The intersection of theory and practice: Do crisis communication practitioners apply theoretical guidelines and what (or who) might be stopping them?

Abstract
Twenty-five in-depth interviews with European crisis communication practitioners were conducted in order to examine the gap between crisis communication theory and practice. Over the years crisis communication has grown to be an important research area within public relations. Several studies have resulted in theories and guidelines regarding the effective use of communication in times of organizational crisis. The question remains whether these guidelines are known and understood by practitioners and how they are applied in practice. This study examines the degree to which practitioners are willing to take responsibility for an organizational crisis and self-disclose incriminating information, two important elements in prior research. In addition, we study if a gap between theory and practice might be due to the difficult relation between communication and legal departments. The findings show that practitioners know some of the most important theories in crisis communication, yet consider them hard to apply in practice. Nevertheless, they acknowledge the importance of taking responsibility and self-disclosing crisis information, even though they refrain from using these guidelines until it becomes unavoidable. Finally, regarding the relationship with legal departments, an interesting discrepancy occurs between communication managers of organizations and professionals from PR consulting firms.
1. Introduction

Crisis communication research has offered a number of clear and useful guidelines for practice that often stress the accountability of organizations in crisis (cf. Coombs, 2015). Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007), for instance, indicates that an organization that is blamed for a crisis should communicate crisis response strategies that express acceptance of responsibility. Research on crisis timing strategies similarly stresses the importance of open and responsible communication and shows that organizations should steal thunder (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). That is, they should self-disclose incriminating information instead of trying to conceal it (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). Research illustrates, however, that while offering a full apology might be the most effective crisis response strategy when responsibility attributions are high, the most frequently employed strategies are bolstering and denial (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009). In addition, literature suggests that practitioners acknowledge the value of stealing thunder but rarely self-disclose crises (Kline, Simunich, & Weber, 2009; Ulmer, 2012). As such, there might be a gap between theoretical guidelines and crisis communication practice.

In order to bridge this gap it is crucial to examine to what degree practitioners practice what we preach and why. Literature suggests a number of potential issues that may inhibit organizations from communicating in a manner that is in the best interest of their stakeholders. Some suggest that theory should be communicated more effectively to practitioners (Kim et al., 2009). Others indicate that communication practitioners may very well understand the theoretical guidelines, but they are simply unable to put them into practice. Management often fears litigation when thunder is stolen or when apologies are offered (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In addition, organizational culture and the level of autonomy of communication practitioners may determine whether or not organizations communicate openly and honestly in
times of crisis (Marra, 1998). In order to examine if and how crisis communication theory is put into practice, in-depth interviews were conducted with European communication professionals between February and May, 2015. Half of the interviews was conducted with public relations officers of large national and international organizations (e.g., retail, banking, telecom) and the other half with consultants from national and international PR-agencies. This study offers a way to examine how theoretical guidelines are put into practice. The findings indicate which factors may limit their practical application on the one hand and allow us to look ahead and see how we can further stimulate practitioners to put theory into practice on the other hand.

2. The importance of accepting responsibility

Most crisis communication research has focused on the content of an organizational crisis response (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). This attention for crisis communication strategies is reflected in the two most influential theories in crisis communication research, namely Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007). The first attempt in developing a theoretical framework of crisis communication strategies is Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995). The theory offers a list of communication strategies for organizations in crisis and is based on the assumption that crisis communication serves the goal of restoring reputational damage. Benoit’s (1995) typology of so called image repair strategies has mainly been applied to case studies, in order to analyze the crisis communication of individuals and organizations.

While these case studies have been very useful to determine the available crisis communication strategies, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) has initiated the examination of how organizations should use each strategy (Coombs, 2007; Coombs &
Holladay, 2009). Coombs (2007) developed SCCT in order to provide crisis managers with guidelines to match crisis response strategies to different crisis types. According to SCCT, the amount of responsibility stakeholders attribute to an organization in crisis determines the reputational threat (Coombs, 2007, 2004). As such, SCCT includes three clusters of crisis types based on individuals’ attributions of responsibility to the organization in crisis (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The victim cluster entails crises with weak attributions of organizational responsibility (e.g., product tampering). The accidental cluster involves crises with a certain, but low level of responsibility attribution to the organization (e.g., technical-error product harm). The preventable cluster incorporates crises for which the organization is considered highly responsible (e.g., organizational misdeed with injuries). SCCT matches these crisis types, differing in organizational responsibility, to three clusters of crisis response strategies, differing in the amount of responsibility that the organization takes for the crisis in its communication (Coombs, 2007). Deny strategies reject all responsibility for the crisis, diminish strategies minimize the organizational responsibility or the crisis damage and rebuild strategies allow organizations to admit full responsibility. Crisis managers should select crisis response strategies that match the amount of potential reputational damage that a certain crisis inflicts (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Therefore, when an organization is considered responsible for a crisis, it should take its responsibility, apologize and offer suitable compensations to victims (Coombs, 2007).

