



Responding to Accusations of Corporate Wrongdoing:

How Technical Communicators Can Help

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Imagine walking into work to discover that your company is in the middle of a crisis. Perhaps a product is being blamed for injuring a customer or some employees have been caught on video misbehaving. Your company's name is printed in bold black-and-white headlines atop newspapers and floats to the top of the blogosphere as the negative story spirals out of control.

What should you do in this situation? Contact your public relations or communications department and offer your services because they're going to need your help—even if they don't realize it yet.

Why Should You Get Involved?

In today's challenging economic times, technical communicators need to find new ways to demonstrate their value to their companies (see Hannah Kirk's article in the July/August 2009 *Intercom*). More importantly, internal departments need your services in handling accusations in today's online environment.

Traditionally, corporate responses to accusations of wrongdoing have been relegated to the fields of communication under the title of "crisis management" or the ancient Greek term *apologia* (which is defined as a defense or justification of one's actions). That's because when companies, politicians, or celebrities faced accusations in the past, they either made a speech, gave an interview to the media, or printed an ad to defend themselves or apologize.

Unfortunately, that mentality has stuck with us today. In looking at 91 academic articles printed over the past 40 years, the types of *apologia* that have been studied aren't exactly surprising. More than 80 percent fell into the categories of speech or traditional media. Those categories naturally lend themselves to speech communication and mass communications—as opposed to fields like technical communication. This is a problem for two reasons:

1. It needlessly limits the number of professionals who are exposed to this type of communication. A PR professional is probably well versed in crisis management and *apologia* (or image restoration) strategies, while a technical communicator has likely received little to no training or education in this area.
2. The importance of new media, as well

as business and technical documents, is often overlooked. New media is already a crucial channel of delivery, and a growing number of technical communicators are being asked to contribute their skills to assist their employers' responses to accusations.

Let's look at a couple of recent examples to better understand what we're talking about.

Mattel: When Toys Become Hazardous

In 2007, Mattel, the largest manufacturer of children's toys, issued a voluntary recall of several toy lines due to small digestible magnets and indications of lead-based paint. Although the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission issues official recall notices, Mattel went several steps beyond what was required:

1. The company posted product images and other important recall information on its corporate website.
2. The company immediately implemented a new "three-stage safety check" that was described in detail to consumers online.
3. The company posted a video on its website featuring chairman and CEO Robert Eckert describing the problem to consumers, offering an apology, and discussing the company's corrective action.



Domino's Pizza: When Employees Behave Badly

Domino's Pizza offers a more recent example of today's interactive apology. By now, most of the hype has died down regarding the public apology on YouTube by Domino's USA President Patrick Doyle. The apology was posted after two former employees posted a video on YouTube showing themselves "appearing inappropriately" with food. What many people—even in the areas of crisis management and new media—may not realize is the extent of this social media apology.

1. Not only was the president's apology posted on YouTube, but it was also posted on a company webpage with the heading "Domino's Customer Care."
2. Domino's used its Facebook page to link to the video and issue bolstering statements such as, "We care about our customers" and, "Domino's Pizza does great things for your community."
3. The company set up a Twitter account to connect with customers, fans, and interested parties. As one of the first posts explained, "Dominos Pizza just launched @dpzinfo as the Official Corporate Info page. We r answering the call by listening 2 our customers." In the days that followed, the Twitter account was used to address concerns with statements such as, "This was one time at one store in the U.S. We have thousands around the world who want you to know it won't happen where you are" and, "This was an isolated incident at one store and we're taking it VERY serious. We're doing all we can to regain your trust."

After the initial negative publicity, the video's buzz faded and customer comments began sounding positive again. In an interview, Tim McIntyre (Domino's vice president of communications) attributed the quick turnaround and positive reaction to the company's direct use of social networks. "Are we on the mend? It's too early to tell," McIntyre said. "Would we do it again? Yes. It

The image shows a screenshot of the Mattel Voluntary Safety Recall Facts webpage. At the top, there is a red banner with the Mattel logo and the text "VOLUNTARY SAFETY RECALL FACTS". Below this, there are links for "back to mattel.com", "customer service", and "international consumers". The main heading is "because your children are our children, too". Below this, there is a section titled "MESSAGE FROM CHAIRMAN & CEO" featuring a video player showing a man in a suit speaking. Below the video, there is a section titled "RECALL DETAILS & TOY LISTINGS" with a sub-heading "Products Affected By Lead Paint" and a list of products: "Fisher-Price (multiple products)", "CARS® Super Character (2 products)". Below this, there is a section titled "Products Affected By Magnets" and a list of products: "Polly Pocket™ Play Sets (multiple products)", "Batman™ Magna Play Sets (4 products)", "Barbie® and Tinker™ Accessory (1 product)", "Doodle Daycare™ Play Sets (multiple products)", "Shonen Jump's One Piece™ (1 product)".

helped us get the word out. While it did expose more people to the issue, it also said Domino's Pizza is taking this very seriously and that the thing we hold dearest is our customer's trust."

