

THE DEEPWATER HORIZON OIL SPILL CRISIS: DID PUBLIC RELATIONS HELP REBUILD THE COMPANY’S REPUTATION?

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ABSTRACT

In 2010, Deepwater Horizon, a rig owned by Transocean and leased by British Petroleum (BP), exploded off the coast of Louisiana in the Gulf of Mexico. The blast killed 11 crewmembers and injured 17 others. It was considered the biggest accidental marine oil spill in the world and the largest environmental disaster in the U.S. This case study assesses how British Petroleum handled the crisis. The analysis suggests that the British company attempted to pursue two-way communication with the families of the victims and keep the general public, media and shareholders updated of its endeavor to contain and close the leak. However, the evidence reveals that BP disseminated incomplete and distorted information and did not want to take responsibility. In fact, the company blamed Transocean for the spill and tried to manipulate the public by buying search phrases on internet browsers such as *Google* and *Yahoo* so the first match people see is BP’s website and not news or protest sites. The study concludes that BP was not prepared to deal with the disaster. The company had a handbook of procedures for crises, but it did not seem to help much. BP appeared to have followed the Exxon-Valdez oil spill’s public relations approach. The authors address the strengths and weaknesses of the campaign to influence public opinion and offer some ideas on how the situation could have been tackled differently.

Keywords: British Petroleum (BP), corporate communications, crisis communication, Deepwater Horizon, environmental disaster, public relations effects, reputation management, restoration of public trust

INTRODUCTION

On April 20, 2010, at approximately 9:45 p.m. CDT, a mixture of natural gas, mud and concrete exploded from under the Deepwater Horizon semi-submersible mobile drilling oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. The accident resulted in multiple casualties: 11 people died and 17 were injured. The Deepwater Horizon rig was owned by Transocean, and leased by BP. It sank two days after the explosion. BP realized hours later that there was an oil leak that would spill into the Gulf of Mexico for more than three months (Byars, 2013). BP officials estimated the spill to be 1,000 barrels a day (Bergin, 2012), but it was later discovered that the rate of spillage was much more significant than what BP officials thought. In fact, the disaster became not only the biggest U.S. oil spill, but also the largest accidental marine oil release in the history of the petroleum industry. As such, it also became a major test for crisis public relations.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

British Petroleum (BP), a multinational gas company, was founded in 1909 as Anglo-Persian Oil Company and it became BP in 1954. Over time, the company set up oil rigs around the world, and grew exponentially due to different mergers. In the 1980s, the British government sold off its own stake of the company and BP started acquiring a sizable presence in the American market through the 1980s and 1990s. Now, it is one of the 6 major oil and gas company in the world. As of December 2016, BP employed over 74,500 people in 72 countries, produced around 3.3 million barrels of oil per day and its sales and other revenues reached \$183 billion. The company also manufactures and markets fuels and raw materials used in thousands of everyday products, from mobile phones to food packaging (BP at a glance, 2017).

BP's reputation in the U.S. was hurt by a series of incidents that occurred through the 2000's. According to *ProPublica*, in 2005 an explosion at BP's Texas City refinery killed 15 workers (White, 2010). Regulators said the accident's main reason was cost cutting. The following year BP paid a \$12 million fine for failing to repair a pipeline that caused an oil spill in Prudhoe Bay. This repair had been warned about and needed since 2002. Five years later, BP was accused of manipulating the market price of propane and the company agreed to pay a \$300 million fine (White, 2010).

Initially, the 2010 Deepwater Horizon accident was not a very important news story to the media because the leakage was not perceived to be significant. Ali Velshi, a *CNN* reporter, said that about 1,750 barrels of oil go into the ocean on a daily basis and the leakage was normal (Bergin, 2012). However, scientists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) calculated the flow rate to be between 5,000-10,000 barrels per day, and the leak was not sealed for almost three months (Bergin, 2012). As a result, a week after the incident the media coverage got more intensive and critical and public opinion got worse. The disaster soon was everywhere on the news, in television shows, YouTube videos, social media, and others.

