Christian Chicken vs. Mainstream Media: A Case Study Analysis of Chick-fil-A's Stance on

Traditional Marriage Using Situational Crisis Communication Theory

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Presented to the Faculty of

Liberty University

School of Communication and Creative Arts

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Master of Arts

In Strategic Communication

By

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Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my thesis committee. Dr. Widgeon, thank you for initially nudging me towards graduate school and opening up the opportunity for me to grow in this experience. I am thankful for your guidance as my chair, your constant encouragement through this research, and your gracious attitude. Thank you Dr. Martin for giving me new insights into the field of communication and for giving me guidance throughout the graduate program and this thesis.

Second, I would like to thank my wonderful family. Mom and Dad, you have encouraged me to perform to the best of my abilities my entire life. I would not have been able to get through this program without your support and love. Thank you Erin for constantly checking in on me to make sure I was still sane and to offer up encouragement.

Third, thank you David for constantly cheering me on and proofreading every page. Your long-distance calls, sweet notes, prayers, patient attitude, and coffee fueled the second half of the process. I cannot thank you enough for supporting me.

Finally, I would like to thank my amazing group of friends for the coffee, laughs, chocolate, and pep talks. To Sam, Carley, and Emily, you are truly life-long friends and I am blessed to have spent the past two years learning and growing along side of you.

Abstract

A crisis can strike an organization at any moment and it is the responsibility of the organization to be prepared with a plan of action. This thesis will explore crisis management, using Timothy Coombs' crisis management strategies, of Chick-fil-A and then COO Dan Cathy to see if those two parties implemented crisis strategies in a way that benefited the organization following Cathy's statements in support of the biblical definition of family. Since many interpreted these comments as anti-gay sentiments from Chick-fil-A itself, crisis struck the organization Cathy represented. This thesis will also look at the idea of social activism in corporations, and the ability or lack of ability to support a cause on the opposite side of general public opinion.

A qualitative content analysis was used to examine the responses from both Chick-fil-A and Cathy following Cathy's controversial statements. As many corporations are choosing to vocalize opinions on divisive debates, it is important to analyze how an organization and individual respond when such an expression of opinions causes backlash. The responses were analyzed in terms of Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory, applied as a framework in the analysis.

Chick-fil-A and Cathy both swayed from the recommended communication strategies. Cathy remained mostly silent during the five-month time period that was studied, while Chick-fil-A employed some, but not all, of the recommended strategies. Though perception changed among many stakeholders initially, a portion of the stakeholders rallied behind the company in the midst of the controversy, boosting company sales in the short term.

Keywords: Crisis Management, Timothy Coombs, Chick-fil-A, Communication, Social Activism, Organizational Communication, Dan Cathy

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Chapter I: Introduction

Background

"The Lord has never spoken to me, but I feel Chick-fil-A has been His gift" (Schmall, 2007). This statement from CEO and founder of Chick-fil-A, S. Truett Cathy, embodies the food chain's biblically minded approach.

Chick-fil-A is a privately held, family owned, quick-service restaurant chain known for its boneless chicken breast sandwich. The chain boasts over 1,900 locations in 41 states and in Washington, D.C., and has become the largest restaurant chain of its kind in the United States ("Company fact sheet," 2015). S. Truett Cathy, founder and former CEO, opened the first Chick-fil-A restaurant in 1967, following his success with The Dwarf Grill, a diner in Atlanta, Georgia. Chick-fil-A is founded and runs on the value of service to customers, operators, team members, and the community ("How we give," 2015).

Dan Cathy, son of founder S. Truett Cathy, spent his life around the Chick-fil-A empire. According to Dan Cathy's executive biography, his career with Chick-fil-A started with his musical talents at the age of 9, as he sang to customers and did radio commercials for one of the chain's original restaurants, the Dwarf House ("Dan T. Cathy," 2015). With a business administration degree from Georgia Southern University, Cathy returned to the family business as director of operations for the chain, opening new chains across the United States. Cathy continued to advance in the company as senior director of operations, vice president of operations, executive vice president, and later president and chief operating officer in 2001. S. Truett Cathy then named Cathy president and CEO of Chick-fil-A in 2013 prior to his death in September of 2014. Even as the CEO, Cathy defines his role uniquely, stating, "I work in customer service" ("Dan T. Cathy," 2015). His job involves traveling to different Chick-fil-A

franchises, interacting with team members and operators as well as participating in the grand

openings for new franchises. His travels support the idea that studying the chain at every level

"provides a clearer understanding of the ever evolving wants and needs of Chick-fil-A

customers" as well as allowing him to "personally convey his servant spirit to the chain's 70,000-

plus employees" (2015).

The Chick-fil-A Corporate Purpose takes a clear religious stance with the following

statement: "To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us and to have a

positive influence on all who come into contact with Chick-fil-A" (2015). Additionally, the

company is marked by its decision to close every Sunday, a rule maintained by franchisees with

the risk of having their contracts terminated if they do not comply (Schmall, 2007). In regards to

Sunday closures, Dan Cathy states, "We've had a track record that we were generating more

business in six days than the other tenants were generating in seven [days]" (Blume, 2012).

The Cathy family does not attempt to hide their personal values, whether in company

policy, corporate social responsibility, or personal interviews. In one Forbes Magazine article

(2007), *The Cult of Chick-fil-A*, the author highlights the intense hiring practice and application

of values to company policies (Schmall, 2007). The article addresses Chick-fil-A's goal to bring

in loyal employees, often putting potential hires through an intense screening process, which

includes questions regarding personal family life and marriage status. Potential employees are

screened specifically for loyalty and values that line up with the company's own. S. Truett Cathy

stated, "You don't have to be a Christian to work at Chick-fil-A, but we ask you to base your

business on biblical principles because they work" (2007).

Though many are familiar with Chick-fil-A's biblical values, controversy struck over a

radio interview featuring Dan Cathy that aired on the Ken Coleman Show on June 16, 2012. The

following statement from Cathy contributed to what Ken Coleman refers to as "the media

firestorm":

> I think we are inviting God's judgment on our nation when we shake our fist at him and
>
> say, "We know better than you as to what constitutes a marriage"… and I pray God's
>
> mercy on our generation that has such a prideful, arrogant attitude to think that we have
>
> the audacity to define what marriage is about. (Coleman, 2012)

An article in a Christian news journal, The Biblical Recorder (BR), followed this

interview to discuss Cathy's views on business integrated with his worldview. In this article,

Guilty as charged,' Dan Cathy says of Chick-fil-A's stand on faith, Blume (2012) discusses

Cathy's views on Christianity and commerce. It is not until the end of the article that Cathy's

views on gay marriage are addressed. He states that he is "guilty as charged" in regards to his

views on the traditional family unit (2012). He explains further, "We are very much supportive

of the family – the biblical definition of the family unit. We are a family-owned business, a

family-led business, and we are married to our first wives. We give God thanks for that" (2012).

In a follow-up article in the Biblical Recorder, *Chick-fil-A interview with BR triggers media*

storm, the author nods to other organizations that picked up on the stance in favor of biblically-

defined family including the *Los Angeles Times*, *Associated Press*, *Huffington Post*, *Washington*

Post, and others (Foust, 2012).

The comments Dan Cathy made in the original BR article, the company's stance on

biblical principles in the workplace, and Cathy's worldview prompted a response from

individuals and groups who perceived the stance as offensive or an attack on their moral choices.

Can an organization or its leaders take a moral stance if it differs from perceived popular

opinion, and does taking such a stance create a crisis that needs to be strategically addressed?

The researcher will analyze the crisis management surrounding this situation using rhetorical methods, specifically observing crisis management strategies employed by Dan Cathy and Chick-fil-A, and applying W. Timothy Coombs' situational crisis communication theory as a framework.

Coombs' Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is characterized by its use of evidence and experimental techniques to create an applicable framework to future crises (Coombs, 2007c). SCCT looks at significant factors of a crisis to observe how these impinge on the crisis attribution and the stakeholders' perceived reputation of the organization. This form of analysis helps to estimate how stakeholders will respond to the company. The theory builds upon Attribution Theory to "predict the reputational threat presented by a crisis and to prescribe crisis response strategies designed to protect reputational assets" (Coombs, 2007c, p. 166).

The thesis is broken down into five separate chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and discussion. Chapter two discusses the literature related to this study, offering special consideration to foundational studies and theories leading to situational crisis communication strategies as they relate to crisis management. It also further expands upon Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Chapter three explains how the study was conducted. Chapter four gives details of the study's results and chapter five brings the study to conclusion with the discussion.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Fearn-Banks (2010) defines crisis as a "major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name" (p. 2). Organizations can be especially susceptible to crises. Coombs (2012) states, "Wise organizations know that crises will befall them; they just do not know when" (p. 3). Crisis in an organization is defined as "unpredictable events that can disrupt an organization's operations" (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 166). According to Coombs (2010), the key terms in crisis studies are crisis, crisis management, and crisis communication. "The three are inextricably interconnected and must be considered in a progression from crisis to crisis management to crisis communication" (p. 17-18). The term "crisis" can have many interpretations when establishing if a situation is actually a crisis. Coombs states, "Crisis should be reserved for serious events that require careful attention from management" (p. 19). In his previous writings, Coombs notes the following of a crisis: "The crisis is the negative event that leads stakeholders to assess crisis responsibility" (2007c, p. 166). Coombs also posits, "Two key traits of crises are that they are unexpected (we might know one might hit but not when) and negative" (2007a, p.136). Crisis definitions should be applied to events with potential to harm a company, including their stakeholders (Coombs, 2010). These atypical events attract awareness to the situation, often from the stakeholders as well as media.

With crisis communication, specifically in organizations, a plan or guidance is necessary. Guidance should be supported and based on evidence from previous crises (Coombs, 2007). Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, and Johansen (2010) discuss crisis management in a corporate setting in their article, *Why a Concern For Apologia and Crisis Communication?*. According to Coombs et al., "A crisis response, what management says and does after a crisis, is essentially

communicative" (p. 337). Coombs (1995) states, "The crisis situation should be a major

influence in strategy selection" (p. 448). When determining a course of action following a crisis,

the corporation should consider four factors: "crisis type, veracity of evidence, damage, and

performance history" (Coombs, 1995, p. 470). However, as Hearit (1995) points out in regards to

corporate apologies, "legitimacy crises leave a permanent skepticism, for those who are victims

of corporate malfeasance no longer trust corporate discourse" (p. 13). According to Lecero,

Kwang, and Pang (2009), "If there was a cardinal rule in crisis communication, it must certainly

be the criticality and centrality of crisis leadership" (p. 234). According that 2009 study, a CEO

should make special effort to step up in support after an organization needs to "reverse their

initial stance" or when the situation "involves the integrity of an organization" (p. 244).

This literature review discusses theories and related studies, which provide the platform

into situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), followed by the previous application of

SCCT, social activism marketing, and the heuristic value of SCCT and this study.

Image Restoration Theory

Benoit's theory of image restoration operates on two key assumptions. First,

"communication is best conceptualized as a goal-directed activity" and second, "maintaining a

positive reputation is one of the central goals of communication" (Benoit, 1995a, p. 63). If

communication is goal-directed, the message sender will choose which message to send based on

which one will help accomplish a specific goal (1995a). If the specific goal is to maintain a

positive reputation, "the need for discourse designed to restore our reputation arises" (1995a, p.

67). Certain communication strategies can allow for restoration of image or face if the image in

question has been compromised. In his book, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of

Image Restoration Strategies*, Benoit (1995a) provides a theoretical framework with five general

categories of strategies implemented in image restoration: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (1995a). The researcher will apply the theoretical framework to Dan Cathy and Chick-fil-A following Cathy's controversial statements regarding the traditional family unit

William Benoit's image restoration strategies, which are outlined in his book, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies* (1995a), provide a framework that can be applied to situations that appear to require mending an individual or company's image. Before the framework can be evaluated, it is important to understand the assumptions with which the theory operates. First, "communication is best conceptualized as a goal-directed activity" (Benoit, 1995a, p. 63). When a person has a goal, they create a message that is believed to be beneficial to obtaining that goal (1995a). Second, "maintaining a positive reputation is one of the central goals of communication" (1995a, p. 63). Benoit (1995a) points out that the need for image restoration occurs because of the human disposition of engaging in behaviors that open image up for attack, specifically citing the world's limited resources; events that occur beyond human control that prevent obligations from being met; human mistakes, whether those are honest mistakes or acts of self-interest; and finally because of differing goals among people. Fisher (1970) believes the affirmation of an image involves subverting an old image, and vice versa. He states, "Elements of both motives may exist in a single communication and certainly exist in a persuasive campaign or movement, but one motive will tend to dominate in any given rhetorical situation " (Fisher, 1970, p. 138). If the goal is to affirm and subvert images that have developed, as Fisher states, one goal may become priority over the other in the communication that occurs. Benoit (1995a) indicates that there is one particular goal in image restoration discourse: "restoring or protecting one's reputation" (p. 71).

An image, face, or reputation can be challenged and attacked. This gives a need for restoration or repair. The person whose image is being challenged is likely to be motivated to take steps in order to repair his or her image. According to Benoit (1995a), the attack on an image is composed of two elements: "1) An act occurred which is undesirable, 2) You are responsible for that action" (p. 71). When both of these elements are believed to be factual by an applicable audience, the reputation in question is at risk (1995a).

Typology of Image Restoration Strategies. Since the person whose image is being challenge possesses motivation to repair his or her image, Benoit (1995a) proposes five broad strategies observed as a typology of image restoration: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Three of these strategies also contain subcategories or variants in their construction.

The first strategy in this typology is denial. This action involves denying the wrongdoing or unwelcome act. This can include either a denial that the action even happened or denial that the person who was perceived to be involved was actually involved. In each case, if the denial is accepted, "should absolve the actor of culpability" (p. 75). However, in addition to the statement of denial, "denial may be supplemented with explanations of apparently damaging facts or lack of supporting evidence" (p. 75). It is important when employing the strategy of denial supplemented by facts or evidence to use facts that will not be perceived as damaging. In the denial strategy, the following question arises: "Well if you didn't do it, who did?" (p. 75). This is one of the variants previously mentioned. "This strategy can be considered a variant of denial, because the accused cannot have committed the repugnant act if someone else actually did it" (p. 75). Rather than forcing the audience to believe a simple denial, it allows for a new target of aggression that the audience may have following the unwanted action, this target becoming the

newly accused individual or party. Additionally, "it answers the question that may make the audience hesitate to accept a simple denial: 'Who did it?'" (p. 76).