A large number of experimental studies have examined the causal relationship between these crisis response strategies and stakeholders’ perceptions of an organization in crisis. While Verhoeven, Van Hoof, Ter Keurs and Van Vuuren (2012) found no impact of apologizing versus not apologizing on organizational trust or reputation, most studies indicate that organizations should take responsibility for a crisis and apologize. Claeyts, Cauwerts and Vyncke (2010) found that overall a rebuild crisis response strategy results in the most favorable
post-crisis reputation. Other research confirms that, especially in the case of a preventable crisis, organizations should offer a rebuild crisis response strategy rather than a diminish strategy (Sisco, 2012; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). Based on Benoit’s (1995) Image Repair Theory, Sheldon and Sallot (2009) similarly found that an apology is the best strategy for politicians in crisis. Other studies compare an apologetic response to a defensive response and illustrate that the public has a more favorable attitude towards an apologetic company and that people find such companies more ethical (Lyon & Cameron, 2004; Turk, Jin, Stewart, Kim, & Hipple, 2012). Dean (2004) compares an appropriate response, in which an organization expresses sadness over what happened, communicates corrective action and offers compensation, to an insincere and blame shifting inappropriate response. Companies responding appropriately are regarded more positively than those responding inappropriately.

These findings clearly illustrate that organizations in crisis, which are considered responsible for these events, should use an apologetic response or more generally a rebuild crisis response strategy. According to Coombs and Holladay (2008), however, prior studies in which apologies are compared to denial are somewhat unfair. By comparing these two extremes, research has overly promoted apology as ‘the’ response in times of crisis. Their research indicates that offering compensations or expressing sympathy can be just as effective as apologies in shaping the perception that an organization is indeed taking responsibility. Because like an apology, these strategies focus on victims’ needs. Other studies have further attempted to explicate which elements make an apologetic response more or less convincing and stress the importance of explicitly accepting responsibility. The more an organization clearly accepts responsibility in an apology, the more positive impressions stakeholders will hold toward that company (Lee, 2005). Therefore it is not enough to merely apologize. Organizations should clearly mention that the organization is responsible for the crisis and take responsibility for their misdeed (Lee & Chung, 2012). A passive responsibility admittance (i.e.
expressing concern and making perfunctory responsibility statements instead of directly admitting responsibility) will be less effective in relieving public anger. This may explain why Exxon’s response to the Valdez oil spill was deemed ineffective. The company simultaneously apologized for the events and insisted that it was not their fault (Tyler, 1997). Unfortunately for Exxon, our ethic demands that the sinner admit guilt to be forgiven.

Research also clearly indicates that evading responsibility leads to reputation damage. Corporate reputation, or how stakeholders perceive an organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), is an important factor for competitive advantage of organizations (Gardberg & Fombrun, 2002). It influences commercial opportunities, sales and profit (Groenland, 2002). Whether an organization is commercial, governmental or not-for-profit, a good reputation paves the organizational path to approval by stakeholders (Watson, 2007). As such, organizations should take their responsibility both for practical and ethical reasons. Our first research question is whether or not communication professionals and the companies they work for adhere to this advice and why.

3. The importance of stealing thunder

Besides the content, communication professionals must also consider the importance of timing during crises. Timing refers to the moment in which information, acknowledging that a crisis exists, is released (Coombs, 2015). Crisis communication research has focused on examining the impact of organizational self-disclosure on stakeholders’ perceptions of the company. According to this research, organizations can basically apply two crisis timing strategies. The first strategy is self-disclosure and is commonly referred to as stealing thunder. Stealing thunder implies that an organization “breaks the news about its own crisis before the crisis is discovered by the media or other interested parties” (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005, p. 425). As such,
stealing thunder in the context of crisis communication involves the proactive admission of a mistake or failure before external parties such as the media announce it. The second crisis timing strategy is referred to as thunder, and implies that an organization waits for inquiries from the media or other external sources and responds afterwards (Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

Best practices in public relations stress the need for open and proactive communication in times of crisis (Huang & Su, 2009), the reason for which is threefold. First and foremost, self-disclosing important and potentially incriminating crisis information allows organizations to behave ethically and emphasizes that they prioritize the needs of their stakeholders (Ulmer, 2012). Second, crisis communication practitioners argue that if organizations do not share information about a crisis openly, the public is likely to obtain the information from other sources and the organization loses the ability to manage the crisis message (Seeger, 2006). Third, self-disclosing crisis information is likely to result in a more favorable reputation than waiting for a third party to do so (e.g., Claeys, Cauberghe, & Leysen, 2013).