Historical Context

The Exxon-Valdez oil spill is the only comparable U.S. offshore incident. This similar but smaller-scaled incident happened in 1989 in Prince William Sound, Alaska. An oil tanker bound for Long Beach, California, struck Prince William Sound's Bligh Reef and spilled 260,000 to 750,000 barrels of crude oil. This spill was the largest one in U.S. waters until the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, in terms of volume released. In its first month, BP's oil spill dropped 4.2 million barrels (equal to 30 million gallons) of oil into the Gulf, many times the amount of the Exxon-Valdez oil spill. Most of BP's crisis public relations activities were inspired from the Exxon-Valdez oil spill case (Bergin, 2012).

Economic Context

The Deepwater Horizon disaster crashed the Gulf Coast economy with impacts on marine wildlife, fishing, and tourism. According to the *Moody's Analytics*' research, Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas were affected by the disaster. The two most impacted states were Louisiana for its heavy dependence on fishing and oil extraction and Florida for its reliance on tourism (Di

Natale, 2010). Three years after the oil spill, Drue Banta Winters, attorney with the Louisiana governor's office, noted that more than 1,700 sea turtles were found stranded between May 2010 and November 2012, compared to an average 240 stranded sea turtles annually. There were also 930 cetaceans — mostly bottle nosed dolphins and some whales — stranded in the Gulf between February 2010 and April 2013, including 440 in Louisiana. The historical average is 20 strandings a year (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2016).

There was a great economic loss for British Petroleum. Ten days after the spill, some BP-branded gas stations reported sales declines of 10 to 40 percent from Florida to Illinois (Weber, 2010). According to *BBC News*, in 2010 BP suffered a revenue decline \$4.9 billion, which was BP's first annual downturn since 1992 (BP reports \$4.9bn annual loss, 2011). Additionally, the company's share price decreased considerably after the oil release. For instance, on April 20, 2010, the share price was at \$655.40 but on June 29 it went down to \$298 (BP oil spill: An interactive timeline, 2013). Furthermore, after a long legal battle, a federal judge in New Orleans approved an agreement between BP and the Justice Department for the company to plead guilty to 14 criminal charges and pay \$4 billion criminal settlement (Krauss, 2013). Additionally, as of December 2012, BP had spent more than \$14 billion on their response activities such as the "Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Trust" (BP's website).

Health Consequences

Six years after the oil spill, Gulf residents were still suffering from migraines, skin rashes, bloody diarrhea, bouts of pneumonia, nausea, seizures, muscle cramps, profound depression and anxiety, severe mental fuzziness, and even blackouts. In addition to the oil spill, BP officials released 1.8 million gallons of Corexit, a chemical dispersant used to break up the oil, into the Gulf before the well was sealed. Government scientists expressed concern about the health consequences of mixing such large quantities of dispersants into millions of barrels of sweet crude. Occupational health experts now believe it created a toxic mix that sickened thousands of locals — including some of the 47,000 people who worked in some capacity on BP's cleanup operations — crippling them with chemically-induced illnesses that doctors were unable to treat (Marsa, 2016).

Michael Robichaux, an ear, nose, and throat specialist in south Louisiana and a former state senator, pointed out that every patient will be ill for the remainder of his/her life as the result of exposure to chemicals involved in the Deepwater Horizon tragedy. Many of the ailments plaguing workers and residents in the Gulf region mirror what has been seen after previous spills, such as that of the Exxon Valdez, where many workers claimed brain damage due to exposure to the neurotoxins in the oil. Others suffered from infertility, endocrine disorders, heart damage, chronic respiratory illness, premature aging, a decline in cognitive function, long-term depression, and nerve damage, according to numerous studies (Marsa, 2016).

Michael Harbut, a professor at Michigan State University and an environmental and occupational health expert who served as a consultant for the plaintiffs on the medical class-action suit filed against BP said, "Exposure to organic solvents causes the same intellectual effect as lead poisoning." He added, "We'll see chronic adverse health effects, including liver and kidney disease, birth defects, and developmental disorders. Over time, we'll see a bump in certain cancers

that are related to industrial solvents, such as leukemia, lymphomas, and lung and skin cancers” (quoted in Marsa, 2016).

In 2012, BP agreed to a complex class-action \$7.8 billion medical settlement that would compensate victims up to \$60,700 per person and allowed people to file further claims if they developed more serious problems. More than 37,500 victims have filed claims, according to the latest figures from the claims administrator (Marsa, 2016).