Unfortunate Events, Fortunate Opportunities

Both cases exemplify a transformation in the way companies respond to accusations of wrongdoing. Whether it's a product recall or malicious behavior by employees, companies are launching multi-pronged responses that use the skills and training that technical communicators exemplify. In both cases, we see:

- *skills* such as information architecture, HTML design, Flash and JavaScript coding, video production, technical writing, and new media interactivity.
- *delivery methods* that mirror the media technical communicators already use to communicate product information—including corporate or product websites, downloadable PDFs, online videos, and chat features or discussion threads.

These examples demonstrate the crucial roles that information architects, web designers, and technical writers play in producing, as well as delivering, corporate responses to accusations of wrongdoing. From a technical standpoint, they demonstrate the inclusion of safety information and technical descriptions of product specifications, safety procedures, and corrective actions. Such aspects are within the expertise of technical communicators, regardless of the delivery channel. Unfortunately, there is little information or training available to these professionals regarding apologia. But, as is often the case, the lack of information actually creates an opportunity for proactive technical communicators to take initiative, understand the subject matter, assemble a plan, and position themselves and their department as a valuable resource to the company.

The following sections provide some information to help you respond to accusations. We begin with a brief overview—breaking the subject into three areas that technical communicators already understand: *what to say*, *how to say it*, and *how to deliver it*.

What to Say

During a crisis, there are any number of things you can say. But knowing what you *should* say is entirely different. Scholars have identified a variety of strategies that people and corporations use when facing allegations of wrongdoing. While those theories are helpful in examining a situation in hindsight, most aren't helpful in determining what you should say when you're in the middle of an unfolding controversy. In fact, there are only a few theories that are predictive in nature, and one of the best is W. Timothy Coombs's book, *Ongoing Crisis Communication*.

Coombs outlines a continuum for evaluating the specific situation you face and then selecting the appropriate response. Here's the gist of it: Say your company faces rumors of wrongdoing. According to Coombs, your level of responsibility is low, since rumors constitute unfounded statements or gossip. In that case, the continuum indicates that the appropriate response would be to attack the accuser, calling his or her information and motives into question.

This is just one example, but it demonstrates how technical communicators can get up to speed on the available major communication strategies and when they should be used. In the end, your company's strategy will likely be decided by the communications or PR department with input from the executive team. But by having a general understanding of the options under discussion, you can participate in the conversation and position yourself as a knowledgeable resource.

How to Say It

Another important aspect in managing a crisis is balancing the needs of people who feel they've been wronged with the desire of your company to alleviate the situation responsibly. Here we're talking about ethics—not in terms of black-and-white, right or wrong, but in terms of complex decisions that impact a variety of stakeholders, including victims, stockholders, and employees. Often these moral obligations seem to compete with each other.

To help balance such issues, Keith Michael Hearit's book *Crisis Manage-*

ment by Apologia breaks apologia into two aspects—the *manner* and the *content*. In terms of the *manner*, Hearit states that an ethical apologia is truthful, sincere, timely, and voluntary. In terms of the *content*, it should acknowledge wrongdoing, accept responsibility, express regret, identify with the victims, ask for forgiveness, seek reconciliation, disclose relevant information, provide an explanation that addresses the victims' questions and concerns, and offer corrective actions and compensation.

As in the case of choosing an apologia strategy, the manner and content will likely be negotiated between the executive team and the PR director. But those elements will then be carried out in web text, online videos, downloadable documents, micro-blog posts, and so on. In other words, *how to say it* isn't something that's decided in a meeting and forgotten; it's continually reflected in every small and large project. Understanding what's involved in terms of manner and content will help you participate in the initial discussion and carry out the decision, knowing what should (and should not) be included in your company's response to an allegation—whether you're drafting an FAQ for the website or filming a statement from your CEO to be viewed on the Internet.