Research on stealing thunder originated in the context of law studies. When a defendant in trial admits incriminating information before the prosecutor reveals it, a mock jury tends to consider the defendant less guilty (Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993; Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003). Social psychological research has examined self-disclosure as well and illustrates that people who are responsible for a negative event that occurred in their lives should self-disclose this information when they meet a new potential partner (Jones & Gordon, 1972; Archer & Burleson, 1980). If not, they are likely to be considered less attractive. More recently, the effects of individuals’ self-disclosure have been explored in crisis communication research as well. Research has compared news coverage following crises that involved four well-known individuals who either stole thunder or waited for a crisis to be revealed by a third party (Wigley, 2011). The results indicate that well-known individuals that steal thunder receive less news coverage and their stories are framed more positively than those who do not.
Not only individuals in crisis benefit from stealing thunder but organizations as well. Arpan and Pompper (2003) found that stealing thunder results in increased credibility of public relations practitioners. Additional research shows that an organizational self-disclosure causes stakeholders to consider the crisis as less severe (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Stealing thunder also reduces consumers’ intention to spread negative information about the organization in crisis (Einwiller & Johar, 2013). In addition, self-disclosure affects the impact of the content of crisis communication on the one hand and of the emotions expressed in a crisis response on the other hand. More specifically, it appears crucial for reputation repair to add a crisis response strategy (e.g., apology) to general information about a crisis when a third party has revealed the crisis but not when an organization steals thunder (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). In addition, if an organization steals thunder, expressing sadness as opposed to communicating in a rational manner increases perceptions of sincerity and as such positively affects the post-crisis reputation (Claeys et al., 2013). When an organization responds to third party allegations, however, expressing emotions no longer positively affects stakeholders’ perceptions. Finally, research indicates that the positive effects of stealing thunder may rather apply to organizations with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation than to those with a favorable pre-crisis reputation (Fennis & Stroebe, 2014).

Despite the multiple advantages for both organization and stakeholders illustrated in crisis communication research, communication professionals have conflicting views regarding the appropriateness of this kind of openness in times of crisis (Kline et al., 2009). According to Ulmer (2012, p. 531), “we know that these communication approaches are appropriate yet they rarely are employed during a crisis”. In fact, organizations often fear that communicating openly may lead to litigation (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). In addition, companies in distress might hope that they will be able to keep incriminating information from leaking. According to prior research, self-disclosing a crisis is indeed especially feasible when organizations are aware
that the spread of incriminating information is unavoidable (Easley, Bearden, & Teel, 1995). For these reasons, organizations in crisis may tend to only steal thunder when they are absolutely sure that the information would be revealed by a third party otherwise. Nevertheless, each organization should nowadays accept that all secrets will surface eventually (Coombs, 2002). The use of social media by both internal and external stakeholders has further increased the chance that crises will end up getting revealed (Miles, & Mangold, 2014). In this regard, Heath (2006) stresses that facts will emerge and that the harder an organization tries to hide them, the more explosive the information will become once it surfaces. However, organizations in crisis should not steal thunder merely as a reputation restoring strategy. Self-disclosure should rather be an opportunity for organizations to emphasize their willingness to prioritize stakeholders’ needs (cf. Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012). The second research question is therefore whether or not communication professionals advise companies in crisis to steal thunder, under which circumstances and why?

4. Potential obstacles for putting theory into practice

The overview of research and guidelines regarding the content and timing of crisis communication reveals an important factor which might hinder practitioners from communicating responsibly and openly in times of crisis, namely legal liability. Crisis communication scholars often assume that the legal department of an organization in crisis will advise against certain strategies (e.g., Benoit, 1997). Apologies especially are associated with liability concerns and thus financial implications (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). According to Tyler (1997, p. 51), ‘crisis communication theorists need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the ways in which concerns about liability constrain corporate executives from apologizing for crises for which the corporation itself bears some responsibility’.
Organizations should avoid denial if their own degree of responsibility for a crisis is insecure (Coombs, 2015), yet many countries’ legal systems encourage this strategy (Tyler, 1997). Communication professionals may therefore consider the organizational legal department as an obstacle for their autonomy. Effective crisis communication requires the ability to provide information quickly (Marra, 1998). Communication practitioners are unable to do a good job, however, if communication strategies must be reviewed several times before approval due to a lack of autonomy. Therefore, the third research question examines these liability concerns and more specifically the quality of communication practitioners’ relationship with legal departments.