Ultimate Cost

In October 2015, BP agreed to a \$20 billion settlement with the U.S. Justice Departments, more than five years after the disaster stained more than 1,300 miles of the Gulf of Mexico’s coastline. The deal involved a massive restoration effort for plant and wildlife habitats that were damaged when 3 million barrels of oil spewed into the Gulf. The deal also included a \$5.5 billion civil penalty and \$7.1 billion in claims under the Oil Pollution Act. The company sold numerous assets to cover the bill (Bomey, 2016).

On July 14, 2016, BP claimed that the estimated cost of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill hit \$62 billion. This cost includes all of the settlements and lawsuits from individuals, lawsuits from cities and states, federal lawsuits, and civil penalties and cleanup costs (Cousins, 2016). It is difficult to determine the final cost of the disaster, but some newspapers, such as *The Telegraph* in London, earlier explained that subsequent claims could push the total bill for over \$90 billion (Gosden, 2013). In addition, *The Washington Post* reported that BP lost one third of its market size as a result of the spill, which was about \$180 billion before the disaster (Cousins, 2016).

THE CAMPAIGN

Nelson (1988, p. 372) presciently warned that “Those in the private sector who lack a commitment to applying strategic planning to involve themselves in shaping issues may find themselves in unmarked and dangerous public policy territory, groping blindly into the future.” The BP issues management campaign started as soon as the CEO, Tony Hayward, received a voicemail early in the morning of April 21, 2010 in London informing him that an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon rig occurred at 10 p.m., April 20, 2010, CDT, in the Gulf of Mexico (Bergin, 2012). Hayward conveyed a team of his top executives and his head of press Andrew Gowers. BP issued its first press release in the late morning of April 21, 2010, less than 12 hours after the incident. The press release was short (171 words) and titled “BP Offers Full Support to Transocean After Drilling Rig Fire.” This was an indication that BP would not take a full responsibility and it would blame Transocean for the oil spill (Bergin, 2012).

Reasons for Conducting the Campaign

British Petroleum had various reasons for conducting the campaign (see Valvi & Fragkos, 2013; Pollitt, 2014). First, the accident killed 11 crewmen and the company needed to create a two-way communication with their families. Second, BP wanted to keep the general public and media aware of its efforts to contain and close the leak. Third, BP wanted to reassure the Gulf coast states residents and offer them some solutions for re-launching tourism and fishing activities. Fourth,

and most importantly, BP attempted to restore its image. According to a *Washington Post-ABC News* poll conducted in June 2010, about 81 percent of the people surveyed gave low marks to BP for its response (Cohen, 2010).

Target Publics

BP conducted various kinds of public relations activities to restore its reputation but it did not come up with a list of specific target publics. However, in scrutinizing these activities we concluded that the company actively attempted to reach out to the following groups and organizations:

Media. The size of the disaster, the people killed and BP's stained reputation during the 2000's created an important and critical media coverage. According to a Pew Research Center study on the website "Journalism.org", the story dominated mainstream news media for 100 days after the explosion, accounting for 22% of the "news hole" (Pew Research Center, August 25, 2010). The media played a significant role in: (a) shaping public opinion and showing concern for the environmental disaster and (b) informing various publics about BP's different efforts to contain the leak and create the claim fund.

The Gulf Coast states and residents. BP's main target publics were the Gulf Coast states and their residents because of their serious concern with the environmental consequences. The oil was all over the Gulf Coast's beaches, destroying wildlife, fishing and tourism.

The general public. The general public consisted of people in the U.S. and around the world who followed the news about the environmental disaster.

The American government. BP had multiple federal and state lawsuits for criminal charges, environmental damages, injuries and health risks from cleanups. Public opinion polls and contemporary media reports were generally critical of the way President Barak Obama and the federal government handled the disaster.

Clients and BP shareholders. The oil spill caused BP's sales to go down 40% and the stock to lose about half its value.

Environmentalists. They were devastated by the disaster which was considered the largest accidental marine oil spill in the history of the petroleum industry. The leakage into the Gulf of Mexico caused widespread kill-off of marine wildlife and other damage requiring massive restoration efforts (Gaskill, 2015; Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, 2017).