The second strategy in the typology is evading responsibility. Benoit (1995a) states, "Those who are unable to deny performing the act in question may be able to evade or reduce their apparent responsibility for it" (p. 76). Within this strategy are four variants. The first variant is provocation, in which the individual "may claim that the act in question was performed in response to another wrongful act, which understandably provoked the offensive act in question" (p. 76). The second variant is defeasibility. Defeasibility involves "pleading lack of information about or control over important factors in the situation" (p. 76). If the individual was provoked and this is acknowledged, the provoker could instead receive the blame for the wrongful act. The third variant is when the individual cites an accident as an excuse for the action in question. If a factor cannot be controlled, Benoit (1995a) notes that the audience tends to only hold others responsible for situations that can usually be controlled. Benoit (1995a) explains, "the accused attempts to provide information that may reduce his or her apparent responsibility for the offensive act" (p. 76). The final variation within evading responsibility is justification, or is for the individual "to suggest that performance or the action in question may be justified on the basis of motives or intentions" (p. 76). Without denying the act, the individual is able to justify the act with good intentions, rather than evil intentions that would still make the audience hold the individual fully accountable.

The third strategy in the typology is reducing offensiveness. The individual held guilty for the act may try to ease the negative feelings that the audience holds, and can do so in six variants: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one's accuser, and compensation (1995a). According to Benoit (1995a), these six variations do not deny that the

accused individual committed the wrongdoing nor do they negate the individual's responsibility. In bolstering, the accused individual may reference constructive actions from the past or positive traits in order to counteract the negative action and restore image. With minimization, the individual attempts "to minimize the amount of negative affect associated with the offensive act" (p. 77). The strategy relies on the ability of the accused individual to persuade the audience into believing the negative act is not as negative as it first appeared to be. In differentiation, the accused attempts to make the act appear less distasteful by comparing it to similar actions that would be less pleasing and have "the effect of lessening the audience's negative feelings" towards the individual (p. 77). In transcendence, the individual attempts to restore image "by placing the act in a different context" (p. 77). This could involve suggesting a "different frame of reference" or directing the audience's attention to "allegedly higher values, to justify the behavior in question" (p. 77). In attacking one's accuser, the accused individual challenges the credibility of the source, thus "reducing damage to the rhetor's image" (p. 78). Finally, with compensation, the individual counteracts the accusations with some form of reimbursement, sometimes as a "bribe" to settle the issue at hand (p. 78). Benoit (1995a) states, "If the accuser accepts…and if [compensation] has sufficient value, the negative affect from the undesirable act may be outweighed, restoring reputation" (p. 78).

The fourth strategy of the typology is corrective action. In this strategy, the accused individual "vows to correct the problem" (p. 79). This can take place by bringing the situation back to how it was before the wrongdoing and/or making promises to "mend one's ways" (p. 79) and take action to prevent the wrongdoing from happening again. While this strategy could include some semblance of an apology, it is not a required aspect as "one can take corrective action without admitting guilt" (p. 79). In this stage, Benoit (1995a) notes the important

difference between corrective action and the aforementioned compensation. While corrective action "addresses the actual source of injury" (p. 79), compensation instead equalizes the wrongdoing with a gift rather than seeking to correct the fault.

The fifth and final strategy in the typology is mortification. Benoit (1995a) states, "If we believe the apology is sincere, we may choose to pardon the wrongful act" (p. 79). This strategy can optionally be matched with correction of the problem or proposed plans to prevent the problem from reoccurring.

Image Restoration Related Studies

Image restoration is not a new area of study, as images are constantly broken down and built back up among individuals, groups, or companies. In this section, the researcher addresses such studies as they lead up to the main study involving Dan Cathy and Chick-fil-A. In Benoit and Brinson's article (1999b), *Queen Elizabeth's Image Repair Discourse: Insensitive Royal or Compassionate Queen*, the researchers discuss the repair strategies employed by the British Royal Family following the sudden death of Princess Diana in 1997. The need for repair was prompted with the Royal family's simple statement carried by the news media following the death of Princess Diana, which just confirmed her death. The public reaction contrasted with the Royal family's apparent lack of grief by responding with "an enormous public demonstration of grief" by turning palaces into "instant shrines to Diana's memory" as the landmarks were "deluged with flowers, cards, candles, and other remembrances of her" (Benoit & Brinson, 1999b, p. 146). The grief merged with anger as the public reacted in resentment towards the Royal family's response, or seeming lack of response, questioning if they even cared about the loss of the princess. As the news media and subjects expressed anger across a variety of mediums, Queen Elizabeth finally approached the outcry with a public address, one that was

"virtually unprecedented" based on tradition (p. 147). Benoit and Brinson (1999b) found four

image repair strategies present in the Queen's discourse: denial, bolstering, defeasibility, and

transcendence. Denial and bolstering were used as the major strategies while defeasibility and

transcendence were minor. The Queen used denial as a strategy when she denied the public's

accusation that the Royal family did not care about the death of the princess or the grief

expressed by the public. Bolstering was used in the address as she referenced her part in assisting

the children through their loss of their mother. Defeasibility occurred as she expressed the reason

for delay in a true public address being the difficulty involved with thoroughly expressing their

feelings upon the initial onset of emotions. Transcendence occurred as the Queen directed the

attention of her audience to the "world's perception of the British people" (p. 152). The

researchers felt the response was "well-developed and appropriate" for the situation (p. 152).

In leadership, the need for image restoration is not isolated. Leaders often find

themselves under public scrutiny. President George W. Bush was also a leader who employed

image restoration, made necessary due to the growing casualties and public unrest during the war

in Iraq while he was in office. In his article, *Image Repair in President Bush's April 2004 News

Conference*, Benoit (2006) evaluates President Bush's prime time press conference in April 2004

as a part of the president's image discourse. President Bush was already dealing with a "highly

polarized audience" in this discourse (p. 141). According to Benoit (2006), "[Bush's] image

repair effort was not devoid of merit, but it was unlikely to end the controversy" (p. 142). An

audience is a factor to take into consideration when using image restoration discourse, as the

outcome will have some dependence on the audience's previously held or developed beliefs.

As a major public figure, President Bush was the center of much public scrutiny. Benoit

and Henson (2009) also address President Bush's response to the Hurricane Katrina crisis in their

article, *President Bush's Image Repair Discourse on Hurricane Katrina.* After the devastation left following Hurricane Katrina, President Bush chose not to acknowledge any specific error in the way the aftermath was handled. The researchers acknowledge that presidents should take special consideration when it comes to admitting that "they lacked the ability to solve or prevent a problem" (p. 45). According to Benoit and Henson (2009), "mortification would have almost certainly been a more effective approach in this situation" (p. 48) though this strategy would require admitting a serious mistake in hiring the director who handled the crisis.

In addition to looking at political discourse, Benoit (1997) also analyzes actor Hugh Grant's apologetic discourse. The actor was arrested following public bawdy acts with a prostitute in his car. Prior to the arrest, his career was growing and he was about to appear in a series of talk shows as part of a movie promotion for his upcoming film. Grant chose to keep these scheduled appearances after the arrest and used the promotional time simultaneously with time to repair his image. Benoit (1997) specifically looks at the five talk shows Grant appeared on during the restoration period. During this time, Grant used mortification, bolstering, denial, and attacking accusers in a generally consistent manner. In response to mortification, Benoit (1997) highlights that the "willingness to forgive someone who engages in mortification is not assured" (p. 261) and "we often admire those who have the courage to accept the blame for their actions" (p. 262).

Compton and Miller (2011) analyze the image restoration discourse applied by late-night comedian David Letterman after he made a joke about Sarah Palin's daughter. Though politicians typically "play along … by either brushing it off or even appearing on the programs" (p. 415), Letterman's joke was followed by responses from Palin and the public, but eventually ended in an apology from Letterman that was eight minutes long. Compton and Miller (2011)

note that the interchange between Letterman and Palin display the "flexible boundaries" that can

be characteristic in image repair as "attacks and defenses are not always static analogs or neat

rhetorical packages" (p. 419).

In his article *Hooray for Hollywood? The 2011 Golden Globes and Ricky Gervais' Image

Repair Strategies*, Kauffman (2012) analyzes British comedian Ricky Gervais following his

hosting duties at the 2011 Golden Globe Awards. According to the study, much of the audience

believed the jokes towards the awards and guess to be "harsh" and "mean-spirited" (p. 46).

Gervais attempted image repair by using denial, evasion of responsibility, minimization, and

mortification in what Kauffman referred to as "creative ways" (p. 49). Kauffman states, "One

must view Gervais' attempt at image repair as a failure because he employed appeals that

focused almost exclusively on him" (p. 49). It is important in image repair to be aware of the

audience perception of the reparations and the effect that efforts might have on an audience.

In the religious sector, televangelists employ rhetoric that displays "a rather unyielding

view of certain positions" (Armstrong, Hallmark, & Williamson, 2005). In the article

Televangelism as Institutional Apologia: The Religious Talk Show as Strategized Text, the

researchers look at evangelical rhetoric and the bolstering used in apologia. They find that the

bolstering used in televangelism is "carefully orchestrated" and "sought to conform to and to

reaffirm his viewer's assumed … beliefs" (p. 79).

Corporate Image Studies. Individuals are not alone in their need for image repair.

Corporations are often the subjects of public scrutiny following what is perceived by the public

as a wrongdoing. In Benoit and Brinson's article, *AT&T: "Apologies Are Not Enough"* (1994),

the researchers look at the telephone company AT&T following the interruption of New York

service on September 17, 1991. The incident was considered "a serious threat to AT&T's

reputation" (para. 2). The mishap was contrasted with AT&T's advertising campaign at the time, which highlighted the reliability of the service and produced high expectations of the brand. Benoit and Brinson (1994) note three stages of defense from the company: shifting blame to lower level employees, confusion as to the position the company was taking on the incident, and a public apology. Benoit and Brinson translate the apology into image restoration techniques: mortification, correction, and bolstering. Mortification occurred with a direct apology from the Chairman Allen, whose letter in newspapers stated, "I apologize to all of you who were affected, directly or indirectly" (para. 41) and did not minimize the situation at hand. Correction was employed as he disclosed plans to fix the situation and explained, "Apologies, of course, are not enough" (para. 42). Finally, bolstering was used throughout the letter subtly with "a strong sense of security" (para. 48), specifications of the effort used by the company to bring service to its customers, and reminders of the company's strong reputation of the "highest standards" (para. 50). Blame shifting and confusion aside, the researchers believe the actions that were taken to be appropriate for the situation.

Benoit and Czerwinski (1997) approached the issue of corporate image restoration with a focus on the overall message that is communicated to the public after an attack on image. In their article, *A Critical Analysis of USAir's Image Repair Discourse*, the researcher analyze the discourse by USAir following the crash of a Boeing 737 passenger jet that killed 132 people. According to the researchers, the airline was charged in an article by *Times* for safety violations and lapses in training, claiming that the planes were dangerous, policies were not sufficient, and policies that were used existed in such a way to save the airline money (1997). The airline found the claims and perception "too powerful to be ignored" (p. 49). USAir took action by appointing a general to direct safety of the airline, selected a company to audit the management and

operations, and issued an advertising campaign to make a clear public statement. The advertisements took the form of a letter from the CEO, USAir pilots, and USAir flight attendants, and employed strategies of bolstering, denial, and corrective action. The researchers found bolstering to be "an appropriate strategy for USAir but not well used" (p. 50) and the denial and correction action to be "well chosen strategies" (p. 50), but noted that they do not always work well when used together. According to Benoit and Czerwinski (1997), "The company chose individual strategies that were appropriate but did not develop them well in their messages" (p. 52). The researchers believe the response from USAir was less persuasive than that of the original *Time* article that challenged the company's face. In regards to the strategies used, Benoit and Czerwinski (1997) conclude that the denial "should be forceful and address specific charges" and the corrective action should be used to "correct the problems, not merely try to change public attitudes" (p. 52). A final piece that was missing from the image restoration for USAir was the lack of all parties of the company who would be considered involved in the crisis. According to Benoit and Czerwinski (1997), " If a corporation decides to reinforce its image repair efforts with messages from groups other than management…it should make sure [that] all obviously relevant groups participate" (p. 53).

In the article, *Blowout!: Firestone's image restoration campaign*, by Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal (2002), the researchers look at the restoration attempts by Firestone following the recall of more than six million tires in 2000. The recall, though called "voluntary" by the company, was a reaction to the public pressure and government investigation of Firestone. According to the researchers, "Firestone's corrective action was too little, too late, and too slow" (p. 386). The company used mortification through the CEO's apology to consumers who experienced a rollover accident, corrective action through the recall of the tires, bolstering through their

highlight of safety as a priority, denial of defective tires, and shifting blame to Ford for the

mishap, all in the initial response to the crisis. The second phase involved "making it right" (p.

384), including an advertising campaign to "influence public perception of the embattled

company" (p. 384). This campaign employed corrective action, bolstering, and shifting the blame

in an attempt to restore the wounded image.

W. Harlow, Brantly, and R. Harlow (2011) address corporate image repair in their article,

BP initial image repair strategies after the Deepwater Horizon spill. Following an explosion of

the company's drilling rig in 2010, British Petroleum (BP) was met with an outcry from the

public and chose to quickly enact image repair strategies. The researchers found BP's initial

attempt at image repair to be unsuccessful but also note, "these results do not necessarily mean

that an ideal strategy was available" (p. 82).

Sears' auto service center is another corporation who employed image restoration

discourse in the corporate sector following charges of fraud. In his article, *Sears' Repair of its*

Auto Service Image: Image Restoration Discourse in the Corporate Sector, Benoit (1995b)

applies image restoration strategies in an attempt to analyze Sears' discourse. Sears used a series

of strategies spread across two stages of defense. The differentiation used was "ill-advised" and

the denial was "inconsistent" as these were "simply not reasonable to expect customers to

believe" the company's stance (p. 100). In terms of bolstering, it is important to note that it is

"more likely to be effective when it relates directly to the accusations" (p. 101). Overall, the

researchers found most of the strategies used to be "ineffectual" and poorly executed throughout

the stages of discourse. Corrective action was the most effective aspect in the reparation

discourse, Benoit (1995b) believed the action to be more appropriate as a first step "instead of

attacking its accusers" (p. 101). Additionally, Benoit (1995b) states, "The effectiveness of Sears'

corrective action was also undermined by its refusal to admit wrongdoing and engage in mortification" (p. 101).

