critical to a company's long-term sustainability and success.

The purpose of this research is to analyze and understand how effective crisis communication can contribute to building brand resilience in the digital era. Furthermore, this research was conducted to identify the optimal crisis communication strategy to deal with a product crisis. In addition, this study highlights the strategic use of digital platforms to control the crisis narrative, limit negative impacts, and strengthen brand resilience in the face of the challenges of this rapidly changing and interconnected era.

## Theory Review

### Crisis Communication in the Digital Age

According to the Situational Emergency Communication Hypothesis (SCCT) theory developed by Coombs, it is said that a fast, transparent, and humane crisis response can help companies minimize the negative impact of a crisis and restore brand image. It is suggested that different communication responses are needed for different types of crises such as a product crisis, reputation crisis, or financial crisis. In a product crisis, companies must take quick action, including product recalls and open communication to the public. Coombs emphasized that an effective communication strategy should consider how the public perceives the crisis and the company should be honest and responsible. In addition, a crisis requires

transparency and empathy in dealing with the crisis at hand. Transparency means that companies provide clear and complete information to the public, while empathy requires companies to deliver messages that show concern for consumers. These two aspects are considered key to rebuilding trust after a crisis.

In the digital era, the use of social media has become a very important stage in responding to crises in real-time. In a study by Canhoto et al. (2015), social media allows companies to manage conversations with the public more quickly and effectively. Through the use of appropriate strategies on social media, companies can control the crisis narrative and minimize its negative impact. After all, the ultimate goal of crisis management is the restoration of brand image. A study by Xu et al. (2016) shows that direct interaction with consumers through gatherings or online question and answer sessions can help companies show empathy and increase public trust. This recovery step is important to strengthen the company's image after a crisis.

## Methodology

This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach to understand how effective crisis communication can build a strong brand in the digital era. A case study was used on a company that had experienced a product crisis and successfully overcame it. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with ABC company managers. With the aim of analyzing the cases to gain insight into best practices in handling crises in the digital era. Therefore, this study will provide strategic guidelines that can be applied by companies to manage crises more effectively and build resilient brands amid communication challenges in the digital era.

## Results and Discussion

### *Results*

PT ABC, which sells fresh milk and supplies products to retailers, experienced a serious crisis after discovering that the quality of the products it sold had declined. This incident resulted in complaints from consumers and a loss of trust in the company's brand. When a crisis occurred due to a decline in the quality of raw milk products sold by PT ABC, customers felt the impact immediately. Many consumers complained about the products they received through retailers or directly to the company. Customer trust in product quality can drop dramatically, leading to dissatisfaction and reduced brand loyalty. In addition, customers who are adversely affected by the defective products become concerned about their health, which also negatively impacts PT ABC's image in the eyes of consumers. This not only impacts relationships with existing customers, but also risks losing opportunities to acquire new customers.

"We took proactive steps after learning of the issues related to our brand crisis. Our first step was to withdraw the affected products from the market, and then we transparently explained to consumers the cause of the crisis. We also ensured that our communication was empathetic, where we acknowledged the mistake and offered compensation to affected consumers. It is important for us to demonstrate that consumer safety and satisfaction are our top priorities. We also used social media to disseminate real-time information, answer consumer questions, and provide an overhaul of the actions we took. Through this approach, we managed to restore most of the consumers' trust, although it will take time to fully restore the company's reputation." (Interview with Corporate Communications Manager of PT. ABC).

In this crisis situation, PT ABC took action and implemented effective crisis communication measures to minimize the negative impact on the company's reputation. The first step was to educate the public in an honest and transparent manner regarding the cause of the quality decline so that consumers understood the reality. In addition, the company immediately recalled the contaminated products both in retail stores and in consumer markets, demonstrating its commitment and commitment to customer safety.

It is also important for the company to issue a sincere and timely apology that acknowledges its mistake and offers solutions to address the fallout. Through proactive and transparent communication, PT ABC

can restore consumer confidence and prevent further escalation of this crisis, while strengthening its image as a responsible company that values its customers.

In addition to taking basic steps to address the crisis, PT ABC utilized the power of digital media to communicate the situation to the public quickly and effectively. Through digital platforms such as social media, the company can immediately disseminate information about the latest developments regarding the cause of the problem, the actions taken, and the solutions provided. Digital media allows PT ABC to respond directly and in real-time to consumer complaints and feedback, creating a transparent dialog and demonstrating the company's commitment to problem resolution.

Through this open approach, the company was able to regain customer trust by ensuring that customers were involved in the recovery process and assuring customers that precautions had been taken to prevent similar events from happening in the future. By proactively managing this crisis using digital media, PT ABC was not only able to restore its damaged reputation, but also strengthen long-term relationships with customers and help the company recover from the challenges of the dynamic digital age.

After the crisis, PT ABC's first step was to conduct a comprehensive impact assessment. This comprehensive review includes analyzing customer feedback provided in person and through social media. By understanding how customers and the public perceive the company after the crisis, PT ABC can understand the extent of the damage done to its brand image. This assessment also includes analyzing how widespread the negative impact of the crisis is so that the company can devise more effective strategies to restore its reputation.