Impact Objectives

According to one of the standard public relations texts, a key way to understand campaigns involves evaluating its objectives. *Impact objectives* consist of informational, attitudinal, and behavioral criteria because they represent specific, intended effects of public relations programs on their targeted publics. *Output objectives* refer to media techniques and tactics that the organization uses (Hayes, Hendrix, & Kumar, 2013, pp. 24-27). In this case, BP did not establish

specific, measurable and time-bound objectives. However, in our review of the published literature we noted the company attempted to pursue the following objectives:

Informational

1. To create public awareness of the different steps that BP was taking to fix the oil spill.
2. To inform the general public about claim funds available for victims of the Deepwater Horizon disaster.
3. To educate the target publics about the Gulf of Mexico restoration program.

Attitudinal

1. To reverse negative attitudes towards BP.
2. To convince the general public that it will not happen again.
3. To restore confidence that BP is a responsible company.

Behavioral

1. To persuade BP's former customers to buy BP products.
2. To keep shareholders investing their money in BP.

Output Objectives

1. To send press releases to major news agencies to update the media on BP's efforts such as containing the leak and cleaning up the Gulf of Mexico.
2. To set up a website to provide information on the accident.
3. To conduct multiple news conferences updating the media on the company's activities.
4. To grant one-on-one journalist interviews.
5. To establish a hotline answering calls from the press and to the public.
6. To create multiple YouTube campaigns about BP's continuing efforts at restoration such as "BP Gulf Coast Update: Our Ongoing Commitment."
7. To launch another website called the "Deepwater Horizon Joint Information Center." In the first 60 days, the site received more than 100 million hits. It allowed visitors to receive emails and text messages and to ask questions or post comments to Unified Command using automated forms.

Programming

Public relations models. After reviewing decades of public relations efforts, Grunig and Hunt (1984, pp. 13-46) developed four major models to describe how practitioners influence opinion: (1) the press agent/publicity model, (2) the public information model, (3) the two-way asymmetric model, and (4) the two-way symmetric model. These models are now widely accepted in terms of analyzing programs, strategies, and tactics.

In the press agent/publicity model, practitioners promote an organization's point of view, often through incomplete, distorted, or half true information. The public information model is applicable when the purpose is the dissemination of information, not necessarily with a persuasive intent. Communicators opting for the two-way asymmetric model have a function more like that of the press agent/publicist, although their purpose can best be described as scientific persuasion. They

use what is known from social science theory and research about attitudes and behavior to persuade publics to accept the organization's point of view and to behave in a way that supports the organization. In the two-way symmetric model, practitioners serve as mediators between organizations and their publics. Their goal is to create and maintain mutual understanding between organizations and their publics. These practitioners, too, may use social science theory and methods, but they usually use theories of communication rather than theories of persuasion for planning and evaluation of public relations.

The application of these models is controversial, particularly in crisis situations. As Nelson & Heath (1986, p. 20) point out, "No single clearcut public interest standard exists....Certainly the use of organizational resources and scientifically targeting audiences is crucial to understanding issues communication. No model of issues communications should treat it as merely a matter of disagreement or misunderstanding. At heart it centers on a power struggle between corporate interests and public interests as interpreted by social media agitators."

In the Deepwater Horizon case, BP used a combination of two public relations models: the press agency publicity model and the two-way asymmetric model. Early in the campaign, company officials claimed that spill was 1,000 barrels a day while scientists estimated the spill to be between 5,000 to 10,000 barrels a day. Thus, the disseminated information was either distorted or incomplete. Furthermore, BP did not want to take a full responsibility for the disaster. Instead, it blamed Transocean for the spill. BP also tried to manipulate the public by buying some search phrases on search engines such as *Google* or *Yahoo*, so the first match people see is BP's website and not news or protest sites.

At some stages of the campaign, BP appeared to have used the two-way asymmetric model. The company tried to get as much feedback as possible to establish interactive websites, hold press conferences, use social media, and respond to claim funds and hotline. Nevertheless, the information was imbalanced in favor of the organization. For example, BP's executives seemed to attempt to persuade the various publics described above that everything was under control even though it wasn't.