Brinson and Benoit (1999a) analyze a corporation's response to racist comments from employees in their article, *The Tarnished Star: Restoring Texaco's Damaged Public Image*. Following a Texaco executive meeting, a secret tape from the meeting came into public view. The tape contained comments from certain employees using racist comments towards African Americans. A Texaco chair, Peter Bijur, addressed the damaged image in a series of six messages that contained four image restoration strategies: bolstering, corrective action, mortification, and shifting the blame. Upon studying the situation, Brinson and Benoit (1999a) determine that Bijur shifted the blame but kept it internal. They note, "For this strategy to be effective, the target group must be identified and clearly distanced (separated) from the rhetor engaging in image repair" (p. 483).

Attribution Theory

People constantly seek out an answer to the question of "why?" There is often a desire to seek an attribution, whether of a success, a failure, or a crisis. Success is likely met with a desire, or "causal exploration," to seek out a way to recreate the "prior causal network" while an event that is seen as a failure or produced undesired results are likely to amend the causes of the failure to "produce a different (more positive) effect" (Weiner, 1985, p. 549). This causal exploration is generated by a desire for "mastery and functional search" (p. 549). These are not confined to a certain region or era (1985). According to Weiner (1985), developer and editor of Attribution Theory, states, "Once a cause, or causes, are assigned, effective management may be possible and a prescription or guide for future action can be suggested" (p. 548).

The connection between Attribution Theory and crises is rational (Coombs, 2007a). Coombs (2014) states, "A crisis is a negative event that does trigger the search for attributions of responsibility" (p. 14). Also according to Coombs (2007a), "Stakeholders will make attributions about the cause of a crisis; they will assess crisis responsibility" (p. 136). Stakeholders play a vital role in the reputation of a company. If an organization is considered the responsible party in the case of a crisis, reputation will suffer and the stakeholders can leave the relationship and/or spread negative feedback to others through word-of-mouth (Coombs, 2007a).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) finds its roots in Attribution Theory. According to Coombs (2007b), "SCCT utilizes attribution theory to evaluate the reputational threat posed by the crisis situation and then recommends crisis response strategies based on the reputational threat level" (p. 138). Just as Weiner (1985) posits in Attribution Theory, SCCT seeks to master the successes and improve upon the failures that have occurred in an organization. SCCT does so by assessing hypotheses that connect perceptions of crises with the effect of the perceptions on the response as well as how the responses affect certain results including reputation, emotional response, and purchases (Coombs, 2007a). According to Coombs (2007a), "Attribution Theory provides a mechanism for integrating the various studies of crisis communication to build a set of principles for evidence-based crisis communication" (p. 138).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Developed and refined by W. Timothy Coombs, SCCT presents a framework based on evidence from previous crises and attempts to "maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication" (Coombs, 2007c, p. 163). "Needed is a situational approach to selecting crisis response strategies, that is, what an organization says and does after a crisis to protect the organizational reputation" (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 166). The theory operates

with the assumptions that the way an organization is recognized by its public, otherwise known as the organization's reputation, is a resource that holds value and is thus threatened by crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In order to protect this valued resource, the crisis manager must assess the crisis situation and choose a particular crisis response strategy deemed the best fit in a crisis. According to Coombs, "SCCT posits that by understanding the crisis situation, the crisis manager can determine which crisis response strategy or strategies will maximize reputational protection" (p. 166). The entire SCCT process tackles each of the three phases of a crisis: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis (Adkins, 2010). The theory relies on analysis of the crisis and proper determination of the level of threat to the organization's reputation as a result of the crisis.

Initial Crisis, Crisis History, and Prior Reputation. "Three factors in the crisis situation shape the reputational threat: (1) initial crisis responsibility, (2) crisis history, and (3) relationship history/prior reputation" (Coombs, 2007a, p. 137). These three factors are used to evaluate the reputational threat facing an organization in a two-step process. First, the crisis manager must conclude the "initial crisis responsibility attached to a crisis" (p. 137). Second, the crisis manager assesses consistency, specifically in the reoccurrence of such crises, as well as distinctiveness of the crisis. "Distinctiveness is operationalized as relationship history/prior reputation; how well or poorly an organization has treated stakeholders in other contexts" (p. 137). Reputation can be defined as "an evaluation stakeholders make about an organization" (Coombs, 1999, p. 24). These reputations are developed through direct and indirect interactions that stakeholders have with an organization, thus evaluating it (Coombs, 1999). The crisis response strategy should be carefully aligned with the goals of an organization as well as the type of event while understanding the factors shaping the reputational threat. Such an alignment allows for recommendations to be made for a response strategy. According to Adkins (2010),

"SCCT describes three major categories of crisis types, which are categorized by the level of responsibility that is likely to be attributed to the organization(s) involved" (p. 102). These disaster/crisis cluster types include victim cluster, accidental cluster, and preventable cluster (Adkins, 2010). Disaster cluster types as gathered by Coombs (2007c) are detailed in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

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Applying SCCT. As previously stated, once the crisis manager determines the crisis type, the next step is to choose a particular crisis response strategy deemed the best fit in a crisis. "Crisis response strategies are used to repair the reputation, to reduce negative affect and to

prevent negative behavioral intentions. Primary and supplemental strategies are listed in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2

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By combining the three major categories of crisis types with the primary and secondary crisis response strategies, SCCT is able to present 13 recommendations that are specific for organizations when deciding upon a crisis response strategy. The specific 13 SCCT recommendations are included in detail in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3

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Stakeholder Perception. When applying SCCT, it is important to note the stakeholders'

role in the field of crisis communication. "SCCT takes an audience-centered approach to crisis

communication, considering how stakeholders react to the crisis situation and crisis response

strategies" (Coombs, 1999, p. 143). According to Coombs (2007), "Ethics recommend that the

physical and psychological needs of the stakeholders be the top priority in a crisis" (p. 173).

It is important to note that stakeholders are not simply shareholders. Anthonissen (2008)

notes the following about the enormity of the stakeholder population:

For, it is true, in addition to the shareholders, there is a whole slew of other parties who

are involved with the company, or more aptly, feel involved with what companies do:

trade unions, environmental associations, animal rights organizations, action groups of all

kinds, the unavoidable TV, radio and printed press, the bloggers, but also, bankers,

financial analysts, securities watchdogs, governments and parliaments with investigative

commissions. In short, there is a virtually infinite constellation of directly and indirectly

involved parties. (p. 10)

Anthonissen (2008) additionally notes the tendency for the food sector to experience crises,

resulting in a high level of involvement from stakeholders. This sector has a wide variety of

groups, each approaching the plate with their own agendas and view on what exactly is priority.

"Consumers, consumer groups, the media, the industry, states and authorities, NGOs, academics,

scientists, business and social partners are all parties involved in this public debate"

(Anthonissen, 2008, p. 112).

SCCT Studies

In the nonprofit sector, the American Red Cross has dealt with a multitude of disasters,

both natural and man-made. In their article, *Through the Looking Glass: A Decade of Red Cross*

Crisis Response and Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Sisco, Collins, and Zoch (2010)

study nonprofit organizations (NPOs), specifically the Red Cross, and apply SCCT to the

organization's crisis communication efforts. "Unfortunately, the American Red Cross has often

been more successful in helping to solve crises rather than coping with its own – at least in terms

of negative public perceptions" (Sisco et al., 2010, p. 21). Upon observing the use Coombs

(2007) SCCT response strategies in the American Red Cross's crisis communication, the study

found the NPO did not use the suggested strategy two-thirds of the time. According to the study,

the American Red Cross took a "safe" approach without considering if the crisis type was

labeled victim, accidental, or preventable (Sisco et al., 2010). "The findings suggest that, in

many instances, the Red Cross failed to assume sufficient responsibility for a crisis, but in other

cases took too much responsibility when an alternative strategy might have gained more public

support" (p. 26). In consideration of all crises handled by the American Red Cross and analyzed

in the study, the authors state, "While the organization should not be faulted for its lack of

awareness of the tested SCCT…one cannot but wonder how much more reputational

improvement the Red Cross might have seen had it incorporated theory into practice" (Sisco et

al., 2010, p. 26).

In the for-profit sector, General Motors (GM) filed for chapter 11 bankruptcy and applied

SCCT strategies successfully during its financial crisis. According to Cooley and Cooley (2011)

in their article, *An Examination of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory Through the*

General Motors Bankruptcy, "The SCCT model predicts that companies facing crises such as

bankruptcy have an increased risk of reputational damage due to the fact that blame and also a

host of other difficulties in composing a coherent crisis response strategy" (p. 208). Due to the

company's acceptance of government money to stay afloat prior to filing for bankruptcy, public

opinion was a strong factor when deciding on a way to manage public opinion. The authors state

the following about the challenge:

The 'new' GM and the new corporate executives faced having to re-image the company,

cut jobs across the board, justify the acceptance of government ownership and public

funding, and re-emerge the brand with a profitable business model under extremely short

time period placed on them by the government. (p. 209)

GM crisis managers chose three distinct elements to focus in on: justification and excuse

strategies; ingratiation, concern and compassion strategies; and accepting past failures. Had the

company chosen to apologize or employ denial strategies, these would have conflicted with the

justification and excuse strategies. "This allowed the company to not explicitly apologize and be

free to focus discussion on the future of the 'new' company" (Cooley & Cooley, 2011, p. 210).

Overall, the authors were able to outline and match the SCCT strategies used in GM's messaging

during this crisis. "Whether or not these measures result in the restoration of consumer

confidence is yet to be seen, and beyond the scope of this paper" (Cooley & Cooley, 2011, p.

210).

Crises are not always due to strictly actions. In some cases an organization is caught up in

a statement that upsets stakeholders and the general public, and must then deal with the crisis

that develops surrounding those statements. In the article *The ACORN Story: An Analysis of

Crisis Response Strategies in a Nonprofit Organization*, Sisco (2012) analyzes SCCT strategies

employed by the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN)

following damaging statements in combination with actions made by employees of ACORN,

which were recorded by two political activists on a hidden camera. According to the article, "The

videos purported to show ACORN employees providing advice to the two activists, who were

posing as a prostitute and a pimp, on how to evade taxes and engage in child prostitution" (Sisco,

2012, p. 89). In this study, SCCT was applied after the event occurred as an analysis of what was

actually done, and was gathered via media analysis. The article acknowledges that defunding of the organization may have occurred regardless of the crisis communication strategies employed by ACORN. "However, it is also equally possible that adroit handling of the organization's responses to its critics might have allowed the organization to remain viable and, in time, perhaps to regain its former vigor" (Sisco, 2012, p. 94). By withholding information from the public, lacking any accommodative strategy, apparently lacking a strategic communication arrangement, and maintaining a "revolving door in its management ranks," the study concludes ACORN did not perform sufficiently to save its reputation (Sisco, 2012).

Crisis does not just find its catalyst in issues such as disasters, bankruptcy, and unethical decisions. Social stances can also prompt uproar from various stakeholders who do not share the same view of a company. Food industry expert Rupert Barkoff states, "When you bring politics into business, the worlds collide and the consequences can be unpredictable" (Stafford, 2012, para. 7). The next session discusses the idea of social activism, often politically related, used as a marketing strategy.

Social Activism Marketing

Society is no stranger to social problems. According to Brenkert (2002), "Various organizations, including governments, corporations, religious institutions, and voluntary associations, have attacked these problems using a variety of methods, such as advertising, propaganda, philanthropy, moral exhortation, and religious injunctions, as well as legal constraints and incentives" (p. 14). Social activism marketing, or cause-related marketing, can raise awareness or support for a cause or social issue while also boosting the organization's reputation, finances, and customer loyalty (Berglind & Nakata, 2005, p. 443). In the political social realm, Simon (2011) notes, "As brands reach deeper into daily life, they have usurped

local, regional, and even national political authority" (p. 147). In some cases, consumers may

view an organization as having a more powerful voice in politics or social issues than the

average consumer. With that perspective, some consumers choose to use their buying power as a

way to support, or not support, an organization and thus the politics or social investments of that

organization. "Through their marketplace activities, buyers say what they think, laying out their

visions for justice, and explaining how they imagine a fair and equitable society" (Simon, 2011,

p. 150). Brands and consumers alike are shifting focus from the electorate to the marketplace

(Simon, 2011). However, even with involvement from both parties, there are still issues which

companies either tend to keep distance from issues that would alienate customers (2011). Upon

studying the actions of Starbucks and consumer boycotts, Simon states the following on this

politically driven marketing method:

> In this new political environment, [organizations] often tried to play both sides of the
>
> fence, wading into thorny issues that have value to some of their customers, bust at the
>
> same time, trying [to] keep enough distance from issues to deny any real involvement to
>
> other customers who might be alienated by their actions. This double-sided quality to
>
> their actions … made brands an even bigger political target in the realm of engaged
>
> buying. (Simon, 2011, p. 150)

Though an organization may choose to enter into social activism marketing, a CEO also

plays a part in what the public perceives the organization to support. Upon referencing political

support or withdrawals from notable CEOs such as those from Starbucks and Amazon, Mikeska

and Harvey (2015) note, "While these examples seemingly have little to nothing to do with the

product the CEO represents, this research asks the following question: Do consumers attribute

negative media portrayals of industry leaders toward the product itself?" (p. 76). According to

Selznick (2013), "The views of a company and the views of its upper management are likely to be as one in an organization that has had the same top officers for many years" (p. 575). In the previously noted study by Mikeska and Harvey (2015), the researchers concluded that if a CEO is interested, involved, or in some way invested in politics, this could influence consumer spending at the organization. "Consumer purchases, in this way, act as a powerful mediator to the cyclical business-politics relationship" (Mikeska & Harvey, 2015, p. 89). Based on a Starbucks case study, Simon (2011) states, "But in the end, brand managers don't really want to pick sides. Instead, they want a broad audience, so they act like crafty centralist politicians, seeking the safe, flat, nonthreatening middle ground" (p. 161).

When social activism marketing can take on a political stance, politics are naturally discordant. Simon (2011) states, "Almost always there are winners and losers as groups vie for the finite resources of power and public recognition" (p. 161). Simon also notes, "…Starbucks and other companies want – need – to present themselves as non-partisan do-gooders with little responsibility beyond a single helpful act or gesture, even though they are, in reality, in the throes of knotty politics everyday…" (p. 162). Though an organization can take a stance on an issue in a way that would ideally benefit it, how should the organization respond when the general public is not all on the same side of the issue?

Research Questions

Below are the research questions addressed in for this content analysis:

RQ1: How did Dan Cathy attempt to restore his image after the negative response that followed his original interview?