Crisis communication research should provide practitioners with sufficient information and proof about recommended strategies in times of crisis. Scholars need to give them the tools needed to adequately convince management and legal departments of a necessary course of action (cf. Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). To this end, best practices in crisis communication have been formulated. Researchers draw lists of best practices in order to stimulate the transition of academic research to professional practice (Janoske, Liu, & Madden, 2013). Seeger (2006), for instance, formulated a list of ten best practices in crisis communication based on literature, empirical investigations and an expert panel. These best practices were updated and validated by Janoske et al. (2013), who are concerned with the implementation of best practices during crises. According to them, practitioners express the need for theory and research to be adequately and actively ‘translated’, so guidelines can be understood and shared more easily (e.g., by means of workshops). Coombs (2015) refrains from using the label ‘best practices’ because this term implies uniformity and assuming uniformity in crises is misleading. While there can indeed be similarities between crises, ‘each crisis has the potential to create unique communication demands’ (Coombs, 2015, p. 142). Nevertheless, he indicates that prior research in crisis communication provides some consistent results which allow us to formulate
guidelines regarding strategies that are typically effective or ineffective in times of crisis. The fourth and final research question is therefore whether practitioners are aware of these theoretical guidelines, whether they apply them and why.

5. Method

In order to answer the research questions above, we opted for in-depth interviews with senior communication practitioners, because we wanted to learn more about how crisis communication guidelines are put into practice and why (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). We aimed to acquire a sample that consisted of companies and organizations from different sectors and of varying size. We interviewed both communication managers of organizational communication departments (N = 12) and consultants of well-established PR consulting firms (N = 13). The internal communication managers worked in either a public sector organization (e.g., hospital, educational institution, ministry) or a private sector organization (e.g., bank, retailer, telecom). As we were interested in authoritative practices, we focused on publicly traded companies, SMEs and subsidiaries of multinationals. The selection of the companies occurred randomly. It was necessary, however, that each company had been confronted with a crisis in the past. For the PR consulting firms we interviewed senior consultants with a specialty in crisis communication. Both subsidiaries of international PR-companies and independent PR consulting firms were included in the sample. All firms were well-established companies with both national and international clients. Ultimately 25 communication practitioners were included in the study, 14 of which are female and 11 of which are male. All interviews were conducted in the spring of 2015, most of which at the company premises so that the respondents were in their familiar surroundings. All interviews were recorded using an audio recorder and then transcribed in full.
The interviews were semi-structured and conducted on the basis of a short topic list with predefined questions. The topics were chosen based on several sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954) that we took from our literature review. The investigation focused on crisis communication and more specifically the degree to which crisis communication practitioners advise responsible practices and why. We especially wanted to examine if practitioners adhere to the guidelines from the crisis communication literature with regard to the content and timing of crisis communication. Do they recommend that organizations take responsibility for crises, to what degree and under which circumstances? Do they recommend that organizations steal thunder? If so, do they only recommend stealing thunder when an information leak is unavoidable or even when they suspect that the problem might be swept under the rug? We further ask practitioners to what degree they experience legal liability as an obstacle for their autonomy. Finally, we examine if their stance on these matters is based on academic theory and research or rather on experience or gut feeling.

The interviews were responsive (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and thus involved close listening and ample space for respondents to expand and digress. All interviews were transcribed, verbatim and subjected to a thematic analysis (Bryman, 2008), loosely based on the three coding phases of the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In a thematic analysis, researchers search for recurring themes and subthemes within the data. By comparing similarities and differences, we identified clusters of practices. In view of the anonymity requested by the companies, we opted to make the quotes in the analyses and thick descriptions of the results anonymous.
6. Findings

6.1 Taking responsibility

The interviews present a general picture of communication practitioners who are prepared to take responsibility for their organization’s actions. They see this as a positive evolution and link it to a number of guiding principles such as transparent communication and showing empathy. The interviews reveal several main reasons for this. Firstly, there is a view that no other course is viable in modern times; it is no longer possible to truly conceal something. Journalists will relentlessly seek the truth and a continual flurry of exposés will eventually impel a disclosure.

The second reason centers around the positive impact on the business, even in a crisis situation. Negative news can be presented in a positive manner to reflect favorably on the corporate image. One respondent referred to a crisis situation as a ‘moment of truth’ that allows a company to reveal its inner character. The final reason given was that taking responsibility can add a human element to the situation; the public is aware that things can go wrong and can empathize with a company that does not try to hide this:

*Sometimes companies do get things wrong and, when that happens, I think people will find you more credible if you’re willing to be honest about it. The focus needs to be on minimizing the damage and developing a plan to make sure it doesn’t happen again. But if all you want to do is conceal the truth, I don’t think anyone will appreciate that.*

*(Respondent 1, communication manager)*

But not every practitioner is convinced of the need to take immediate responsibility in every situation. Some of them take the view that it depends, and may vary from case to case. One common problem is that, at the moment of outbreak, there is often very little information
available about the nature of the problem and who might be responsible. This means a communication practitioner may well end up providing incorrect information that must be subsequently corrected when further details come to light. Not only is this a transgression of good communication principles, but it may also have legal implications. A company claiming responsibility at an early stage may well find itself in an unfavorable position when legal liability is determined, even if it is later revealed that it could not have been responsible. This reasoning can often prevent a practitioner from claiming responsibility at the earliest opportunity. A number of other respondents, however, did not agree; they believed that taking responsibility and admitting liability could be two different things. They suggested that it is perfectly possible for a company to show empathy and investigate ways of resolving the crisis without giving the impression that it has caused it.