Reactive approach. BP was not prepared to deal with such a large disaster. It had a handbook outlining the main steps to follow in case of a crisis, but it did not seem to help. The company also had a 583-page emergency-response strategy report prepared prior to the disaster and approved by the government, but it was neither helpful nor applicable for the Deepwater Horizon case. The report did not have any procedures to address a deep-sea spill such as this one. However, paradoxically the report had one source link to a Japanese website. BP seemed to have pursued the Exxon-Valdez oil spill's public relations approach and learned from some of their mistakes. For instance, like Exxon-Valdez, BP realized that its CEO had to fly on the site of the disaster to emphasize the company's concern. BP also hired different public relations firms to handle the crisis, recognizing after a few weeks that the company's public relations department was not specialized in crises.

Theme

The main theme, introduced in most of BP's advertisements, was: "We will get it done. We will make it right."

Messages

The following messages were drawn from our review of BP's advertisements, press conferences, and websites.

- BP accepts responsibility for the cleanups.
- BP is concerned about the harm it caused to people and to the environment.
- BP is committed to restore the environment in the Gulf of Mexico.
- BP is obligated to help the Gulf communities.

Actions

According to BP's website, most of the company's actions were to clean up the beaches with assessment technique teams composed of scientific experts, along with federal and Gulf state representatives. BP used a variety of techniques (such as skimmers, controlled in situ burning, and dispersants) in attempting to prevent oil from reaching the shores. The company ended its cleanup of the oil spill in three Gulf Coast states in June 2013 and spent an additional year on finishing the cleanup in Louisiana because it was the most polluted state after the accident. According to its website, BP paid \$23 billion in claims and cleanup efforts.

Use of Controlled Media

BP used a wide range of media but it relied heavily on controlled media to convey messages to its targeted publics. The following is a summary of the main controlled media:

- Announcements on television apologizing and highlighting BP's commitment to the Gulf and its coastline.
- Full-page advertisements in major newspapers (*Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *USA Today*).
- Funds to the Gulf states to pay for tourism advertisements.
- Creation of a website to provide information about the accident and to update the publics on the company's efforts.
- Hotline to answer the media's and general public's questions.
- Updates via emails and text messages to those who signed up for a series of regular website updates.
- *Twitter* to keep people who wanted instantaneous information on BP's current commitment to the Gulf (@BP_America).
- *Facebook* pages ("Updates from the Gulf" and "Voices from the Gulf") to offer updates on the cleanup and to promote tourism in the Gulf.
- *Flickr* (image-hosting website) ("BP America Photostream") to update pictures from the company covering the cleanup, community outreach, wildlife rescue and beach restoration in and along the Gulf.

- Creation of *YouTube* video series about BP ongoing commitment to the Gulf: “BP Gulf Coast Update: Our Ongoing Commitment.”

Use of Uncontrolled Media

BP also used the following uncontrolled media:

- Multiple news releases to various media.
- CEO’s interviews with journalists.
- News conferences.

Effective Use of Communication Principles

Two-way communication. BP focused heavily on a two-way interaction using emails, telephone, press conferences, and websites. In addition, the company relied on social media to allow the public respond and offer comments. The BP’s website gave the public an opportunity to ask questions or to post comments to *Unified Command* using automated forms (“Gulf Spill Communications”).

Salient information. BP’s advertisements in newspapers and magazines and commercials on television contained salient information about the cleanups, the amount of money paid to restore the economy, clean the environment, and handle the claim funds.

Verbal cues. The language was clear and appropriate and messages were in U.S. (rather than U.K.) English spelling.

Strengths of the Campaign

BP cleaned the Gulf effectively and helped the community. According to BP’s website, the company paid \$23 billion in claims and cleanup efforts. In June 2013, BP ended the oil spill cleanup in three Gulf states (Chappell, 2013).

BP actively employed the following social media:

- ***Twitter: @America.*** The company managed to send a minimum of one update per day to keep its followers posted on BP’s commitment to the Gulf and its work towards secure energy. It was a very effective way to keep posted the general public. It was also successful, because BP answered multiple questions via *Twitter*.
- ***Facebook: BP*** had two different pages on *Facebook*. The first one was called “Updates from the Gulf” and served to give quick updates on the oil spill cleanups and responses. The second page was called “BP America—Voices from the Gulf” and it was used to promote the different activities featured in the Gulf of Mexico such as restaurants, vacation spots, and stories from the Gulf Coast residents. Currently, BP has a *Facebook* page called “BP America.” The page informs the public about the company’s commitment to America’s energy, security and economy.
- BP also had a *Flickr* account called “BP America Photostream,” now called “BP_image.” The company posts different photos and covers different subjects such as the cleanup, community outreach, claims, beaches, and wildlife.