RQ2: How did Chick-fil-A use situational crisis communication strategies to maintain its reputation among stakeholders?

RQ3: Can an organization engage in social activism marketing if its cause is in

opposition to perceived popular opinion?

This topic of crisis management merits attention because of relevance to public relations

for public figures and companies who are under constant public scrutiny as well as progressing

the study of SCCT. Speaking up for a specific belief can come with risk, particularly when

speaking in a position of power at an organization. Individuals and corporations are often faced

with crises and, in order to maintain or improve a reputation or image, it is necessary to employ

certain strategies to restore and image and maintain value to the reputation in the eye of the

stakeholder. According to Coombs, the crisis type, organization's responsibility, and selection of

strategy must be established in order to achieve a positive outcome. Finally, even when

situational crisis communication strategies are applied, it is sometimes impossible to remove the

skepticism that remains for some stakeholders of the original crisis.

Chapter III: Methodology

The literature provides an in-depth analysis of crisis management, leading to Coombs' situational crisis communication theory. Coombs' SCCT strategies will help interpret the process of crisis management taken by Chick-fil-A and Dan Cathy in their attempts to repair the company's image following Cathy's statements regarding what he deems as the biblical definition of a family unit. This chapter will describe the qualitative content analysis, data collection method, and analysis of the data used in this study.

Qualitative Content Analysis

In order to answer the research questions, the researcher applied qualitative methods and used a rhetorical content analysis for the purpose of examining the predicament surrounding Dan Cathy and Chick-fil-A. According to Creswell (2014), "Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). People who act as the receivers to a message ascribe meaning to the message, whether it is the intended meaning or a variation. Creswell additionally notes the "importance of rendering the complexity of a situation" (p. 4). Human interactions involve complex dynamics and can often be interpreted in a variety of ways.

According to Creswell (2013), "Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) … over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information … and reports a case description and case themes" (p. 97). According to Coombs (2014), the case study outline includes orienting the reading to the case, previewing key points in the analysis, giving a summary of the case, identifying and describing key actors who have stake in the case, and identifying crisis concerns. The outline analysis continues with an explanation of the analytic

tools applied to the case, specifically the theory and principles, the list of potential solutions provided by the analytic tools, and then a discussion of the selection of solutions and a review of the lessons learned. Coombs (2014) notes, "What will remain constant in the case analysis is the use of theories and principles to analyze the cases and to justify the actions recommended for crisis managers" (p. 4). In order to complete the content analysis, the researcher will apply an adapted general outline of case study research, as outlined by Coombs (2014).

According to Lapan, Quartaroli, and Riemer (2012), "Qualitative research from the critical theoretical view uses interpretive frameworks but also reveals ways that power is embedded in social contexts" (p. 3). Since marriage equality and the view of a traditional family is currently a major topic for heavy debate, it is important to analyze the content with special attention to the social context at hand. Social context in this particular study includes reactions from mass media, public officials, LGBT activists, and supporters of traditional marriage.

It is important to note that qualitative studies should involve a holistic account as researchers seek to "develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study" (Creswell, 2014, p. 186). According to Creswell (2014), "This involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges" (p. 186). The media chosen for this study includes published interviews and statements from Dan Cathy, Chick-fil-A, and Chick-fil-A representatives.

Data Collection

The goal for this data collection is to analyze the situational crisis communication strategies used by Dan Cathy and Chick-fil-A and then determine the alignment of Cathy and Chick-fil-A's crisis communication strategies with those of Coombs (2012). The researcher will collect data through qualitative research methods. Materials that will be collected include

published articles and statements available to the public. The documents include published

interviews with Cathy and other Chick-fil-A representatives. The time period chosen for this

begins on June 16, 2012 and ends in October of 2012. On June 16, 2012, talk show host Ken

Coleman interviewed Cathy, and a few comments were made regarding traditional families.

Cathy clarified the comments on July 16, 2012, which started the flurry of media responses. In

October 2012, Chick-fil-A released a final statement directly related to the crisis at hand. The

researcher will collect statements and actions related to Cathy's original comments made during

that time period by both Cathy and Chick-fil-A.

The researcher will analyze data produced and released over approximately five months.

The portions of the original radio interview with Ken Coleman are transcribed and available to

the public with no subscription or fees necessary. The articles quoting Cathy in the *Biblical*

Recorder and the *Baptist Press* are available to the public on the organizations' websites.

Official statements from Chick-fil-A are available at specific URLs available to the public as

well as the company's public Facebook page. Other statements are gathered from published

online news articles.

Data Analysis

The researcher will use Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory and

communication strategy recommendations (2012) to analyze each of the responses made by

Chick-fil-A and Dan Cathy following Cathy's original interviews. The theory was discussed in

detail in the literature review. The crisis communication strategies that will be applied to the

content are included in the literature review as well. The researcher will analyze Chick-fil-A's

official statements and related Facebook statements from the company that occur within the

previously determined five month time period, if they relate to the original controversy. The

researcher will conclude the analysis by applying SCCT strategies to the statements.

Summary

The overall goal of this study is to discover the use of organizational crisis

communication strategies, particularly in the case of Chick-fil-A as it sought to combat the crisis

that surrounded the company following Cathy's interview and subsequent media storm. This

chapter acts as a guide for the analysis portion of the research. Following the analysis, the

discussion chapter will deliberate the answers to the posed research question and then include a

summary of the case.

Chapter IV: Analysis

Introduction

   Orienting the Reader. Chick-fil-A has never been private when it comes to the biblical

principles on which it runs. The moral focus is reiterated throughout company policies, down to

the Corporate Purpose, "To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us

and to have a positive influence on all who come into contact with Chick-fil-A" ("Dan T.

Cathy," 2015). Though the Corporate Purpose statement and other choices regarding a biblically-

operated company reflect Christian values, true crisis did not strike until after a radio interview

on the Ken Coleman Show on June 16, 2012 during which Dan Cathy made the following

statement:

   I think we are inviting God's judgment on our nation when we shake our fist at

   him and say, "We know better than you as to what constitutes a marriage," … and

   I pray God's mercy on our generation that has such a prideful, arrogant attitude to

   think that we have the audacity to define what marriage is about. (Coleman, 2012)

   Following that interview, Dan Cathy interviewed with the Biblical Recorder, a Christian

publication. In the article, he is reported as stating the following:

   We are very much supportive of the family – the biblical definition of the family

   unit. We are a family-owned business, a family-led business, and we are married

   to our first wives. We give God thanks for that. (Blume, 2012)

   At the time of the statements, 38 states had laws that also defined marriage as a union

between one man and one woman (Coombs, 2014). On the other side of this social issue,

however, is a belief that marriage should be defined in broader terms to include legal marriage

between one man and one man or one woman and one woman. The Supreme Court later declared

same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states in June of 2015, but that has not stopped the general

debate. "Taking any side on a social issue is guaranteed to upset the other sides" (Coombs, 2014,

p. 189). Coombs considers Chick-fil-A as entering into this social issue debate as of 2012

following Dan Cathy's statements (Coombs, 2014).

Preview of Key Points. In this chapter, based on Coombs' approach to constructing a

case study analysis (2014), the researcher will give an explanation of the case, an analysis of

SCCT strategies in comparison with Dan Cathy and Chick-fil-A's statements as the controversy

developed, and final solutions of SCCT. The case explanation will delve into the triggering event

of this crisis, key actors and stakeholders in the event, and the crisis communication concerns.

Explanation of Case

Summary and Triggering Event. Timelines regarding the actual start of the

controversial statements by Dan Cathy vary based on the news organization reporting on the

events. According to *NPR*, the controversy began with Dan Cathy making statements in an

interview with Baptist Press in support of the 'biblical definition of the family unit' while then

following that with an interview on *The Ken Coleman Show* (Hu, 2012). In the article *Chick-fil-A*

Thrust Back Into Spotlight on Gay Rights, *The New York Times* maintains that same timeline as

NPR, but attributes Dan Cathy's statements on family to an interview with *The Biblical Recorder*

website, BRnow.org (Severson, 2012).

On June 16, 2012, Dan Cathy took to The Ken Coleman Show, hosted by Ken Coleman.

In the midst of discussing fatherhood with Coleman, the following statement from Cathy

contributed to what Ken Coleman refers to as "the media firestorm": "I think we are inviting

God's judgment on our nation when we shake our fist at him and say, 'We know better than you

as to what constitutes a marriage'… and I pray God's mercy on our generation that has such a

prideful, arrogant attitude to think that we have the audacity to define what marriage is about"

(Coleman, 2012). Following this interview with Coleman, the *Biblical Recorder* released a story

in its July 7 issue after interviewing Dan Cathy and posted the same story to its website,

BRnow.org, dated July 2, 2012. The *Biblical Recorder* is the "news journal for North Carolina

Baptists since 1833" while its official website, BRnow.org, gives the publication "another

avenue to communicate with [its] audience all over the world" (Who we are, 2015). In the

article, *Guilty as charged,' Dan Cathy says of Chick-fil-A's stand on faith*, Blume (2012b)

discusses Dan Cathy's views on Christianity and business. The article refers to Dan Cathy as a

"warm, common man who is deeply committed to being a faithful Christian witness" (Blume,

2012b). The article focuses primarily on Dan Cathy's personal mindset as well as the mindset

behind Chick-fil-A. In the article, he states the following:

> In that spirit ... [Christianity] is about a personal relationship. Companies are not
>
> lost or saved, but certainly individuals are. … But as an organization we can
>
> operate on biblical principles. So that is what we claim to be. [We are] based on
>
> biblical principles, asking God and pleading with God to give us wisdom on
>
> decisions we make about people and the programs and partnerships we have. And
>
> He has blessed us. (Blume, 2012b, para. 6-7)

The article continues with explanations of Chick-fil-A's mission-minded approach, success in

business, college football connection with the Chick-fil-A Bowl, Sunday store closures, and

various charitable donations that the organization takes part in. The article shifts into the topic of

marriage when discussing Chick-fil-A's WinShape Foundation. The foundation is described as

what began in the form of a college scholarship, which then transformed into "a foster care

program, an international ministry, and a conference and retreat center modeled after the Billy

Graham Training Center at the Cove" (Blume, 2012b, para. 25). According to Dan Cathy, "That

morphed into a marriage program in conjunction with national marriage ministries" (Blume,

2012). It is at this point in the article that the soon-to-be controversial statements were added:

> Some have opposed the company's support of the traditional family. "Well, guilty
>
> as charged," said Cathy when asked about this opposition. "We are very much
>
> supportive of the family – the biblical definition of the family unit. We are a
>
> family-owned business, a family-led business, and we are married to our first
>
> wives. We give God thanks for that." (Blume, 2012, para. 27-28)

The article closes with the following statement from Dan Cathy:

> "We intend to stay the course. We know that it might not be popular with
>
> everyone, but thank the Lord, we live in a country where we can share our values
>
> and operate on biblical principles." (Blume, 2012, para. 30)
>
> Following the posts for *Biblical Recorder*, *Baptist Press (BP)* also reposted the same

BRnow.org article on July 16, 2012. According to BRnow.org, it was the repost by *BP* that

initiated the media storm as early as the next day, July 17, 2012, as organizations and news

outlets such as Huffington Post, Fox News, USA Today, and Los Angeles Times picked up the

article's statements and ran articles of their own with headlines and references to Dan Cathy

making "anti-gay" statements, though the author of the original article later pointed out that the

term "anti-gay" was not used during the interview with Dan Cathy (Hendricks, 2012).

Key Actors and Stakeholders. This case encapsulates multiple key actors, including

certain stakeholders. Actors defined and evaluated include Chick-fil-A CEO Dan Cathy; Chick-

fil-A; mainstream mass media; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer

(LGBTQ) activists; opposing public officials; and conservative supporters.

Dan Cathy. As the son of founder S. Truett Cathy, Cathy grew up with Chick-fil-A. After graduating from college, Cathy returned to his father's business as director of operations for Chick-fil-A with the responsibility of opening new chains across the United States. Cathy advanced in the company to senior director of operations, vice president of operations, executive vice president, and later president and chief operating officer in 2001. Cathy became president and CEO of Chick-fil-A in 2013.

Cathy's original comments as a key actor, though an expression of his personal opinion, were associated as the opinion of Chick-fil-A. Due to this position as CEO of the brand, stakeholders perceived his statement of opinions as that of the company. According to Selznick (2013), "The CEO is the voice and face of the company. Because his or her speech, unlike expression by other employees, will be associated with the company, it warrants separate analysis" (p. 574). Dan Cathy's role and crisis communication strategies will be evaluated later in the chapter.

Chick-fil-A. Chick-fil-A is a privately held restaurant chain famous for its chicken sandwich. With more than 1,900 locations, it has become the largest restaurant chain of its kind in the United States ("Company fact sheet," 2015). The founder and former CEO, S. Truett Cathy, opened the first Chick-fil-A restaurant in 1967. The Chick-fil-A Corporate Purpose finds its roots in the Christian faith with the following statement: "To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us and to have a positive influence on all who come into contact with Chick-fil-A" (2015). The company also operates only six days of the week, marked by its decision to close every Sunday.

Though Chick-fil-A as a company did not directly issue the statements regarding the "biblical definition of a family unit," the CEO of a company is often seen as the representative

voice for a company's stance. In some cases, a company takes a stance itself on a social issue.

This is the case for Starbucks, who joined with a group of businesses and organizations in 2011,

including Microsoft and Nike, totaling 70 to oppose the Defense of Marriage Act, an act

confining the definition of marriage as one man and one woman (Smith, 2013). In contrast with

Chick-fil-A, Starbucks' CEO Howard Shultz took the position as a company rather than as an

individual. Chick-fil-A's role and crisis communication strategies will be evaluated later in the

chapter.

    Mainstream Mass Media. Mainstream mass media plays an important role when

evaluating the overall crisis involving Dan Cathy and Chick-fil-A. According to Coombs (2014),

"Chick-fil-A had entered the minefield of same-sex marriage amid a swirling storm of traditional

or legacy and digital media coverage on July 16, 2012" (p. 190). This date is in reference to the

date the *Baptist Press* reposted the original story. A writer from the publication that originally

posted Dan Cathy's comments made the following observation about the mass media frenzy:

> In a day when companies such as General Mills, Nabisco, JC Penney and Target
>
> seemingly compete to appear the most supportive of gay marriage, Chick-fil-A
>
> and its biblically-based values stand out – and the nation and media are noticing.
>
> (Foust, 2012, para. 1)

Foust (2012) notes the article was picked up by mass media organizations such as CNN, *Los*

Angeles Times, Washington Post, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Associated Press, Huffington

Post, as well as others. An article in the *Los Angeles Times,* "Chick-fil-A's anti-gay-marriage

stance triggers online uproar," stated, "The company president wants the fast-food chain to be

known for serving up Christian values along with juicy chicken sandwiches, proudly proclaiming

the company's anti-gay-marriage stance" (Lynch, 2012, para. 1). A sister blog to the *Los Angeles*

Times, Money & Co., also took note of the controversy stirred by the CEO's comments by writing a post about the event that ended up being shared on Facebook more than 3,800 times, displaying what the *Los Angeles Times* considered "just one indication of how Cathy's comments have struck a nerve" (Lynch, 2012, para. 6).