Companies are often quite happy to take responsible actions as long as this isn’t seen as an admission of guilt – that’s the difference. They’re perfectly willing to take responsibility for resolving the crisis, but admitting they’re effectively responsible for causing it is another matter entirely. A lot of this comes down to the legal/legislative climate, as the matter is then in the hands of their lawyers. (Respondent 13, consultant)

Everyone agreed that pushing the blame onto others is not a good communication strategy. Companies remain responsible for their sub-contractors, staff and suppliers, and those who do not actively address their partners’ failings risk being dragged down with them.

We live in a society where we assume that if we can pass the buck, it’s no longer our problem, but passing the buck doesn’t actually resolve the issue. If a member of staff
gets something wrong, the company should think about how that came about and take responsibility for it. (Respondent 14, consultant)

6.2 Stealing thunder

As regards the timing of communication, there was a far greater division of opinion in comparison to the previous issue. All 25 respondents accepted the value of proactive communication in theory, but many had differing views on whether to implement such a strategy automatically.

The supporters of the stealing thunder principle refer to three reasons. The first of these is the need for rapid communication during crisis situations; they say a slow response may further exacerbate the issue. There is the concept of the ‘golden hour’ – the first hour after outbreak – which is said to be crucial for communication and a rapid response can reflect favorably on the corporate image. The second and main reason given by respondents, however, was that the original communicator has more control over the subsequent narrative (its content, tone and timing). Missing this opportunity may lead to other parties claiming ownership of the issue along with its narrative. This may limit the company to merely reactive or even defensive communication, which according to the practitioners should be avoided at all costs:

Our advice is (…) to respond proactively in order to avoid a news cycle where you’re constantly firefighting the release of new facts, which sends an implicit message that you have something to hide. (Respondent 15, consultant)

It’s better to communicate proactively than to wait until you’re already cornered. Trying to correct information that’s already been put out by the media is incredibly difficult.
People have already begun to form opinions and the advent of the Internet and social media has only accelerated this. (Respondent 2, communication manager)

The final reason mentioned for the need to communicate proactively was the simple principle that ‘the truth will out’. A number of practitioners linked this to the negative consequences of the emergence of news that a company had attempted to conceal:

You can hope it doesn’t get out, but if it does, you’ve got public opinion against you right from the start – ‘see, they hoped we wouldn’t find out’. (Respondent 16, consultant)

Experience has shown that you may as well steal thunder because people will find out anyway. I think I’ve seen this in every book I’ve read on strategic communication as well: it’s better to clean up your own mess. If you cover it up, you’re taking the risk that it could rebound on you – and if it does, everyone will say you knew all along but never fixed it. (Respondent 3, communication manager)

One practitioner – who happened to be a former journalist – explicitly linked the stealing thunder strategy to the world of journalism. Proactive communication makes a story less interesting for a journalist because they cannot then claim an exclusive scoop. By disclosing its own failures, a company can ensure that this does not become the work of the press.

A proactive response takes the wind right out of a journalist’s sails. It means they’ll be far less keen to take a sensationalist angle. I think journalists soon learn to tell when a company is prepared for a crisis and when it isn’t, and whether it’s got everything under
control. If it has (...) there’s not much more the journalist can say. (Respondent 15, consultant)

Clearly, then, there are a number of reasons to employ the stealing thunder strategy. Nevertheless, analysis of the interviews also reveals a number of arguments against the automatic assumption of a proactive stance. Various practitioners noted that there is often insufficient information available to present the public with a clear picture of events, in which case they prefer to remain silent rather than risk giving out incorrect information. After all, the accuracy of communication is also vital:

> Proactive communication is a good thing, but it does depend on the situation. (...) It’s still essential that everything you say is true, so giving out information for the sake of it is a bad idea. When in doubt, or when there’s a huge crisis that we don’t yet know much about, it’s not opportune. (...) Never say anything if you don’t know it’s true or if it might later be proven false. (Respondent 17, consultant)

Others also acknowledge this problem, although some would add that a total lack of communication is just as undesirable and that proactive communication is still possible even without all the facts at one’s fingertips. This comes back to the approach of exercising suitable control over the organization’s communications and messaging.