- BP has its *YouTube* channel called “BP, plc.” In this channel, the viewer can pick one of the different subjects: “Commitment to America,” “The Energy Future” or “BP in the Community.” In 2010, the channel featured “BP Gulf Coast Update: Our Ongoing Commitment” and some advertisements for tourism in the Gulf.

BP reacted promptly. The company issued a news release 12 hours after the incident even though it is based in England. The CEO flew quickly to the site of the disaster publicly show BP’s commitment and concern.

BP strove to be open and listen to the public. After Tony Hayward’s resignation on July 27, 2013, the new CEO Robert Dudley attempted to make BP more transparent and adapted to the American public.

Weaknesses of the Campaign

All public relations models and lists of good practices for business emphasize the need for strategic planning, open and truthful communication, and being upfront about corporate responsibility. In addition, being sensitive to peoples’ needs as individuals as well as groups has become increasingly important when dealing with international issues. Unfortunately, BP did not fully embrace these best practices in the Deepwater Horizon aftermath. For example:

BP didn’t have a crisis plan. Though the company had a crisis handbook and an emergency-response strategy report, the board of executives did not have a crisis plan for dealing with this kind of disaster and they were not prepared (BP: Lessons in crisis public relations, 2010).

BP broke the key rule of being transparent and honest. At the beginning of the campaign, BP officials estimated the spill to be 1,000 barrels a day, but other scientists estimated it to be between 5,000 to 10,000 barrels a day. While it is hard to determine whether BP knew that the spill was more than 1,000 barrels, the public interpreted the estimation as a lie.

BP’s denial of responsibilities at the beginning. In its first news release titled “Gulf of Mexico – Transocean Drilling Incident,” the company seemed to want to blame Transocean and deny its own responsibility. The CEO Tony Hayward told the BBC, “This was not our accident ... This was not our drilling rig. This was not our equipment. It was not our people, our systems or our processes. This was Transocean’s rig. Their systems. Their people. Their equipment” (Rowell, 2010).

BP lost the public trust because of its initial response. It was only after pressure from the government that the board of executives decided to be responsible.

Cultural differences hampered the communication processes. Hayward did not know how to effectively speak to the American public and how to appropriately deal with the American media. Americans were unmoved by images of Hayward on TV, especially when he was quoting Churchill with his British accent. The fact that the company appeared as “British Petroleum” multiple times in the press played on Americans’ sense to be attacked from outside (Bergin, 2012, chapter 7).

Selection of an inappropriate public relations firm. Hayward picked a British-based public relations company (“Brunswick Group”) which did not specialize in crisis communication. The firm had excellent media connections in England, but not as many in the U.S. despite maintaining a Washington, DC office.

The general public believed BP wanted to manipulate them. The company bought terms such as “oil spill” on *Google* and other search engines to direct Internet users to BP’s website, rather than protest websites. The public interpreted the move as dishonest (Bergin, 2012, chapter 7).

CEO’s decision to manage responses. Hayward decided to deal with the responses by himself without seeking advice from a public relations specialist, and as a result, he committed many blunders. He did a series of interviews in the U.K. in which he outlined his true feelings. For instance:

- He told *SkyNews*: “Everything we can see at the moment suggests that the overall environmental impact will be very, very modest” (BP chief predicts, 2010).
- He said to *The Guardian*: “The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume” (Webb, 2010).

However, Hayward announced on U.S. television networks: “I would like my life back” (Snyder, 2010).

BP disabled feedback for its social media campaign. At the beginning of the campaign and until the middle of June, on *Facebook*, the company only accepted comments from people who “liked” BP’s page. Likewise, the comments were disabled on the company’s *YouTube* channel (Seitz-Wald, 2013). This suggests that the company did not want to listen to the public and consider customers’ feedback.

Too few employees were in charge of the hotline. Only four employees worked at the hotline answering questions from the public and media, not enough manpower at the beginning of the campaign (Bergin, 2012).

THE OUTCOME

The published research suggests that BP’s efforts were not successful. Two months after the incident, an *ABC News/Washington Post* poll reported that three-quarters of the surveyed residents who live along the Gulf claimed that the spill hurt their area’s economy and 55% of the respondents said that the incident had a strong negative impact on their lives (Langer, 2010).