     LGBTQ/LGBT Activists. LGBTQ/LGBT activists also played a strong role in the crisis, launching a national boycott of Chick-fil-A soon after the controversial comments were released (Bingham, 2012b). The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) was one such group to speak out following Cathy's statements. According to HCR, it is "the largest civil rights organization working to achieve equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans" and "represents a force of more than 1.5 million members and supporters nationwide" ("About Us," para. 1). HCR posted a Chick-fil-A logo with a modified tagline to its website, which stated, "We Didn't Invent Discrimination. We Just Support It" (Foust, 2012, para. 10). Following Cathy's statements, the HRC vice president of communications Fred Sainz made the following comments:

     Americans by and large are not comfortable with Chick-fil-A's anti-LGBT

     donations, and the company's proud embrace of these discriminatory practices is

     taking a deserved toll on its image. …Chick-fil-A supports organizations that

     demonize LGBT people on a regular basis – and in addition to being morally

     wrong, it's also bad for business. In an era when corporations are supporting

     equality at unprecedented levels, Chick-fil-A is on the decidedly wrong side of

     history. ("Chick-fil-A's Image," 2012)

According to the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), another LGTBQ activist group, same-sex marriage supporters pushed for a counter protest to Chick-fil-A

Appreciation Day (discussed in detail later in this section), "asking people to donate the approximate cost of a Chick-fil-A meal, about $6.50, to gay and lesbian rights groups" ("Gay rights," 2012, para. 23). A separate organized event supported by LGBTQ activists was the National Same Sex Kiss Day at Chick-fil-A founded by Carly McGehee, who developed the idea based off a 2009 event at Starbucks during which gay couples kissed in the shop as a supportive gesture toward domestic partner benefits of the company (Bingham, 2012d). The goal of the Chick-fil-A event was for same-sex couples to go to the restaurant, inside or outside, and kiss in protest of Cathy's comments. Additionally, some demonstrators purchased food with cash marked with the term "gay money" ("Gay rights," 2012). Regarding the event, McGehee stated, "This is a day about love. … Our love is just as valid, just as real and just as credited as heterosexual love and we deserve the same protections under the law to raise a family and get married" (Bingham, 2012d, para. 16). Regarding the protest, she also stated, "I like to liken it to a married couple sharing a light kiss over a romantic meal, it's the same thing. We're here, and our love is just as good" ("Gay rights," 2012, para. 3). About 12,000 people joined the event's Facebook page in support, though the actual number of attendees is unclear (Bingham, 2012e). A second event followed the kiss-in, known as National Marriage Equality Day though originally referred to as Starbucks Appreciation Day. Kirsten Ott Palladino, editor of the same-sex wedding magazine Equally Wed, started this event. In contrast with the kiss-in demonstrations at Chick-fil-A, the idea behind this event was to show up at Starbucks in support of the company's same-sex partner benefits (Bingham, 2012e). Palladino stated, "It felt like the right wing groups were showcasing Aug. 1 as 'This is how America feels.' … We are wanting to say, 'This isn't all of America and we can come out and support our businesses too'" (Bingham, 2012e, para. 3). More than 28,000 people signed up via Facebook to support this event.

Public Officials. Another key set of actors in the Chick-fil-A case is public officials. According to an article published by ABC News, several public officials publicly supported the outcry by gay rights activists, including mayors of Washington, D.C., Boston, San Francisco, and Chicago (Bingham, 2012c). Thomas Menino, mayor of Boston, was among those in opposition to Chick-fil-A, releasing the following statements in a letter addressed to Dan Cathy:

> In recent days you said Chick-fil-A opposes same-sex marriage and said the generation that supports it has an "arrogant attitude." Now – incredibly – your company says you are backing out of the same-sex marriage debate. I urge you to back out of your plans to locate to Boston. … I was angry to learn on the heels of your prejudiced statements about your search for a site to locate in Boston. There is no place for discrimination on Boston's Freedom Trail and no place for your company alongside it. When Massachusetts became the first state in the country to recognize equal marriage rights, I personally stood on City Hall Plaza to greet same sex couples coming here to be married. It would be an insult to them and to our city's long history of expanding freedom to have a Chick-fil-A across the street from that spot. (Bhasin, 2012, para. 1-2, 4)

Menino later revised his statements as the controversy ensued:

> Originally, I said I would do everything I can to stop them. And that was mostly using the bully pulpit of being mayor of the city and getting public support. … But I didn't say I would not allow them to go for permits or anything like that. I just said we would do everything we can, bully-pulpit wise. ("New York City mayor," 2012)

Another public official, Chicago alderman Proco Joe Moreno, joined in with Menino's

sentiments, announcing plans to block any attempts by Chick-fil-A to build a second store,

stating, "If you are discriminating against a segment of the community, I don't want you in the

1st Ward" (Dardick, 2012, para. 3). In a proposed opinion piece to the *Chicago Tribune,* Moreno

referred to Cathy's comments at "bigoted" and "homophobic," stating, "Because of this man's

ignorance, I will now be denying Chick-fil-A's permit to open a restaurant in the 1st Ward"

(Dardick, 2012, para. 4). Similarly, Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel supported the decision of

Moreno, stating, "Chick-fil-A values are not Chicago values. … They disrespect our fellow

neighbors and residents. This would be a bad investment, since it would be empty" (Dardick,

2012, para. 6). Following a formal complaint from the Chicago Republican Party regarding

broken civil laws with his statements, Emanuel's spokesman Tarrah Cooper clarified the mayor's

original comments, stating, "If they meet all the usual requirements, then they can open their

restaurant, but he does not believe the CEO's values are reflective of our city" (Bingham, 2012,

para. 29). San Francisco mayor Edwin Lee joined other officials with messages suggesting to

block expansion of the company in his region, this time via the social media site Twitter. His

first message on the site read, "Very disappointed #ChickFilA doesn't share San Francisco's

values & strong commitment to equality for everyone" (Bingham, 2012a, para. 12). The second

stated, "Closest #ChickFilA to San Francisco is 40 miles away & I strongly recommend that they

not try to come any closer" (para. 12). In contrast, New York mayor Michael Bloomberg chose

not to voice the same opposition to Chick-fil-A's expansion into his city as the previously

mentioned politicians, stating on the radio that it would be unsuitable for a government body "to

look at somebody's political views and decide whether or not they can live in the city, or operate

a business in the city, or work for somebody in the city" (Bankoff, 2012). He continued by stating the following:

> You can't have a test for what the owners' personal views are before you decide
>
> to give a permit to do something in the city. You really don't want to ask political
>
> beliefs or religious beliefs before you issue a permit. That's just not government's
>
> job. (Bingham, 2012a, para. 3)

Other politicians spoke out against the chain as well. D.C. councilman Marion Barry took to Twitter to announce that he doesn't support "hate chicken" (Bingham, 2012b). Philadelphia councilman Jim Kenney referred to the company as having an "Anti-American attitude" and noted consideration for a resolution to condemn the company (Bingham, 2012b).

Conservative Supporters. Conservative supporters are the final actors evaluated in this case. In response to the controversy and media storm, Chick-fil-A supporters rallied for the fast-food chain. The most notable event for this cause is the Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day, initiated by former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee. On the event's Facebook page, created July 22, 2012, Huckabee wrote the following message:

> I ask you to join me in speaking out on Wednesday, August 1 "Chick Fil-A
>
> Appreciation Day." No one is being asked to make signs, speeches, or openly
>
> demonstrate. The goal is simple. … Let's affirm a business that operates on
>
> Christian principles and whose executives are willing to take a stand for the
>
> Godly values we espouse by simply showing up and eating at Chick-fil-A on
>
> Wednesday, August 1. (Fama, 2012, para. 2).

More than 630,000 signed up to attend the event via the Facebook page (Bingham, 2012b). According to ABC News, many supporters told the news organization that their support of

Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day was "to support Cathy's First Amendment rights to express his

opinion on marriage" (Bingham, 2012d, para. 6). According to Chick-fil-A, the event was a

success for sales, stating, "While we don't release exact sales numbers, we can confirm reports

that it was a record-setting day" (Bingham, 2012c, para. 2). Former vice presidential nominee

Sarah Palin and her husband were both in attendance, later posting a photo to Facebook in which

they were holding full Chick-fil-A bags (Bingham, 2012b). In an interview on Fox News

regarding the controversy, Palin stated, "The owner of the Chick-fil-A business had merely

voiced his personal opinion about supporting traditional definition of marriage, one boy, one girl,

falling in love, getting married" (Bingham, 2012b, para. 32). Former republican presidential

candidate Rick Santorum also took to social media to support the company, tweeting about his

"Chick-fil-A lunch" and that he was "fueling up" (Bingham, 2012b, para. 36). Event organizer

Huckabee wrote posts on the Facebook event page to thank specific supporters including Rick

Santorum's Patriot Voices, Concerned Women for America, Family Research Council, Reverend

Billy Graham, Texas state senator Dan Patrick, South Carolina congressman Jeff Duncan, and

others ("Chick Fil-A Appreciation," 2012). Though the Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day was a

large part of the participation from conservative supporters, there was also support in addition to

the event. For example, Focus on the Family's Glenn T. Stanton stated that the message appeared

to be, "Speak up for the natural, traditional family and we will come after you" (Foust, 2012a,

para. 15).

Stakeholders each maintain a major role of the context of the situation. According to

Coombs (2012), "Legitimate criticism that spreads among stakeholders poses a direct threat to

the organization's reputation" (p. 14-15). Additionally, Coombs notes, "News reports, comments

from friends or family, online comments, and messages sent by an organization are important

sources of information for evaluating organizations" (p. 36). Each of the stakeholders discussed

play an important role for Chick-fil-A's communication strategy through the crisis, and are direct

influencers into the crisis communication concerns.

Identify Crisis Communication Concerns. After evaluating the stakeholder reactions

and perspectives, it is easier to determine the concerns that faced Chick-fil-A in this crisis.

Coombs (2007b) notes, "A crisis is a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an

organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat" (p. 164). In the

case of Chick-fil-A, these were all concerns during the crisis. Coombs (2007b) notes, "Crisis can

harm stakeholders physically, emotionally and/or financially" (p. 164). The emotional aspect of

this crisis was important because of the controversial opinions expressed by Cathy and the

variation in public opinion on the issue. The LGBTQ activists were particularly vocal about the

emotional toll the comments took. In support of this community of activists, several political

officials also approached the situation with emotion and passion for the opposing stance towards

Cathy. These emotional threats posed a challenge to the company's finances as well.

Partnerships were severed and many opposing parties chose to boycott the chain, encouraging

others to do so also. Finally, there was a clear reputational threat among the opposing

stakeholders. Though Chick-fil-A was never withholding about the Christian influence the

company was founded on and the continuation of daily operation with that influence, the views

of the CEO brought the company into new light for many, especially as the political debate of

same-sex marriage was already a hot topic in society. The idea among certain stakeholders that

Chick-fil-A is "bigoted" and "anti-gay" is one that could clearly be destructive to a reputation.

Analysis Using SCCT

Crisis management teams must work through distinct challenges over the course of the response phase, both internally and externally (Coombs, 2012). According to Coombs (2012), "Discussions of external crisis communication must include form and content. *Form* is how the response should be presented. *Content* is what is said" (p. 139). Before evaluating the external communication, the researcher will first provide a communication timeline during which the company and Dan Cathy issued statements regarding the crisis. Following Coombs' (2012) external crisis communication discussion, the researcher will then address the form of the initial crisis response, specifically the timeliness of response, consistency, and openness. Next, the researcher will analyze the content of the response message, including instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation management. Finally, the researcher will apply Coombs' situational crisis response strategies, specifically evaluating reputational threat and the effects of credibility and reputation.

Timeline of Communication. Initial statements from Chick-fil-A regarding the controversy began July 19, 2012 with the following post to Facebook:

> The Chick-fil-A culture and service tradition in our restaurants is to treat every
>
> person with honor, dignity and respect – regardless of their belief, race, creed,
>
> sexual orientation or gender. We will continue this tradition in the over 1,600
>
> Restaurants run by independent Owner/Operators. Going forward, our intent is to
>
> leave the policy debate over same-sex marriage to the government and political
>
> arena. Chick-fil-A is a family-owed and family-led company serving the
>
> communities in which it operates. From the day Truett Cathy started the company,
>
> he began applying biblically-based principles to managing his business. For

example, we believe that closing on Sundays, operating debt-free and devoting a

percentage of our profits back to our communities are what make us a stronger

company and Chick-fil-A family. Our mission is simple: to serve great food,

provide genuine hospitality and have a positive influence on all who come in

contact with Chick-fil-A. ("Chick-fil-a," 2012a)

A similar post was released to the company's Twitter page, reading, "Our mission is to

create raving fans; we plan to leave the policy debate over same-sex marriage to the

political arena" ("Chick-fil-A, Inc.," 2012). The Twitter post was accompanied by a link

to the full post on Facebook.

The next statement from Chick-fil-A was issued via a spokesperson, Tiffany Greenway,

due to a recall of its Jim Henson toys, stating that removing the toys from the kids' meals was

"for the protection of our customers" as of July 19 with no elaborate regarding the issue with the

toys (Wong, 2012). The statement came as the Jim Henson Company posted the following

message to its own Facebook page on July 20, 2012:

> The Jim Henson Company has celebrated and embraced diversity and
>
> inclusiveness for over fifty years and we have notified Chick-Fil-A that we do not
>
> wish to partner with them on any future endeavors. Lisa Henson, our CEO is
>
> personally a strong supporter of gay marriage and has directed us to donate the
>
> payment we received from Chick-Fil-A to GLAAD. (Burra, 2012)

A couple individual franchises made their own announcements regarding Chick-fil-A's recall,

including the following from the Willow Bend location in Plano, Texas:

> We apologize for any inconvenience but as of 7/19/2012 Chick-fil-A has
>
> voluntarily recalled all of the Jim Henson's Creature Shop Puppet Kids Meal

Toys due to a possible safety issue. Please be advised that there have not been any

cases in which a child has actually been injured, however there have been some

reports of children getting their fingers stuck in the holes of the puppets. (Wong,

2012)

According to Wong (2012), "Franchises…were not directed to put up notices of the

development. The Willow Bend location chose to do so to communicate what happened" (para.