> The problem is often that you really don’t know much about the crisis yet, but that’s no reason not to react quickly. One of the most important factors remains how quickly you come out and say yes, something is going on, but we’re doing this and that to fix it, we understand people’s concerns etc. It’s important to get your response out there first,
even if you’re not quite sure what’s happened or what’s behind it yet. That way, you can claim ownership over the story before others can pick it up and start running with it.

(Respondent 14, consultant)

The practitioner interviews clearly demonstrate that the decision as to whether or not to communicate proactively depends on the nature of the issue at hand. They refer both to the extent of the crisis (“there’s no sense crying over spilt milk”) and to whether the issue is largely internal in nature. If so, there is a clear preference for resolving the matter internally and, thereby, letting sleeping dogs lie.

If you know for sure it’s going to get out, you may as well be the first to mention it. But if you can resolve it without anyone coming to harm, then it’s best to let sleeping dogs lie. Say we noticed something was amiss with a product, but it hadn’t hit the stores yet – why would we tell the whole world? (Respondent 4, communication manager)

The prevailing approach generally seems to be to resolve a crisis internally in the hope that it never meets the public eye. The interviews do reveal that practitioners are naturally perfectly well aware of the risks involved in doing so, and that a rapid response remains the best course of action if the issue is ultimately reported externally. A number of practitioners made explicit mention of a strategy to await developments while actively monitoring and attempting to anticipate a sudden revelation if one seems likely:

It’s important to wait and see. Monitor! Check if it turns up in the press first and only respond once it does. But also be prepared – internally draft a statement suggesting that the company is aware of the issue and is taking steps to address it ... you can then use
It the moment it appears in the press or someone mentions it on social media. So a statement may well be prepared in advance, just in case, but not necessarily used. If we can ‘keep it in the family’, that’s where it ought to stay. (Respondent 18, consultant)

It depends on the situation. If the crisis involves harm or damage and ought to be public knowledge, then you’ll have to own up. If it’s not on that scale, though, I can’t imagine we’d make too much of a fuss. If someone did bring it to light later on, we’d communicate at that stage. (Respondent 1, communication manager)

In the light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising to note that the interviews also illustrate the problems communication practitioners can encounter when attempting to convince companies to adopt the stealing thunder strategy, either because they would always prefer to hope that an issue is never brought to light, or because they simply cannot reconcile the approach with their own particular situation. The interviews with external consultants in particular show that it can be very difficult to persuade a company to apply the stealing thunder strategy effectively:

They agree with the principle when you put it to them, but in real-world scenarios assessing the potential risks becomes much more difficult. (Respondent 19, consultant)

Companies can often find themselves in shock, preferring to cling to the hope that it might just not get into the press after all. They frequently underestimate the tenacity of the media and the unions in this. (Respondent 20, consultant)
It isn’t always easy to convince a company. We can produce all kinds of examples where the stealing thunder approach proved its worth, but then they often say, “yes, that might have worked there, but we’re in a different position”. (Respondent 14, consultant)

6.3 Legal issues

We already referred to the possible legal issues in communicating a crisis. Two major trends emerge from the interviews with the external PR consultants: about half of the respondents indicate that they are often in conflict with the legal department of the companies they represent. According to these respondents, communication experts and lawyers have conflicting interests and the legal department is often afraid to communicate transparently about a crisis. The consultants indicate that they often try to convince the legal experts of the need to communicate in an open manner:

   Communication experts want to communicate. Legal advisors usually argue that what you’re saying now will be used against you two years later in court. We reply that by that time the company probably will not exist anymore. (Respondent 22, consultant)

   Lawyers sometimes say that something is impossible. We then argue that they have to ignore the policy for a moment, and usually they listen. (Respondent 15, consultant)

The other half of the PR consultants sees value in consulting with legal experts, an opinion that is shared by all internal communication managers interviewed in this study. They see great value in cooperation and consultation between the communication and legal experts, because communication professionals are often not well aware of the legal specificities of a particular case. Rather than convincing the legal practitioners of the need for transparent communication without taking into account the legal aspects, they usually look for a compromise:
You should not see the intervention of a legal expert as an obstacle. I find it useful to know their opinion and advise, because sometimes it involves a lot of money. I think it's important to collaborate, instead of just acting from your own experience as a communication expert. (Respondent 16, consultant)

I don’t want any troubles as a communicator, and sometimes the subject is so specific that you’re glad that a legal expert is looking into it and says if something is OK or not. The perception regarding lawyers is negative, like “oh no, do we have to take them into account as well?”, but on the other hand it is a big advantage if they collaborate with you. (Respondent 13, consultant)

Sometimes we clash, because everyone thinks from their own point of view. We think about image, image, image while they worry about the steps to be followed from a legal standpoint. But we always try to reach a compromise. (Respondent 6, communication manager)

