

# Crisis Communication in the Age of Social Media and the Case of Dairy Khoury

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## INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media was a game changer for consumers and companies alike. It gave the consumers clear and direct voice in many aspects related to the products they consume. On the other hand, it provided the organizations with a new tool to communicate with their audiences everywhere, especially in response to an occurring crisis.

At times, crisis strike due to factors beyond the company's management control (natural disasters, war, stock market drop, boycotts, competition's malevolence etc...), and sometimes due to the management's misconduct, deception or lack of values. For a reason or another, "crises are considered to be common parts of the social, psychological, political, economic and organizational landscape of modern life" (Matthew et al. 2003). Consequently, a predetermined crisis-management plan and an adaptable communication strategy will always play a pivotal role in defining the survival of an organization or an industrial sector as a whole.

According to Willmer (2016), organizations should invest in preparing crisis-management plans on different scales, supported by comprehensive analysis of the organization's environment, activity and potential risks. Risks are known to be all the potential activities or events that could harm the organization's finances, revenues, reputation, market position and capacity to deliver services.

Whereas, crises are known to be unforeseen events that may occur at a specific point in time and they tend to:

- Place the organization in serious financial jeopardy
- Cause damage to the employees and the public
- Cause image and reputation damages:
  - Threaten the viability of the organization
  - Alter the reputation of the company and its leadership
  - Weaken or destroy the confidence of stakeholders and consumers in the company.

Furthermore, the SCCT (Situational Crisis Communication Theory) developed by Coombs (2011) classifies different types of crises as follows:

The rise of social media made it very difficult for any company to survive a failure in responding to a crisis through social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter. "Crises affect more people than ever before, are more widely reported in the media, and have a wider impact on increasingly interconnected, dynamic and complex social-technical systems" (Matthew et al. 2003).

For instance, 2017 witnessed on huge failures of some organizations that didn't have the experience, nor the right knowledge to sail with the company on social media during the crisis. Therefore, we will present three cases:

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*Table 1. SCCT (Situational Crisis Communication Theory) CRISIS TYPES\**

Crisis cluster	Crisis type	Description
<b>Victim</b>	Natural disaster	Earthquake, flood, etc would damage an organization
	Rumor	A rumor is disseminated about an organization
	Hacking	Attackers perform computer hacking
	Workplace violence	An employee attacks other employees
<b>Accidental</b>	Challenges	Stakeholders claiming that the organization is operating inappropriately
	Technical-error product harm	A technology failure resulting in a faulty product
	Technical-error accident	A technology failure causing an accident
<b>Preventable</b>	Human-error accident	A human error causes an accident
	Human-error product harm	A human error results in a faulty product
	Organizational-misdeed	Management taking actions that it knows may place stakeholders at risk

\* (Adapted from Coombs, 2011).

The first is when Pepsi launched a new advertising campaign featuring the basketball star Kendall Jenner while joining a street protest, then, she hands a can of Pepsi to a police officer who takes a sip and smiles at his partners. The company was accused of taking advantage of serious social issues and the crisis began. Pepsi pulled the video and apologized, but the social media audience was not merciful and blamed Pepsi for trivializing the demonstrations.

The second is when the Environmental Protection Agency accused Volkswagen of selling vehicles that didn't meet environmental requirements. The company recalled millions of vehicles and promised to reimburse some of the customers. On social media, the customers expressed their suspicion that the company was handling the crisis in an inconsistent and dishonest way by publishing contradictory statements as to whether they knew or didn't know about the cheating.

The third is when the United Airlines told a passenger to give up his seat for airline staff due to flight overbooking. When the passenger (69-year-old doctor) refused to leave the plane, he was forcefully dragged from his seat and was struck in the process. The crisis started when a cell phone video recording of the incident was published on social media. The CEO Oscar Munoz apologized for "having to re-accommodate" the customer. This statement triggered a huge amount of criticism accusing the CEO for being disrespectful and lacking accountability. This case demonstrates how an apology on social media should be carefully put into words and communicated, taking into consideration the feelings of the victims.

In an era of growing consumption consciousness in the Lebanese market, the conventional media created frenzy about the Labneh (strained yogurt) production in Lebanon. The case gained public interest and triggered public health concerns when the media framed the Natamycin as a carcinogen.

Suddenly Dairy Khoury was at the center of a product harm/food safety crisis (Yehya& Coombs, 2014) and decided to counter campaign via conventional media. But the social media forced itself as a medium to be reckoned with, when the consumers started to voice their opinions on Facebook. What distinguishes the Dairy Khoury case is its being one of the earliest cases in Lebanon in which a dairy

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