7). Even so, Greenway stated, "But just because it would cause confusion, [Willow Bend] has

since taken it down" (para. 8). In the midst of this situation with the Jim Henson Company, one

Facebook account was an active supporter of Chick-fil-A's decision to pull the toys, though the

account was later proved through investigation to be fake (Coombs, 2014). Greenway again

functioned as the spokesperson for the company, stating, "I can confirm that Chick-fil-A has not

created any false Facebook page, account, or persona of any kind … Our official corporate

Facebook page continues to be our only one" (Hill, 2012). Chick-fil-A's next official statement

came via its Facebook page on July 25, 2015, stating the following:

Hey Fans, thanks for being supportive. There is a lot of misinformation out there.

The latest is we have been accused of impersonating a teenager with a fake

Facebook profile. We want you to know we would never do anything like that and

this claim is 100% false. Please share this with your friends. ("Chick-fil-A,"

2012b)

The company went back to Facebook two days later to confront the Jim Henson Company issue,

stating the following:

Hey Fans. Another rumor related to Chick-fil-A that is currently in the media is

related to the Jim Henson Kid's Meal prizes. We want to set the facts straight.

Chick-fil-A made the choice to voluntarily withdraw the Jim Henson Kid's Meal

puppets for potential safety concerns for our customers on Thursday, July 19. On

July 20, Chick-fil-A was notified of the Jim Henson Company's decision to no

longer partner with us on future endeavors. ("Chick-fil-A," 2012c)

The company's first official statement release outside of a social media account came on

July 31, 2012, one day prior to Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day, the event founded by Huckabee.

Chick-fil-A released the following message, attributed to Steve Robinson, the executive vice

president of marketing:

Chick-fil-A is a family-owned and family-led company serving the communities in which

it operates. From the day Truett Cathy started the company, he began applying biblically-

based principles to managing his business. For example, we believe that closing on

Sundays, operating debt-free and devoting a percentage of our profits back to our

communities are what make us a stronger company and Chick-fil-A family. The Chick-

fil-A culture and service tradition in our restaurants is to treat every person with honor,

dignity and respect—regardless of their belief, race, creed, sexual orientation or gender.

We will continue this tradition in the over 1,600 Restaurants run by independent

Owner/Operators. Going forward, our intent is to leave the policy debate over same-sex

marriage to the government and political arena. Our mission is simple: to serve great

food, provide genuine hospitality and have a positive influence on all who come in

contact with Chick-fil-A. ("Chick-fil-A Response to Recent Controversy," 2012)

The next release came two days later on August 2, 2012, again via Robinson. It stated the

following:

We are very grateful and humbled by the incredible turnout of loyal Chick-fil-A

customers on August 1 at Chick-fil-A restaurants around the country. Chick-fil-A

Appreciation Day was not a company promotion; it was initiated by others. We

congratulate local Chick-fil-A Owner/Operators and their team members for

striving to serve each and every customer with genuine hospitality. While we

don't release exact sales numbers, it was an unprecedented day. The Chick-fil-A

culture and 66-year-old service tradition in our restaurants is to treat every person

with honor, dignity and respect – regardless of their belief, race, creed, sexual

orientation or gender ("Statement Following Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day,"

2012)

The next statement related to the crisis was issued by Chick-fil-A on September 20, 2012,

reportedly as a result of the backlash from notable public officials such as Chicago alderman Joe

Moreno, who said he would block Chick-fil-A from constructing a new restaurant in his ward

(Dardick, 2012). The company posted a statement to Facebook with the following message:

For many months now, Chick-fil-A's corporate giving has been mischaracterized.

And while our sincere intent has been to remain out of this political and social

debate, events from Chicago this past week have once again resulted in questions

around our giving. For that reason, we want to provide some context and clarity

around who we are, what we believe and our priorities in relation to corporate

giving. For a better understanding of our corporate giving, please see the attached

document titled "Chick-fil-A: Who We Are". This is the same document provided

and referred to in coverage surrounding Chicago. ("Chick-fil-A," 2012d)

Within more than three pages, the "Who We Are" document, dated August 15, 2012, repeats

many of the messages in the company's previous releases while outlining the exact goals and

destinations of the company's philanthropic giving, including "Restaurant Team Member

College Scholarships," "Supporting Youth Education Programs," "Providing Disaster Relief,"

"Investing in Our Youth," and various donations to "WinShape" ("Chick-fil-A: Who We Are,"

2012). The following is an excerpt from the document:

> In Chick-fil-A, we have a foundational commitment to service – service to our
>
> customers, service to our Owner/Operators and their team members, and service
>
> to our communities. This begins in the restaurant—one customer at a time. We
>
> firmly believe in treating every person who comes through our doors with honor,
>
> dignity, and respect. We teach it to everyone who comes to work at Chick-fil-A,
>
> and it's something that they take with them throughout their careers – whether
>
> they choose to stay with Chick-fil-A or go on to other promising careers. We also
>
> make a commitment to taking care of the people who take care of our
>
> communities. For example, by giving sandwiches to first responders in times of
>
> crisis, we honor the commitment they make to serve all of us. And our
>
> philanthropic giving reinforces that commitment to service by helping children
>
> and families in need. This is what makes us who we are. ("Chick-fil-A: Who We
>
> Are," 2012, para. 10)

Dan Cathy spoke out in mid-September of 2012, making a statement which was posted to Mike

Huckabee's website, stating the following:

> There continues to be erroneous implications in the media that Chick-fil-A
>
> changed our practices and priorities in order to obtain permission for a new

restaurant in Chicago. That is incorrect. Chick-fil-A made no such concessions,

and we remain true to who we are and who we have been. (Foust, 2012b, para. 3)

According to Coombs (2014), Chick-fil-a made one final statement in 2012 regarding the

crisis, though at the time of this research, the cited link was unavailable. The statement included

the following message:

Chick-fil-A is a family-owned and family-led company dedicated to serving the

communities in which we operate. From the day Truett Cathy started the

company, he began applying biblically-based principles to managing his business.

For example, we believe that we are stronger because of such principles as closing

on Sundays, going the extra mile in service, treating others as we want to be

treated, and devoting a percentage of profits back to our communities. Those

same principles have been applied throughout the history of Chick-fil-A and still

apply today. The Chick-fil-A culture and 66-year service tradition in our locally

owned and operated restaurants is to treat every person with honor, dignity and

respect—regardless of their beliefs, race, creed, sexual orientation or gender. We

are a restaurant company focused on food, service and hospitality; our intent is

not to engage in political or social debates. (Coombs, 2014, p. 193-194)

Initial Crisis Response. The initial crisis response evaluates three key aspects of the

timeliness: responding quickly, consistency, and openness of the message (Coombs, 2014). This

section evaluates these three elements in regards to the previously established timeline.

Responding Quickly. In a crisis situation, it is important for the organization to

understand the situation at hand and to respond in a timely manner. According to Coombs

(2012), "In some cases, the key stakeholders affected by the crisis learn about it from media or

online reports before they have been officially notified, creating a bad situation for the

organization" (p. 140-141). In the case of Dan Cathy, the original interview was on the Ken

Coleman Show via radio on June 6. Though his comments were similar in the radio interview as

they were in the later posted articles in the *Biblical Recorder* and *Baptist Press*, the radio

interview did not act as the triggering event for the crisis. The repost in the *Baptist Press*, more

than a week after the article was posted on the *Biblical Recorder*'s website, began the media

frenzy which quickly culminated into a crisis for Chick-fil-A, as the statements by then COO

Dan Cathy quickly effected various stakeholders in the company.

The company's first statement came via Chick-fil-A's Facebook page on July 19, 2012,

while the article was reposted and gained media attention on July 16. The next statement from

the company was issued again through Facebook on July 25, 2012. This statement did not

directly reference the crisis, but rather confronted a rumor that was started based on a fake

Facebook account. The third statement was delivered through the same medium, this time

addressing the rumor behind the Jim Henson Company toys. On July 31, fifteen days after the

triggering article from *Baptist Press*, Chick-fil-A made its first official statement outside of

social media and included the following statement:

> Going forward, our intent is to leave the policy debate over same-sex marriage to
>
> the government and political arena. Our mission is simple: to serve great food,
>
> provide genuine hospitality and have a positive influence on all who come in
>
> contact with Chick-fil-A. ("Chick-fil-A Response to Recent Controversy," 2012)

According to Coombs (2012), "A quick response helps to ensure that stakeholders receive

accurate crisis-related information and hear the organization's side of the story" (p.141). In this

time between the crisis and official response, multiple media outlets posted multiple stories,

public officials made statements about blocking the franchise from expansion into certain

territories, and events were planned from groups on both sides of the issue.

The researcher found that Cathy, though the source of the crisis, was not vocal during the

crisis timeline.

Consistency. On the subject of consistency in crisis communication, Coombs (2012)

notes, "The organization must deliver consistent messages to stakeholders, and a unified

response promotes consistency" (p. 143). Through the four official statements and four Facebook

statements that were previously referenced, several phrases were used consistently. Table 4.1

lists those key phrases, the amount of times they were used, and the form in which they were

used.

Table 4.1

Key Phrase	Amount used (Out of 8)	Form (Official, Facebook)
"treat every person with honor, dignity and respect – regardless of their belief, race, creed, sexual orientation or gender."	5	Official, Facebook
"family-owned and family-led"	4	Official
"biblically-based principles"	4	Official, Facebook
"culture and service tradition"	3	Official, Facebook
"leave the policy debate over same-sex marriage"	2	Official, Facebook
"our mission"	2	Official, Facebook

These key phrases were repeated by Chick-fil-A to reinforce the overall message. The phrase

"treat every person with honor, dignity and respect – regardless of their belief, race, creed, sexual

orientation or gender" was used in approximately 63 percent of the evaluated statements of both

official issued statements and Facebook posts. "Family-owned and family-led" and "biblically-

based principles" were both used in 50 percent of the evaluated posts, the former used only in

official issued statements and the latter used in both official issued statements and Facebook posts. "Culture and service tradition" was used in approximately 38 percent of statements. "Leave the policy debate over same-sex marriage" and "our mission" were used in 25 percent of the statements in both evaluated forms.

Openness. Openness refers to three different factors: "(a) availability to the media, (b) willingness to disclose information, and (c) honesty" (Coombs, 2014, p. 144). Availability involves interaction and answering questions that are issued. This is often evaluated through social media outlets, as stakeholders ask questions and expect immediate responses. Due to the availability of the statements, breadth of media response, and the lack of focus on the social media feedback via comments, the researcher will not address openness in the evaluation of Chick-fil-A and Cathy. Within the crisis timeline outlined in the methodology portion of this research, Cathy's responses were very limited. His comments were taken by many as a direct reflection of his company. By using silence, Cathy was able to allow Chick-fil-A to respond to this reflection in a clarifying manner, without furthering the crisis.

Content of Response Message. On the subject of content in regards to a response message, Coombs (2012) states, "What is actually said during a crisis has serious ramifications for the success of the crisis management effort" (p. 146). It is important to keep in mind crisis communication goals throughout the process, specifically to avoid or reduce damage, continue with day-to-day operations as possible, and mend the damage that comes to the reputation of the individual or organization (Coombs, 2014). According to Coombs (2012), the content response is divided into three chronological categories: instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation management, with the first two argued by Coombs as the foundation of a response.

Messages must remain clear through the process, untainted by emotion if it reduces the ability of the stakeholder to process the presented information (Coombs, 2014).

    Instructing Information. Instructing information is foundational to a crisis response. According to Coombs (2012), "The stakeholders receive the information they require to protect themselves; the crisis team cultivates the perception that the organization is once more in control of the situation" (p. 147). Though the function of instructing information may be clearer in crises involving accidents and product dangers, an aspect of this information is the instruction of how the crisis effects the operations of a business, referred to by Coombs (2012) as a "business continuity plan." In the case of Chick-fil-A, it is unclear the messages conveyed to the employees of the various franchises. However, through the first statement from Chick-fil-A, the company offers an outline of the expectations of the employees based on the following statement:

        The Chick-fil-A culture and service tradition in our restaurants is to treat every

        person with honor, dignity and respect – regardless of their belief, race, creed,

        sexual orientation or gender. We will continue this tradition in the over 1,600

        Restaurants run by independent Owner/Operators. … Our mission is simple: to

        serve great food, provide genuine hospitality and have a positive influence on all

        who come in contact with Chick-fil-A. ("Chick-fil-a," 2012a)

The term "continue this tradition" suggests that the functions of business stay the same in the midst of the crisis, with the mission to continue to "serve great food, provide genuine hospitality and have a positive influence." The same statement also asserts, "Going forward, our intent is to leave the policy debate over same-sex marriage to the government and political arena" ("Chick-

fil-a," 2012a). This demonstrates the need to be neutral in the debate as a company, regardless of the statements from Cathy.

  Adjusting information. Continuing in Coombs' order of crisis response content, adjusting information "helps stakeholders cope psychologically with the crisis" (Coombs, 2014). This can mean explaining the fundamentals of the crisis. This adjusting information can be in the form of corrective action and renewal response strategy. The corrective action is "communicating action taken to prevent a similar crisis" (Coombs, 2014, p. 150). The key statement used by Chick-fil-A to convey this message states, "Going forward, our intent is to leave the policy debate over same-sex marriage to the government and political arena" ("Chick-fil-a," 2012a; "Chick-fil-A Response to Recent Controversy," 2012). On the case of renewal response strategy, this strategy approaches the crisis with a positive perspective with the intent to rebuild confidence. According to Coombs (2012), "For renewal to work, the organization needs a favorable reputation, or the promises of renewal will ring hollow" (p. 151). Though the statements made by Chick-fil-A express a desire to treat everyone with the same level of respect and service "regardless of their belief, race, creed, sexual orientation or gender," the company maintains the idea that the mission remains based in "biblically-based principles," a reference similar in terminology to the statement Cathy used in the original interview, stating, "…we live in a country where we can share our values and operate on biblical principles" (Blume, 2012, para. 30). An additional aspect to adjusting information is the fact that crises can create victims, who are what Coombs refers to as "an entirely new class of stakeholders" (2014, p. 151). In this case it is important to note, "Expressing compassion does not mean an organization necessarily admits responsibility" (p. 151).