6.4 Practice vs theory

The vast majority of communication professionals have studied some course or full program that prepared them for their current job. During these sessions, they have seen a lot of theories about communication in general and crisis communication in particular. However, the majority of respondents said that they do not actively use these theories in practice. The most frequently mentioned reason is that the theories are too abstract and that they are not readily applicable by the professionals in times of crisis:

Abstract theories are good for universities and students, but the reality is completely different. In practice, you have to use a very hands-on plan. (Respondent 21, consultant)
It is interesting that you have a certain background in your head and that you have knowledge, but those general theories do not know exactly what the company needs, what is appropriate and inappropriate within the company. (Respondent 6, communication manager).

I totally do not agree with Situational Crisis Communication Theory. [...] My biggest criticism is that it wants to put you in a box while a crisis doesn’t work that way. It looks great on paper, but a real-life situation is always different. (Respondent 14, consultant)

Almost every respondent cites the importance of tailor-made guidelines. The communication professionals have a general communication plan, which they then adjust to the specific cases. They refer mainly to gut feeling as the most important factor to implement the communication plan. Nevertheless, several respondents clarify that their practices are based on more than just that gut feeling. According to them, their intuition is rooted in previous experience and scientific research that serves as a general basis for the communication plan:

I rely on basic knowledge from theories or other cases, but in the heat of the moment I rely mainly on gut feeling. (Respondent 7, communication manager)

It is not exactly gut feeling, it is rationalized gut feeling, knowing what to do based on your experience. (Respondent 23, consultant)

We rely on experience combined with knowledge of theories. We call it 'solidified experience'. It is a kind of intuition that is based on knowledge, both practical and theoretical knowledge. (Respondent 14, consultant)
7. Discussion and conclusions

Over the past decades crisis communication has gained significant attention from both scholars and practitioners. Crisis communication research has developed several interesting theories and models (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007) based on a large number of case studies and experimental research (cf. Avery et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the question remains to what degree practitioners are practicing what we preach (Kim et al., 2009). A limited number of prior studies have addressed this matter by formulating best practices in cooperation with practitioners (e.g., Janoske et al., 2013; Seeger, 2006) or by means of case study research analyzing the communication during actual crises (Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2010). Yet crisis communication research has rarely examined the experiences and views of practitioners in depth (e.g., Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2014). Therefore, this study conducted in-depth interviews with crisis communication professionals in order to examine to what degree they put theory in practice and how we can improve the translation of research findings and theory in the future.

The findings from this study first indicate whether or not practitioners claim to know, understand and apply theory in practice. The majority of respondents indicate that they find most theories quite abstract and difficult to translate to the actual crisis situations with which they are confronted. Most practitioners claim to rely on their gut feeling when communicating in times of crisis and developing communication plans. They do, however, acknowledge that this gut feeling is rooted in not only their professional experience but in their theoretical background as well. This observation is confirmed when practitioners are asked about their actual response to certain crisis situations. We specifically focused on the degree to which practitioners are willing to take the blame for crises in which attributions of responsibility are high and their willingness to self-disclose incriminating information. The former has been the subject of many studies and theories in crisis communication (e.g., Coombs, 2007), the latter is
called stealing thunder and has led to beneficial results in research as well (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012).

Most practitioners were in agreement with theory and prior research regarding to the importance of accepting organizational responsibility for crises. Practitioners themselves call it a positive evolution that more and more companies are aware that both stakeholders and organizations benefit from communicating in a responsible manner. However, the application of this communication principle is often interpreted in such a way that focuses on the needs of the organization rather than stakeholders. Many practitioners argue that it is unwise to accept responsibility for a crisis when the situation is still insecure. When little information is available about the cause of the crisis, multiple interviewees did not consider it good communication to provide information that may be incorrect. In addition they would fear that it may later on incur legal liability, even if the organization is proven to be innocent. These reactions confirm what has been assumed by crisis communications scholars, namely that apologies are often associated with liability concerns (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Tyler, 1997). Practitioners should thus be made more aware of the reputation, and thus financial, risks associated with denial. When organizations deny responsibility at the start of a crisis, they will eventually suffer much more reputational damage (Coombs, 2015).