How to Deliver It

This is the area where technical communicators can offer the most value and immediate impact. Almost daily, a new situation arises in which a company is forced to acknowledge, justify, or apologize for some element of wrongdoing. Sometimes they're prominent cases that flood the headlines with stories of malicious wrongdoing. But other times, these cases involve oversights or mistakes. Product recalls are the perfect example.

Between the Food and Drug Administration and the Consumer Product Safety Commission, a number of product recalls are released each week. Many of those involve minor safety issues that are easily addressed. But even then, corporations invest resources into delivering the recall information, educating consumers on how to address the problem, and, in many cases, weaving in subtle apologia

statements that help maintain a positive corporate image. That means technical communicators may be asked to help produce apologetics-related web text, product safety releases, and online videos instructing how to address a safety issue.

Here are just a few examples of the positions that may be impacted and how the employees can contribute.

Writers. Whether your company is putting together product recall information, an FAQ webpage, or information to be delivered through social networking sites, technical writers are natural team members to assist—especially if you work in a high-tech industry or there is important safety information that needs to be communicated clearly.

Information Designers. Who knows better how to manage the flow of information? When you throw in the multipronged approach and the multiple stakeholders that will need to be addressed, it's hard to imagine a corporate apologetics strategy not including an information designer.

Web Programmers. Just about everything a company does today involves electronic communications. And apologetics is no different. In many cases, the overall response will be more complex than updating a static webpage or entering a few paragraphs into a content management system. Programmers need to design and build complex webpages and emails that weave together downloadable items, videos, Flash presentations, interactive pages, and so on. Equally important will be the need for speed. The minute the story breaks, your PR department must begin responding. There's no time to train someone on the software or coding, so programmers can expect to be pulled in early and asked to produce projects immediately.

Video Production. Video is becoming increasingly popular in apologetics. Sometimes it takes the form of a CEO apologizing for the incident. In other cases, it takes a subtler role, such as a video showing consumers how to find out if their product is included in a recall and how to submit the proper documentation to take part. Regardless of what strategy your company uses, be prepared to chip in. And if you're not explicitly recruited,

offer your services anyway; someone may not have thought about how video can be used as part of the overall strategy.

Customer Service. This is a crucial area for communicating what happened and how your company is responding. If you already have discussion forums, toll-free numbers, or FAQ pages on your website, consumers will flood those resources first. Be proactive and immediately make a plan to integrate the corporate message into your current customer service resources. You may even want to consider launching additional valuable services, such as a blog or a Twitter account.

Simple Steps to Start Preparing

Regardless of the title or job description, technical communicators need to be up to speed on *what to say*, *how to say it*, and *how to deliver it*. And, they need to know it before they need to employ it.

Technical communicators can start by brushing up on crisis communication and apologetics theory. The two books described earlier are good starting points, as is William Benoit's *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies*. Pay close attention to news that involves corporate wrongdoing. When you see situations in which companies are facing accusations, analyze their responses. What do their websites look like and say? Is there a page devoted to the issue or is it buried somewhere? How are they using social media? Use the information in previous sections to analyze the language used and take notes for future reference.


Additionally, evaluate your skills as an individual or the skill set of your department to determine how and where you can help. As Diana Ost described in her May 2009 *Intercom* article, "Mining for Career Gold," technical communicators already have many of the skills and expertise that other departments need. Now's the time to put those skills and experiences on paper and begin the discussion of how you can help. You should also evaluate what lines of communication you use for product information—including your corporate website, call centers, social media, and so on. These resources may become crucial lines of communication in a crisis.

Once you've evaluated your own skills and resources, make connections. Create a rough plan of how you can help address potential accusations of wrongdoing in the future. Your PR department has an initial plan of attack; meet with them to discuss your ideas and the resources you can offer to their overall plan.

Also consider networking with academics who study apologetics or crisis management. Exchange emails about recent conversations, share ideas that you're pursuing, participate in discussions in organizations like STC, discuss opportunities to present best practices at a conference, or write white papers. Make a name for yourself outside of your company to help increase your value internally.

Finally, we all need to educate the next generation of technical communicators in crisis communications, beginning with academics and industry professionals who can include case studies in textbooks and course work. For example, professors of technical communication can integrate real product recall situations or accusations of wrongdoing into the classroom and assign student groups to discuss and analyze the problems and solutions examined in this article.

By positioning real-world scenarios in such a way, professors can help lead discussions not only about tools, software, and delivery methods that can be used, but also about the rhetorical goals behind such responses.

After all, technical communicators of today and tomorrow never know what challenges or accusations their companies will face when they walk into work each morning. 

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