The next step is to use the evaluation results to improve future crisis management. PT ABC identified the strengths and weaknesses of the crisis response implemented, including communication, speed of action, and effectiveness of the solutions provided. Using the results of this assessment, the company can develop new procedures or refine existing ones so that future responses are faster, more coordinated and more effective. These insights are invaluable for strengthening the crisis management strategy in place and better preparing the organization for other potential crises in the future.

PT ABC's final step was to restore the trust of its customers and stakeholders. Therefore, the company took steps such as compensating affected customers and making commitments to improve product quality and management. In addition, PT ABC launched an aggressive Public Relations campaign to highlight the improvement efforts and changes that had been made after the crisis. By demonstrating resilience and commitment to improvement, the company was able to turn this crisis into an opportunity to strengthen their brand in the eyes of customers, while ensuring that the company rose up and became stronger after overcoming challenges.

## Discussion

### Effective Crisis Communication Strategy

The first step in crisis communication is to identify and understand the type of crisis that PT ABC is experiencing. Each crisis requires a different approach. For example, reputational crises often result from public relations mistakes, scandals or criticism of company policies. In these situations, the communication strategy should focus on clarifying and restoring the image through transparency, speed and fault recognition. On the other hand, product crises usually involve product defects or failures that threaten consumer safety or satisfaction. The communication strategy here entails immediate notification to consumers and, if necessary, recall of the product as well as offering solutions such as replacement or repair. When there is a financial crisis, such as bankruptcy or falling stock prices, communications need to focus on explaining recovery measures and business continuity plans. By identifying the nature of the crisis early on, companies can tailor the most appropriate communication strategy and minimize negative impacts.

According to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (W. T. Coombs, 2022), different types of crises, such as reputational crisis, product crisis, and financial crisis, require different communication

approaches. Another study conducted by Sellnow & Seeger, 2021 highlights that by quickly identifying the type of crisis, companies can design the right communication messages that can significantly reduce the negative impact of the crisis.

The study also found that a well-thought-out and structured crisis communication plan, including the establishment of a crisis management team and the use of appropriate communication channels, has a significant impact in minimizing uncertainty and preserving the company's reputation. These results highlight the importance of corporate preparedness in managing crises through strategic planning and coordinated communication.

A well-thought-out crisis communications plan is essential for a quick, effective and coordinated response. Key elements of this plan include the establishment of a crisis management team consisting of key members of the company, including the official spokesperson, legal team and public relations team. Each member should have clear roles and responsibilities to avoid confusion in decision-making. In addition, it is important to establish communication channels such as social media, websites, traditional media and internal communications to ensure messages are delivered appropriately and quickly. The plan should also include consistent key messages that provide clear information about the crisis, the company's efforts and its commitment to problem solving. With proper planning, businesses can manage crises more effectively, protect their reputation and restore consumer confidence.

### **Information Management in the Digital Age**

Social media plays an important role in crisis communication as it allows companies to disseminate information quickly and respond to public concerns directly. In times of crisis, businesses can use social media to provide real-time updates, answer questions and provide education. It is important for businesses to have a team that can respond quickly and appropriately to the most important social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

Social media monitoring techniques, such as the use of social listening tools, can help companies analyze public sentiment, monitor conversations about their brand, and detect potential crisis escalation. By understanding people's reactions and sentiments towards the current situation, companies can adjust their communication strategies to be more effective and empathetic. Given the negative impact of this crisis, online reputation management is key to limiting its adverse effects. Businesses can use search engine optimization (SEO) techniques to ensure that positive information about their brand appears on the first page of search results, replacing any negative messages that may spread.

Other strategies include proactively publishing positive content, such as success stories, crisis response, and evidence of the company's commitment to improving the situation. Reaching out to customers directly through social media is also very important to improve the image of a brand or company. In addition, the speed of responding to complaints and providing clear and caring resolutions can help calm angry or anxious customers. Overall, a proactive and transparent approach to online reputation management can help minimize the impact of a crisis and restore public trust.

Similar research shows that social media plays an important role in crisis management, especially in terms of speed and interactivity of communication with the public. According to a study conducted by (Njoroge, 2019), companies that can respond quickly to crises through social media can reduce significant reputational damage. In times of crisis, social listening technology allows companies to collect data on public sentiment in real-time, allowing them to better respond to customer needs. Research conducted by Canhoto et al., 2015 also found that companies that actively use social media to provide education and up-to-date information about the crisis that is happening can reduce public uncertainty and build more positive brand perceptions.

Moreover, as explained (Mhiri, 2022), effective SEO and online reputation management strategies help businesses avoid negative repercussions by ensuring that positive crisis-related narratives dominate the



online space. These studies demonstrate the importance of social media as an effective crisis communication tool that enables companies to maintain customer loyalty and rebuild trust efficiently.