Three years after the oil spill, Americans still had unfavorable views of the company. *Huffington Post* conducted a study to determine if BP’s advertising messages helped explaining the company’s cleanup efforts. The study revealed that 43% of the respondents had an unfavorable view of the multinational oil and gas company, and 31% had a favorable view. In addition, 43% of the surveyed Americans said BP did an excellent to good job at cleaning the Gulf oil spill, compared to 41% who claimed that BP did only a fair or poor job. More specifically, 28% of the participants said that they developed more favorable opinions of BP after being exposed to the company’s ads, and 11% mentioned that their opinions had become less favorable. However, the vast majority

(59%) claimed that the ads did not change their views of BP at all. The study concluded that the Deepwater Horizon was a huge public relations debacle for BP and it was not clear whether the \$100 million spent on advertisements helped BP's image (Swanson, 2013).

WHAT WOULD WE HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

We admit that crisis communication management is the most challenging aspect of public relations practices. A coauthor of this study has published several articles on crisis communication in the last 30 years. He concluded that crisis plans differ from situation to situation and from organization to organization. Our purpose here is not offer general guidelines. Rather, we would like to outline how we would have handled the situation had we been assigned the task of managing various aspects of the oil spill crisis.

- Though it was not predictable to face such a big disaster, we would have tried to be prepared with a proactive crisis plan, inspired on other similar cases.
- We would have taken full responsibilities instead of putting the blame on Transocean.
- We would have apologized at the beginning of the crisis to minimize the public's negative opinions.
- We would have conducted various public opinion surveys to probe into the public opinion and make adjustments accordingly.
- We would have asked the CEO to leave the communication efforts to a public relations specialist. While it was a good idea for the CEO to take charges at the beginning of the disaster, we believe he did not know how to deal with the American public. Cultural differences have created discomfort. An American public relations practitioner would have been more qualified to answer the public and media questions.
- We would have arranged a brief media-training refresher course for the CEO to rehearse on delivering key messages if he insisted on continuing the communication efforts.
- We cannot be sure whether BP voluntarily lied about the leak. However, had the company not been able to measure the significance of the spill, it would have been more appropriate for its officials to delay the estimation or seek more assistance from other scientists.
- We would have definitely hired an American-based firm with expertise in crisis communication instead of a British public relations company as the lead in coordinating BP's response to stakeholders. There was a need to have people "on the ground" who understood cultural differences to effectively communicate on behalf of BP.

CONCLUSION

BP has suffered major reputation damage and its knock-on effects: the chief executive resigned, the company was restructured in some way, and the real commercial and financial costs were so high. A main question arises from this case is how can an international oil company, with much experience of crisis management, get the communication and stakeholder relations aspects of responding to a major physical incident so wrong? The obvious answer is poor preparedness. Nowadays issues can snowball quickly. Media and technology have changed. Incidents can be reported on news channels 24 hours a day and social media conversations start even before the affected organization has chance to meet and respond to the crisis.

Managing risks to reputation places heavy strain on the communication aspect. Everything the organization says and does in response to the crisis is judged by those who determine reputation and then make choices accordingly. The 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill is one of the most financially and reputationally destructive corporate crisis in history. Andrew Griffin, a highly-recognized specialist in strategic crisis management and corporate reputation management, sums the incident as follows: “BP’s Deepwater Horizon crisis will be remembered for many things: the Chief Executive’s gaffes; the sheer volume of the spill and the time it took to stem it; the performances at the Congressional hearing; the social media response; the sudden and politically expedient re-emergence of ‘British Petroleum’ (rather than BP) as a brand; the size of the fines. The crisis lessons list goes on and on and will overshadow the extraordinary feats of engineering that eventually saw the operational problem solved” (Griffin, 2014, pp. 173-174).

Because it was the biggest oil spill in the U.S. history, we cannot safely claim that any company would have been able to deal flawlessly with the incident. The time zone differences, the cultural variations, and the damage extent have to be considered in this case. It is particularly difficult to save the company’s reputation after such a big disaster. We speculate, however, that BP’s reputation can be repaired if the company makes serious public relations efforts to reestablish and maintain strong relationships with all concerned publics by genuinely addressing their needs. The publics probably need more time to adjust to new conditions created by the disaster.

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