Reputation Management. Coombs (2012) states, "Reputations are threatened during any crisis" (p. 152). Whether the organization is a victim or the cause of the crisis, the reputation is threatened and must be managed to protect or restore from adverse effects. According to Benoit (1995a), the attack on an image is composed of two elements: "1) An act occurred which is undesirable, 2) You are responsible for that action" (p. 71). When both of these elements are believed to be true by the audience, it puts to risk the reputation in question (1995a). Chick-fil-A's reputation was at risk following Cathy's statements. The backlash of the statements was undesirable, though the statements themselves did not make a clear violation of Chick-fil-A policy. Cathy was also responsible for the statements he made, thus qualifying the individual and connected brand as having an attack on image. Coombs (2007c) states, "Reputations are widely recognized as a valuable, intangible asset" (p. 164). The reputation of Chick-fil-A, prior to the statements, was still in question by dissenting parties; primarily due to donations the company is known for making. According to one news article, "this is not the first time the chain has butted heads with gay rights organizations," citing donations to groups that oppose gay marriage, including Focus on the Family, Pennsylvania Family Institute, and National Organization for Marriage (Stafford, 2012, para. 20). Even so, the same article points out, "The company has long said it operated on biblical principles and is well-known for staying closed on Sundays, a stance that has won admiration from some" (Stafford, 2012, para. 19). Even with the prior negative views from some stakeholders based on Chick-fil-A's charitable giving choices, a brand perception tracker known as BrandIndex by YouGov stated, "Chick-fil-A was one of the top five best perceived QSR (Quick Service Restaurants) restaurant chains in the U.S. over the first half of the year" (Marzilli, 2012, para. 5). This index score is compiled based on reputation, impression, quality, value, satisfaction, and the willingness of a patron to recommend.

BrandIndex contains scores from 100 to -100, with a zero score resulting from equal positive and negative feedback from consumers. The index score was at a national average of 46 on the day the *Baptist Press* republished the original interview containing Cathy's statements, and Chick-fil-A held a score of 65 that day. However, the article notes, Chick-fil-A's score fell to a score of 47, on a day when the national average score was 50 (Marzilli, 2012). With reputation as one of the deciding factors in the overall score, Chick-fil-A clearly took a hit in the consumer perspective of reputation.

Since the reputation is a perception held by stakeholders, these stakeholders attribute responsibility in a crisis. Coombs (2012) states, "Clearly, crises are unexpected and negative, so they provoke attributions of responsibility. In turn, these attributions shape how a stakeholder feels and behaves toward the organization" (p. 152-153). Coombs (2012) notes that crisis response strategies are recommended based on the evaluated reputational threat. "To appreciate the SCCT recommendations, we need to define a set of crisis response strategies and explain how the reputational threat posed by a crisis is assessed" (Coombs, 2012, p. 154).

Crisis Response Strategies. Coombs (2012) states, "Crisis response strategies represent the actual responses an organization uses to address a crisis" (p. 154). Exhaustive research has been done on the different types of strategies. According to Coombs (2012), "A more productive approach is to identify the most common strategies and to organize them in some useful fashion" (p. 154). Table 4.2 defines the most common crisis communication strategies as determined by crisis experts and assembled by Coombs.

Table 4.2

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In the digital age, many organizations take to social media or other online sources to get

information out to the public, especially in the face of a crisis. Coombs (2012) states, "Social

media provides another channel for delivering the updates and addressing specific follow-up

questions stakeholders may have" (p. 28). Though the research was not initially going to look

into social media statements by the company and rather focus on official statements given in

press releases, the current environment and communicative culture requires quick response.

While crisis managers still hold much of the same responsibilities, such as identifying warning

signs, confronting communication demands, putting strategic responses into affect, Coombs

(2012) notes, "What has changed is how the information is collected and, in some cases, how

that information is processed" (p. 19-20). With that in mind, the researcher pulled in statements

from Facebook, as this is where Chick-fil-A released its first statements and additional

statements in regards to the crisis. Others were given as official press releases via the

organization's website. Some of the official statements were first identified from Coombs'

(2014) smaller presentation of the Chick-fil-A crisis. Since Chick-fil-A does not maintain past

press releases on its site, the researcher relied on many previously pulled URLs to locate and

evaluate the official releases. Statements that were not related to the crisis in any way were not

included. Due to the lack of comments and availability of statements from Cathy, his evaluated

statement was pulled from a third party, who was also included in the stakeholder evaluation.

Bolstering. In the initial Facebook statement from Chick-fil-A, they reminded the

stakeholders about past good works, classifying the posture as bolstering, with the following

phrases: "The Chick-fil-A culture and service tradition in our restaurants is to," "We will

continue this tradition," "Chick-fil-A is … serving the communities in which it operates," and

"From the day Truett Cathy started the company, he began applying biblically-based principles"

("Chick-fil-a," 2012a). The second statement, also made through Facebook, uses the bolstering

posture through victimage with the following statement: "The latest is we have been accused of

impersonating a teenager with a fake Facebook profile. We want you to know we would never

do anything like that and this claim is 100% false" ("Chick-fil-A," 2012b). The fourth statement

was similar in content to the first made on Facebook, again using bolstering posture in the form

of reminding. The fifth company statement, a response to Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day, uses

bolstering posture through ingratiation with the following statement: "We are very grateful and

humbled by the incredible turnout of loyal Chick-fil-A customers on August 1" and "We

congratulate local Chick-fil-A Owner/Operators and their team members" ("Statement Following

Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day," 2012). The same statement also uses bolstering posture through

reminding, making similar references to the culture and tradition that it detailed in the first and

fourth statements. The "Who We Are" official statement, linked to by the Facebook statement,

uses reminding as the bolstering posture, as well as two other postures noted later. In the final

official statement observed from Chick-fil-A, the company essentially repeats the first statement,

using bolstering posture.

Denial. The third statement, again made through Facebook, uses denial posture with both

attacking the accuser – in this case, the accuser is the media in regards to the Jim Henson

Company issue that Chick-fil-A claims is a rumor. Chick-fil-A's "Who We Are" statement on

Facebook uses denial and scapegoating, saying its "corporate giving has been mischaracterized"

and "events from Chicago this past week have once again resulted in questions around our

giving," respectively ("Chick-fil-A," 2012d), while the official statement, linked to by the

Facebook statement, uses denial and scapegoating as the denial posture while also using

excusing as the diminishment posture and reminding as the bolstering posture. The researcher

found one statement from Dan Cathy through the process, as most media focused on the original

interview and Chick-fil-A's responses throughout the crisis. Cathy's statement, originally posted

to Huckabee's website, was in response to the Chicago alderman stating that Chick-fil-A had

bent to his stipulations in order to move forward with company expansion in his ward, a claim

that caused a negative response from stakeholders who had commended Cathy for his original

stance. Cathy's statement uses denial posture.

Diminishment. The official "Who We Are" statement, linked to by the Facebook

statement, excusing as the diminishment posture while also using bolstering strategies and

denial. This was the only act of diminishment noted by the researcher.

Evaluating Reputational Threat. According to Coombs (2012), "Three factors are used

in SCCT to evaluate the reputational threat presented by a crisis: crisis type, crisis history, and

prior reputation. These factors are applied in a two-step process" (p.157). The first step involves

determining the initial crisis responsibility of the organization in the crisis. The crisis types and

clusters are recorded in table 2.1 of the literature review. Coombs (2007c) states, "By identifying

the crisis type, the crisis manager can anticipate how much crisis responsibility stakeholders will

attribute to the organization at the onset of the crisis thereby establishing the initial crisis

responsibility level (p. 168). Cathy's comments were his personal opinion, and due to the nature

of his position in the company, endangered the company's reputation with various stakeholders.

In a preventable cluster, Coombs (2007c) states, "the organization knowingly placed people at

risk, took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation" (p. 168). This is in contrast with a

victim cluster, which defines the organization and stakeholders as a victims and state the crisis

types as natural disaster, rumor, workplace violence, and product tampering/malevolence

(Coombs, 2007c). Accidental cluster defines the actions taken by the organization that lead to the

crisis as unintentional and state the crisis types as challenges, technical-error accidents, and

technical-error product harm (Coombs, 2007c). Challenges are, as defined by Coombs (2012),

"When the organization is confronted by discontented stakeholders with claims that it is

operating in an inappropriate manner" (p. 73). In the case of Chick-fil-A's crisis, they fall into

both the accidental cluster and the preventable cluster. The accidental cluster is applied because

Cathy's comments brought to the forefront the company's biblical values, as stakeholders made

the inseparable connection between Cathy's opinions and the company's stance and actions. The

actions include donations to donations to groups that oppose gay marriage, including Focus on

the Family, Pennsylvania Family Institute, and National Organization for Marriage. In the eye of

certain stakeholders, the belief was that the company was operating in an inappropriate manner

by contributing to groups that oppose gay marriage. Additionally, Chick-fil-A's crisis also falls

within the preventable cluster as Cathy's original comments "took inappropriate action" in the

eyes of the certain stakeholders. However, though the crisis can be factored into the preventable

cluster, none of the crisis types clearly describe the crisis in question.

According to Coombs (2012), "The second step in assessing the reputational threat is to

modify the initial assessment based upon crisis history and prior reputation" (p. 158). A crisis

history or negative reputation can result in the following: "Stakeholders will treat a victim crisis

like an accidental crisis and an accidental crisis like an intentional one" (p. 158). Though Chick-

fil-A does not have a history of crises, some stakeholders perceived the company as having a

negative reputation due to donations to groups that oppose gay marriage. However, this

reputation was minimal and primarily unknown to the general public.

Upon assessing the threat to reputation, crisis managers are able to recommend the crisis

response strategy, as outlined in table 2.3 of the literature review. These are addressed and

compared in the discussion chapter.

Effects of Credibility and Reputation. Coombs (2012) highlights two additional

considerations when choosing a crisis communication strategy. These are credibility and prior

reputation. Coombs (2012) states, "Credibility is composed of expertise and trustworthiness" (p.

160). "Trustworthiness is the organization's goodwill toward or concern for its stakeholders" (p.

160). Credibility holds value due to the challenges that the company can face. In Chick-fil-A's

case, the challenge consists of ambiguity, on which Coombs (2012) states, "There are some

reasons why both sides may be correct" (p. 161).

Prior reputation, though also finding roots in stakeholder opinions as previously

discussed, can also be determined through growth and value. Founded in 1967, the chain now

boasts over 1,900 locations in 41 states and in Washington, D.C., and has become the largest

restaurant chain of its kind in the United States ("Company fact sheet," 2015). The company

passed one billion dollars in system-wide sales in 2000, two billion in 2006, three billion in

2009, and four billion in 2011 ("History," 2015). In 2011, Chick-fil-A made gross sales of 2.9

million dollars per location, well above that of the runner-up McDonald's Corp (Coffey, 2012).

In 2012, a brand perception tracker known as BrandIndex by YouGov stated, "Chick-fil-A was

one of the top five best perceived QSR (Quick Service Restaurants) restaurant chains in the U.S.

over the first half of the year" (Marzilli, 2012, para. 5). At the time of the crisis,

Chick-fil-A was the second largest fried chicken chain in the United States, with the largest

being KFC (O'Connor, 2012).

Chapter V: Discussion

Research Question 1

RQ1: How did Dan Cathy attempt to restore his image after the negative response that followed his comments in his original interview?

Image Repair. According to Benoit (1995a), the attack on an image is composed of two elements: "1) An act occurred which is undesirable, 2) You are responsible for that action" (p. 71). In the case of Chick-fil-A, the original comments that caused the media and stakeholder frenzy were attributed to Cathy, making him responsible for the action. In the eyes of many stakeholders, as seen the analysis of those groups, this was also considered an undesirable act. Throughout the crisis, the researcher found limited responses from Cathy himself. Though his comments were the source of the crisis for Chick-fil-A, articles from mass media as well as other stakeholders contributed the statements as a defining value for Chick-fil-A as a company, not Cathy as a CEO of the company.

According to Benoit (1995a), the final variation within the image repair strategy of evading responsibility is justification. This occurs when the individual chooses "to suggest that performance or the action in question may be justified on the basis of motives or intentions" (p. 76). Due to the lack of response from Cathy during the defined timeline, it is important to analyze the original statements within the crisis-stirring interview. Cathy stated, "[We are] based on biblical principles, asking God and pleading with God to give us wisdom on decisions we make about people and the programs and partnerships we have (Blume, 2012b, para. 6-7). This statement, along with the remainder of the interview, set up the background with which Cathy approached the interview, and in general defines his business model and choices in corporate social responsibility. With this in mind, Cathy's statements, which set off the media frenzy, can

be justified by as vocalized biblical principles. In justification, without denying the act or statements, the individual is able to justify what is said or done with good intentions, rather than evil intentions that would still make the audience hold the individual fully accountable. The action in question was justified by context of the remainder of the interview as motives behind the controversial statements that were not well received by all stakeholders.

Beyond the original interview with the *Biblical Recorder*, the researcher found only one statement from Cathy through the defined timeline, making it difficult to assign the reparation tactic employed by the CEO. Though Cathy may have made more than one statement at the time, the focus of the media was on the company as a whole and how Cathy's statements defined that company. Though image repair strategies for Cathy were vague and limited based on his exposure in the media following the controversial statements of the biblical definition of a family, the silence he employed can lend itself to that of image repair. While remaining quiet in the crisis, Chick-fil-A was able to employ its own strategies with the hopes of distancing itself from the political division connected to the situation.

Situational Crisis Communication Strategies. Crisis communication strategies seek to protect or restore reputation. Cathy's statement uses denial posture. Cathy spoke out in mid-September with a statement that was originally posted to Huckabee's website and was in response to the Chicago alderman stating that Chick-fil-A had bent to his conditions in order to move forward with company expansion in that particular ward. This claim from the alderman caused a negative response from stakeholders who had commended Cathy for his original stance. He stated, "There continues to be erroneous implications in the media that Chick-fil-A changed our practices and priorities in order to obtain permission for a new restaurant in Chicago. That is incorrect" (Foust, 2012b, para. 3). At this point in the crisis, Cathy was responding to what he

implied was a rumor regarding the company's stance. Since this was a situation occurring in

response to the crisis, the crisis management surrounding it would be classified as a rumor within

the victim cluster. Even though initial statements in a crisis are given in response to the crisis as

a form of image repair and crisis management strategies, statements from crisis managers must

also be made to handle the sub-crises that develop as a result of the original crisis. Though Cathy

did not speak often during the crisis timeline, his observed response was not necessarily in

regards to the original crisis, but rather a strategic response to the responses of various

stakeholders. One stakeholder, the Chicago alderman, expressed desire to block Chick-fil-A

while requiring in-depth changes to the workings and giving of the company, while other

stakeholders responded to the alderman's claim to Chick-fil-A's submission to his demands.

