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Society for Risk Analysis

Cultural Factors Figure Largely in Food Safety Crisis Communication

A risk communication study reveals how cultural differences trigger varying responses to individual versus company blame in crisis messages.

Washington, DC – Companies faced with food tampering need to make sure they remain sensitive to their customers’ cultural views before trying to assign blame when responding according to a new study. Following a crisis such as an intentional food contamination, a food company is less likely to experience severe economic consequences if its public message communicates the actual damage, confirms containment of the contamination, and is sensitive to varied cultural interpretations of blame, according to the research. Food is a natural target for intentional contamination or terrorism and such an act can disrupt a society and its economy. Past food contamination incidents have had major economic and reputational impacts on companies, and communication about the crisis are known to play a vital role in shaping the public’s response and the outcome of the crisis; people are willing to pay more for products they perceive as safe. However, different cultural groups may respond differently to how blame is assigned.

The findings are in an analysis entitled “Predicting Psychological Ripple Effects: The Role of Cultural Identity, In-Group/Out-Group Identification, and Attributions of Blame in Crisis Communication,” co-authored by Deepa Anagondahalli of the University of Maryland and Monique Mitchell Turner of George Washington University. Their research findings are published in the February 2012 issue of the journal Risk Analysis, published by the Society for Risk Analysis.

Risk perception of dramatic events typically occurs quickly, automatically, and under the influence of emotions like anger and fear. The authors looked at how communication about the affiliation of the perpetrator and motives were received based on the cultural identity of the audience. Previous cross-cultural psychology work has highlighted the cognitive differences in individuals, dependent on whether they were raised in what is sometimes called the “holistic” East (e.g., China, Korea, Japan, or India) or the “analytical” West (e.g., United States). To examine consumer responses, the authors recruited two groups—American (n = 149) and immigrant Asian (n = 146). In this study, participants reviewed a news release on food contamination. They were then asked to respond to questions aimed at measuring their attributions of blame for the contamination, trust and anxiety levels related to the food, and intentions for future purchases. The research found no statistical difference in the degree that Asian or American message receivers blamed the company. However, in conjunction with the
attribution communicated in the message, Asian participants blamed the company more and trusted it less if its message included situational/external attribution (e.g., company fires the employee, which serves as crime motivation), whereas Americans expressed distrust when the message included personal/internal attribution (e.g., company points to a “quick to anger” individual with access to the food supply). For the American receiver, a correlation was evident between purchase intention and blame, trust, and anxiety. For Asian message receivers, however, company blame correlated with trust and anxiety, but not with purchase intention. This points to a more complex relationship between blame and related emotions and cognitions for Asians. “Our findings suggest that any kind of attribution, external or internal, has to be carefully handled as different subgroups within the mass media audience will react differently,” according to Turner.

Related to trust, the authors explored the importance of consumer trust in the company’s remediation process versus trust in the company’s image. They found that although purchase intention correlated with trust in the company’s image for Asians, purchase intentions for American consumers correlated significantly only with trust in the process and not in the image. In other words, American receivers desired reassurance that the company was doing everything it could to deal with the crisis, rather than to be reminded of the company’s virtues. This finding emphasizes the organizational need to provide specific details on how it is rectifying the current crisis and to outline its plans for preventing future crises. “Post-crises, organizations are in a hurry to shift or explain the blame away but they should be aware that this effort may have the opposite rather than the desired effect on their audiences if cultural factors are not considered,” according to Anagondahalli.

For some time, crisis communication experts have been advocating the use of culturally sensitive message practices, such as delivery by a prominent individual in the community, heeding the nuances of language, and otherwise taking swift action to protect the consumer and repair the organization’s reputation. The findings from this study provide additional insights into the underlying cognitive processes of two cultures. The authors note that following an intentional food contamination, “a one-size-fits-all message may not be an effective communication strategy.” Asian receivers will focus on situational cues to determine causality, whereas American receivers will focus on the personal characteristics of the perpetrator. Crisis messaging has become more critical as the diversity in the U.S. population and the presence of Western corporations in Asia both increase. The authors suggest future research should explore other message characteristics potentially related to the message receiver’s cultural identity.

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