A bigger issue between the interviewees was the use of stealing thunder. While all respondents acknowledge the value of self-disclosure, conflicting views arise regarding the application in actual crisis situations. Supporters of stealing thunder raise several arguments that concur with theoretical explanations for the benefits of self-disclosure. Some respondents indicate for instance, that if the organization is the first to communicate, it will have more control over the subsequent framing of the events. If organizations wait for thunder, however, they end up in a defensive position that needs to be avoided. Literature on stealing thunder indeed shows that self-disclosure allows people and organizations to frame negative events in
their own terms, while in case of thunder a third party has already taken the opportunity to frame the crisis (Williams et al., 1993; Claeys et al., 2013). Another argument in favor of stealing thunder that arose from the interviews is that self-disclosure makes a crisis less interesting for the media because then the organization takes away the scoop. This explanation is based on commodity theory, according to which information that is rare is more valuable (cf. Brock, 1968). If an organization self-discloses the information early on, negative publicity becomes less interesting (Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

Despite these proponents of stealing thunder, as expected, there is still a lot of reluctance among practitioners regarding this strategy (Kline et al., 2009; Ulmer, 2012). Again, similar to the discussion regarding the acceptance of responsibility, practitioners argue that at the start of a crisis there is often insufficient information to present to the public. While this makes sense, a lack of sufficient information is inherently related to the definition of a crisis as an unpredictable event (cf. Coombs, 2015). This should therefore not be an excuse to not reveal that something has gone wrong. Another element that arose from the interviews is that several practitioners still argue that, if possible, matters should be resolved internally (i.e. ‘let sleeping dogs lie’, ‘keep it in the family’). In other words, to many practitioners still feel that stealing thunder is a strategy only to be chosen when the spread of incriminating information is unavoidable. Yet, as is also argued by those respondents who are in favor of self-disclosure, in today’s corporate world secrets are likely to surface eventually (Coombs, 2002). This is especially trough given the widespread use of social media by not only organizations, but by employees and consumers as well. Asides from the fact that stealing thunder is a strategically wise option for organizations in crisis, it also allows organizations to behave ethically and emphasize that they prioritize the needs of their stakeholders (Ulmer, 2012). Asides from these arguments raised against stealing thunder, some interviewees also stress the difficulty of convincing management of this strategy. This is often related to liability concerns.
Most participants indicate that, despite the conflicting interests between communication and legal experts, they have no problems cooperating with the legal department in times of crisis. Internal communication managers especially feel that it is valuable for the communication department to be able to consult legal experts. Half of the external PR consultants agree that they need the legal department of the organization to gain information about the legal specificities of a certain crisis. Nevertheless, the other half of the external PR-consultants paints a different picture. According to them, legal departments are a hassle because they are reluctant to communicate openly. Yet, even though part of the interviewees indeed feels inhibited in their decision making by the legal department, their own views of responsibility acceptance and stealing thunder often bear legal liability in mind. Even though all respondents value the importance of these communication principles, some appear to stretch theoretical guidelines to their organization’s advantage while others realize that communicating with respect for stakeholders will in the end benefit all involved parties. We believe that the latter group will communicate in the best manner because ethics should be a primary factor to all organizations in crisis (Bowen & Zheng, 2015). This involves the duty to tell the truth and to prevent harm to stakeholders. When an organization is morally responsible, even if for the fault lies in part with a third party (e.g., suppliers), responsibility should be admitted and stakeholders should be alerted of potential problems.

The findings from this study thus indicate that even though crisis communication professionals claim not to directly put theory into practice, they acknowledge the crucial principles that arise from scientific research. Still, more effort should be made to explain to practitioners how these principles should be put into practice.
8. **Limitations and further research**

This study is based on the views and experience of crisis communication professionals in Belgium. As such, the findings may lack generalizability. Nevertheless, we believe that the sample draws an interesting and relevant picture of crisis communication practices for all communication scholars and professionals for two main reasons. First, respondents were selected to represent a broad range of companies and sectors. Both consultants of PR consulting firms and communication managers from organizations were interviewed. This resulted in a large diversity of respondents that provide an interesting insight into the field. Second, many of these organizations are situated in Brussels, the capital of Europe, or work for organizations situated in Brussels. This location implies that the consulting firms, many of which are independent and local, have great experience with crisis communication for large multinationals. These multinationals greatly depend on local PR-companies especially in times of crisis. Similarly, many of the interviewed communication managers work for subsidiaries of large multinationals for which crises are an important reality. Probably the most well-known illustration of an international crisis in which Belgium played a crucial part is the Coca-Cola crisis that occurred because Belgian school children fell ill after drinking Coca-Cola in 1999 (cf. Taylor, 2000).

Nevertheless, it would be interesting to compare these findings to the experience of communication professionals from different countries in order to take into account potential cross-cultural variations (cf. Claeys & Schwartz, 2015). To conclude, the findings from this study illustrate that while practitioners in crisis communication acknowledge the importance of communicating responsibly and proactively, they sometimes make exceptions to these important principles in order to keep crises from surfacing or avoid legal liability. Also, it appears difficult for practitioners to convince management of the importance of these crisis
communication principles. Crisis communication research should therefore focus not only on expanding our knowledge but also on communicating important insights to practice.

References