Each ripple of the crisis that is felt by the company should be addressed in some form, while in

this situation it was addressed by the CEO himself as the spokesperson.

   CEO Attribution. The CEO's opinion often becomes associated as the company's

opinion with no regard to the leadership style of the CEO. Equally as defining for a company,

Mikeska and Harvey state, "And the stable nature of values and beliefs is more likely to reflect

onto the firm than less-stable events, such as one exaggerated advertising claim or product

defect" (p. 77). Though the original comments were considered to him and Chick-fil-A as his

own opinion, his role as a spokesperson in the company turns what he says as a representation of

the company. Even in his evaluated statement via Huckabee's website, Cathy uses the term "we"

to describe the company, thus connecting himself as one with Chick-fil-A. He stated, "Chick-fil-

A made no such concessions, and we remain true to who we are and who we have been" (Foust,

2012b, para. 3). When speaking as a leader of a company, it is difficult to separate in the eye of

the stakeholder the opinions and values of the CEO or primary spokesperson and the opinions and values of the company itself.

Research Question 2

RQ2: How did Chick-fil-A use situational crisis communication strategies to maintain reputation among stakeholders following Dan Cathy's statements in favor of a biblical definition of a family unit?

Crisis Communication Strategies. According to Coombs (2007b), "SCCT utilizes attribution theory to evaluate the reputational threat posed by the crisis situation and then recommends crisis response strategies based on the reputational threat level" (p. 138). While looking at a crisis in hindsight and applying the theory's strategies in hindsight is not necessarily helpful for the crisis being analyzed, it does demonstrate errors or successes in the actual strategies that were employed and offers clear examples to compare and apply in future crises. Additionally, not all crises offer clear solutions when implementing strategies. The crisis manager must monitor the stakeholders and the sub-crises that occur as a result of the original crisis. Chick-fil-A, though a large company with a diverse consumer base, claims foundation in biblical principles through its corporate mission statement, corporate social responsibility, weekly operations schedules, employee training, and more. Though many stakeholders do not share the same values as Chick-fil-A, some do. The challenge lies in satisfying multiple types of stakeholders who each hold their own views on certain issues and who have a different response to how the concept of morals in business should be handled. Although some stakeholders hold the same views expressed by Cathy in his original interview, many do not. Those who do not hold the same views play a vital role in the audience-driven concept of crisis management. It is the crisis manager's responsibility to protect the reputation of the company over the course of the

crisis by using both actions and words to balance out the crisis with the desires of the

stakeholders.

In the initial statement from Chick-fil-A, made via Facebook, the company reminded the

stakeholders about past good works, categorizing the posture as bolstering. According to

Coombs (2012), a bolstering posture involves supplemental strategies in regards to other

postures. "They also seek to build a positive connection between the organization and the

stakeholders" (p. 157). Coombs operates off of the assumption that crisis managers involve more

than one strategy when faced with a crisis, though the combination of denial with diminishment

or rebuilding strategies makes contradictions. If a crisis is denied, there is no need for rebuilding

or diminishment of the crisis at hand. However, over the course of a crisis, the researcher found

multiple sub-crises, some of which required denial on the part of Chick-fil-A. For the rumor of

the fake Facebook account used to bolster the image of Chick-fil-A among the targeted

stakeholders, Chick-fil-A took the position of the victim and denied the crisis of that lie,

claiming they had no involvement in the fake account. Though Chick-fil-A addressed the overall

crisis based on Cathy's original interview and succeeding backlash from certain stakeholders

with other strategies, denial could be applied to reflexive crises.

Prescriptions of SCCT for crisis response selection are recommended based on crisis type

and cluster. For Chick-fil-A, the original crisis involved organizational misdeed with no injuries.

This classifies the crisis within the preventable cluster, in which the organization knowingly

placed people at risk. This can create a severe reputational threat and there is a strong attribution

of responsibility for the crisis. However, the situation is unique because the organization itself

was not the root of the crisis, unless the CEO is considered as inseparable from the organization

and unable to carry his own opinion separate from that which is stated by the organization. Since

the crisis was not caused by the organization itself, but rather a distinctive spokesperson and leader of the brand, one could also argue that the crisis falls within the victim cluster, as Chick-fil-A fell victim to the CEO's personal statement of belief. Within the victim cluster is the crisis type, rumor. This includes false and damaging information about an organization. Technically speaking, the organization has taken no public stance on what constitutes a marriage and makes no distinction when providing services to the public. While Cathy's comments on his personal values stated a belief in "the biblical definition of a family unit," some media outlets made inference that Chick-fil-A as a corporation was "anti-gay" with some even making that inference in the article headline (Hendricks, 2012). With this perspective, the idea that Chick-fil-A is anti-gay was a rumor that needed to be addressed.

From the perspective that Chick-fil-A's crisis was an organizational misdeed and thus a preventable cluster, Coombs (2012) recommends to use rebuilding strategies. From the perspective that Chick-fil-A was the victim in a rumor situation, Coombs recommends denial strategies, such as attacking the accuser, denial, or scapegoating. In the initial response from Chick-fil-A, the organization indirectly denied the claims that it was "anti-gay" in policy by stating, "The Chick-fil-A culture and service tradition in our restaurants is to treat every person with honor, dignity and respect – regardless of their belief, race, creed, sexual orientation or gender ("Chick-fil-A," 2012a). However, the phrases also lent themselves to being interpreted as bolstering in the form of reminding stakeholders of good works. These were demonstrated in phrases such as "The Chick-fil-A culture and service tradition in our restaurants is to," "We will continue this tradition," "Chick-fil-A is…serving the communities in which it operates," and "From the day Truett Cathy started the company, he began applying biblically-based principles" ("Chick-fil-a," 2012a).

While Chick-fil-A itself never apologized directly nor offered any compensation to stakeholders, therefore not using rebuilding strategies as suggested in a preventable cluster crisis, Cathy made reparations after the timeline that was evaluated by the researcher. In a 2014 interview with *USA Today*, Cathy stated, "All of us become more wise as time goes by. … We sincerely care about all people" (Horovits, 2014, para. 4). This rebuilding posture, though almost two full years following the initial controversial comments, was a public statement of responsibility for the issue. According to Horovits (2014), "Cathy…has now fully backed away from such public pronouncements that mix personal opinion on social issues with corporate policy" (para. 3).

Research Question 3

RQ3: Can an organization engage in social activism marketing if its cause is in opposition to perceived public opinion?

One author notes, "…until very recently, LGBT rights was a no-win issue for companies who feared offending one part of the customer base of other if they spoke up" (Wahba, 2015, para. 5). Rupert Barkoff, a food industry expert, stated, "When you bring politics into business, the worlds collide and the consequences can be unpredictable" (Stafford, 2012, para. 6). In contrast, now many stakeholders praise companies who speak in favor of same-sex marriage. The same author notes, "Meanwhile, companies that opposed LGBT marriage rights have grown quiet: witness how Chick-fil-A, once a vocal critic of LGBT rights, has completely piped down on the issue as it gears up for expansion" (para. 8). "Fast forward…and retailers are falling over themselves to show how progressive they are on LGBT issues" (para. 6). Foust (2012) notes the following:

Cathy's comments were tame from a biblical perspective and would have gone

unnoticed had they been made by the pastor at his home congregation… Yet in

the current environment in which celebrities and companies on a weekly basis

make statements affirming gay marriage, Cathy's statements stood out. (para. 4)

Pew Research Center provided data in June of 2015 regarding the 73 percent of millennials in

support of same-sex marriage, a potential consumer that most companies aim to reach in some

form (Wahba, 2015). Additionally, a CNN/ORC poll in 2012 determined that there is now a

majority support for same-sex marriage among Americans (Aarthun, 2012).

Companies such as Starbucks have vocal CEOs on topics that were once seen as a no-

win. Howard Schultz, president and CEO of Starbucks, stated in regards to taking a vocal stance

for same-sex marriage, "Not every decision is an economic decision" ("For the first time," 2014,

para. 16). When challenged by a stakeholder for taking such a vocal stance, Schultz stated, "You

can sell your shares in Starbucks and buy shares in another company. Thank you very much"

(para. 17). In the same Starbucks news release, an inside sales rep is quoted as saying the

following in regards to Schultz's comment:

Wow. I got chills hearing what Howard said. That was a bold statement. I would

not have been ashamed of Howard if he had given a more reserved answer, but it

was clear that he was speaking from the heart. Support of the LGBT community

is genuine. ("For the first time," 2014, para. 19)

What about the statement from Cathy on the opposite side of the controversial issue of

same-sex marriage? Though some stakeholders supported his opinions as well, others did not

with some public officials claiming to block expansion of the company within their power.

According to Horovits (2014), "While Cathy's comments didn't hurt short-term business – and

even helped it – Chick-fil-A executives recognize that the comments may have done longer-term damage to the brand's image at the very time it was eyeing major growth outside its friendly Southern market" (para. 5).

Limitations

This content analysis was limited by a few factors. First, the researcher had to limit the timeline of the crisis. Though Chick-fil-A and Cathy made statements beyond the observed months, this would have made the timeline unfocused. As it was, the responses from Chick-fil-A regarding the crisis varied on the aspect of the crisis that they were addressing. Few statements were made in direct response to the original statements made by Cathy. The researcher chose this timeline because it contained a large stakeholder response. The response eventually died down.

The second limitation is subjectivity when studying statements. The researcher interpreted the statements, thus translating the meaning based on the context and research. Other researchers could translate a different meaning from the messages conveyed by Chick-fil-A, Cathy, or stakeholders.

The third limitation is the lack of old press releases and public statements on the Chick-fil-A website. The company's website offers only the latest, unless one already knows the exact web address that a statement is located at. The researcher had to rely on second-hand sources and direct links recorded by other researchers to find certain statements made by Chick-fil-A.

The fourth limitation is the reliance on news articles to interpret stakeholder reactions. These articles often contained timelines that did not match up to the actual timelines. Additionally, the material could contain a bias when reported.

Suggestions for Future Research

Research could be improved by comparing the response from the stakeholders in the Chick-fil-A crisis to the response of stakeholders in other cases in which a CEO made statements that were not clearly defined by the company. This analysis focused on a company one side of a controversial argument and its crisis communication strategies. By expanding the research, the researcher could find if the same crisis would exist on the other side of the argument and if the strategies should differ.

Second, the researcher could also extend the definition of "official statements" to other forms of social media, such as Twitter and Instagram. Since those are both growing platforms, research could find the effectiveness of issuing crisis communication across different social platforms. This analysis included Facebook because it was the location of the first response from Chick-fil-A.

Third, research could be extended to look at the comments on social media, evaluating their relevance to the crisis communication message and the effectiveness of the post. This would allow the researcher to find the effectiveness and relevance to issuing crisis communication on different social platforms.

Finally, the research could use mixed methods with a combination of focus groups and surveys to find the reaction to controversial statements made by the CEO and the effect those have on choosing companies to support, both financially and verbally.

Conclusion

There are multiple takeaways from this rhetorical analysis. First, the social climate in the United States is changing. As previously mentioned, 73 percent of millennials now support of same-sex marriage (Wahba, 2015). While many organizations once shied away from taking a

political stance at one time, particularly on same-sex marriage, organizations are now looking to

identify with the target through polarizing topics. Many companies and their leaders are choosing

whether to connect with that market with a public stance or to stay silent. As companies are

taking positions, the media temperature or the attitude of the media towards a controversial topic

such as same-sex marriage is heating up and quick to identify those who do not agree with

perceived public opinion. For Cathy, an interview with "friendly" media that shared a similar

worldview, took his final comments in the interview, comments eluding to same-sex marriage,

and included "guilty as charged" in the article title. This automatically framed Cathy's comments

in perceived negative connotation and was a phrase repeated by many news organizations.

Next, when considering social activism marketing, the results indicate that a CEO cannot

usually profess an opinion in a public arena without many stakeholders attributing that opinion to

that of the company, especially with opinions that already stir controversy among stakeholders.

More specifically, based on evolving political views and public policy, the CEO should consider

the majority public opinion before making statements if he or she is concerned with the backlash.

This does not mean a CEO should completely avoid any personal convictions. However, she or

he should monitor who is receiving the message, what the temperature is of the media at the

time, have awareness of spreadable media and the access of the public to such information, and

use discretion. According to Mikeska and Harvey (2014), "While politics shapes business and

business shapes politics, consumers appear to be a stick in this wheel" (p. 89). By understanding

the views of stakeholders and the strategies to cope in a situation of self-induced crisis,

companies can move past the negative backlash and work to restore the original image or

capitalize on the newfound support for those in favor of a social stand.

Third, this study demonstrates the complexity of sub-crises. As an original crisis unfolds, there are often resulting crises that appear over the course of the original crisis. In the case of Chick-fil-A, the company dealt with rumors that needed to be addressed in the midst of the crisis, though the crisis itself was still ongoing. These messages were separate from the rhetoric applied in the direct crisis responses and were necessary as Chick-fil-A addressed its stakeholders. As the corporate image was fragile among many, any sub-crises had to be dealt strategically without losing sight of the big picture.

Finally, this analysis reveals implications of Facebook. While crises were once first handled with press releases, relying on the media to issue it to the public, now press releases are often accompanied by social media posts. Sometimes, as the case for Chick-fil-A, the first information to the public is given through Facebook rather than press releases. This may imply a shift in the influence that media holds. Rather than relying on media to issue the first statements, Chick-fil-A took the message straight to its public in a shareable forum. Additionally, the company did not promote Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day started by Huckabee. Rather, Huckabee organized and rallied support while media followed along. The only statement from Chick-fil-A regarding the community-led event was to say it was unprecedented in sales and congratulated employees for how it was handled. Participants rallied and shared on Facebook, while giving their RSVP to the event as support.

The objective of this critical analysis was to understand the application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory and recommended strategies to a crisis caused by a leader's words. Statements made regarding the crisis from both Cathy and Chick-fil-A were analyzed across a specified time period for strategies of crisis communication. Companies and spokespersons do not always comply with the recommended strategies of crisis communication.

However, these situations can provide new insights into the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of other strategies, as well as enlighten on media and social trends.

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