### *Transparency and Accountability*

Transparency in crisis communication is essential to rebuilding public trust that may have been affected by the incident. Information disclosure shows that the company has nothing to hide and is ready to face the problem openly. For example, the company could hold a press conference or disseminate a clear official statement regarding what has happened, the steps being taken to address the crisis, and how the company plans to prevent similar problems in the future. By sharing information honestly and openly, companies demonstrate accountability and commitment to improvement, which can help improve their image and strengthen relationships with customers and other stakeholders.

Previous research has consistently shown that transparency in crisis communication is a key element in rebuilding public trust. According to a study conducted by (Zuhdi & Ayuningtyas, 2024)(Zuhdi & Ayuningtyas, 2024), information disclosure in crisis situations helps reduce negative perceptions and increase public confidence that the company is willing to take responsibility for mistakes that occur. Research by (Kim, 2015) also found that companies that proactively provide clear and complete information about the crisis tend to experience faster reputation recovery compared to companies that are less transparent. In the context of crisis communication, transparency not only means providing factual information, but also involves honesty in conveying the challenges faced by the company and the concrete steps taken to solve the problem. The study emphasizes that when companies openly admit mistakes and show commitment to improvement, the public tends to provide more tolerance and trust, which ultimately helps restore a damaged brand image.

The principle and value of transparency in crisis communication is critical to rebuilding trust among communities that may be affected by the incident. Information disclosure shows that the company has nothing to hide and is willing to address issues openly. For example, the company might hold a press conference or make clear public statements about what happened, what steps were taken to address the crisis, and how the company intends to prevent similar problems from spreading in the future. By communicating information honestly and openly, companies can demonstrate responsibility and commitment to improvement, enhance their image, and strengthen relationships with customers and other stakeholders.

Previous research has consistently shown that transparency in crisis communication is a key element in restoring public trust. Research conducted by (Zuhdi & Ayuningtyas, 2024) found that information disclosure in crisis situations reduces negative perceptions and increases public confidence that the company intends to take responsibility for mistakes that occur. (Kim, 2015) also found that companies that proactively provide clear and complete information about a crisis tend to recover their reputation faster than companies that are less transparent.

In the context of crisis communication, transparency means not only providing factual information, but also honestly communicating the challenges faced by PT ABC and the specific steps taken to resolve them. This study highlights that when companies openly admit their mistakes and work to correct them, the public tends to be more forgiving and trusting, which ultimately helps restore a damaged brand image.

### **Brand Image Recovery and Reconstruction**

Restoring a brand image after a crisis requires a series of strategic steps to restore consumer confidence and improve the company's image. The first step is to implement a positive communication campaign that highlights the corrective actions taken and the results achieved. This campaign includes showcasing success stories, testimonials from satisfied customers, and announcing new initiatives to improve the quality of our products and services. In addition, companies can organize events and activities that demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility and active contribution to society. Another technique is to communicate directly with consumers through Q&A sessions, webinars, and online forums to listen to

consumer feedback and demonstrate that the company is truly listening and responding to consumer concerns. There are many things that can be mentioned.

Post-crisis evaluation is an important step that allows companies to learn from the experience and identify areas for improvement in the future. Once the crisis is over, companies should conduct a thorough analysis of the steps taken, including the effectiveness of communications, speed of response, and evaluation of the impact of the various strategies implemented. Gathering feedback from the crisis management team, customers, and other stakeholders will provide valuable insights into what worked and what didn't. This evaluation process should be followed by continuous learning. This evaluation process should be followed by continuous learning and improvement activities, such as updating crisis communication plans, training staff, and refining procedures to better manage future crises. In this way, companies can strengthen their resilience to future crises and improve their ability to protect and restore their brand image.

Other research has highlighted the importance of restoring brand image after a crisis through a strategic approach that focuses on positive communication and consumer engagement. According to research (Saputra, 2023); (Widawati and Elbana, 2024); (Maryam et al., 2024), communication campaigns that emphasize corrective action and corporate social responsibility are effective in restoring public trust. In addition, research (Honora et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2020) shows that companies that can demonstrate transparency in their recovery process, through customer testimonials, community engagement, CSR initiatives, etc., are more likely to bounce back; evidently, the chances of recovery are great. positive reputation.

According to (Xu et al., 2016), interacting directly with consumers, such as through forums and interactive sessions, provides an opportunity for businesses to demonstrate empathy and responsiveness, ultimately restoring a stronger brand image will help the brand. The study also highlights the importance of post-crisis evaluation. Learning from the crisis experience will strengthen the company's ability to deal with future crises, thereby strengthening its resilience and improving its image in the eyes of society.

## Conclusions

After the above discussion, it can be concluded that building a strong brand in the digital era is highly dependent on the company's ability to conduct effective and transparent crisis communication. Fast, open and coordinated communication through digital platforms such as social media can help businesses respond to crises in real time and reduce the negative impact on brand reputation. Transparency, accountability and active consumer engagement during and after a crisis are key to restoring public trust. In addition, post-crisis assessment and application of lessons learned from past experiences can strengthen crisis management strategies and make companies more resilient to future challenges. With the right approach, ABC Company can turn a crisis into an opportunity to strengthen its brand and increase customer loyalty.

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