A Relational Approach to Reducing Uncertainty During a Crisis Through the use of Mobile Technology

UT College of Communication and Information 33rd Annual Research Symposium
Agenda

• Theoretical approach

• Methodology

• Research questions

• Key findings

• Implications to public relations
Theoretical Approach: Uncertainty Reduction Theory

- Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese (1975)
- When strangers meet, their primary concern is one of uncertainty reduction or increasing predictability about the behavior of both themselves and others in the interaction
- 3 Phases to Initial Interactions
  
  **Entry Phase:** behaviors determined by communication rules & norms
  
  **Personal Phase:** individuals engage in communication about issues, problems & values
  
  **Exit Phase:** individuals decide whether or not continue the interaction
Methodology: Literature Review

- Examined the progression of uncertainty reduction theory...
  - Clatterbuck (1979)
  - Parks and Adelman (1983)
  - Gudykunst and Nishida (1984)
  - Planalp and Honeycutt (1985)
  - Brashers (2001)
- Within the parameters of a relationship management perspective:
  - Quality of a relationship is measured by: reciprocity, trust, credibility, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction and mutual understanding
  - These factors could be used to predict public perceptions, attitudes and behaviors
Methodology: Applying Uncertainty Reduction Theory to Crisis Response

Self-Efficacy Messages:
1) Offer harm-reducing actions
2) Recommend a range of activities
3) Provide meaningful relevance to the public, even without verifiable benefit

Explanation Messages:
1) Make sense of an environment
2) Explain what happened
3) How the crisis occurred
4) Who is responsible
5) What steps need to be taken to prevent potential harm
Defining a Mobile Society

Nine in ten 18-29 year olds own their own cell phones

The U.S. is expected to reach 100% mobile phone penetration by 2013

36% of mobile subscribers have 3-G devices (some 4G models already on the market)
Defining a Mobile Society (cont.)

- 45% The amount of time the average iPhone user spends placing calls

- 59% The number of Americans who access the Internet through wireless devices

- 4,000% The number that mobile data services are expected to increase by 2014
Research Questions

Can the use of mobile technology during a crisis help reduce the uncertainty felt by those involved?

Do mobile technologies cultivate personal relationships and reciprocal communication methods that are characteristic to those outlined within Uncertainty Reduction Theory?
Key Findings: Facilitating Intelligent Crisis Response

- Breaks down geographic and organizational boundaries between responding agencies:
  - Government units
  - First responders
  - Across jurisdictions

- Meets the intense demand for information

- Accommodates rapid decision-making

- Streamlines response efforts by connecting skills with tasks
Example: Wireless Phone-based Emergency Response System
Key Findings: Implementing Two-way Communication

Traditional crisis response = top-down flow between responders and at-risk publics

Currently shifting to a two-way form of communication

American Red Cross (2010): 74 percent of respondents expect agencies to answer calls for help made through social media channels
Example:
2010 Haiti Earthquake
Key Findings: Encouraging Citizen Participation

In a crisis, those already in the vicinity are the “true” first responders

Mobile technology creates a participatory public & changes the dissemination of information

It enables citizens to:

• report experiences as they happen
• share life-saving knowledge when seconds count
• use text/picture messaging to share information they could not obtain from authorities
2008 China Earthquake
2009 Miracle on the Hudson
What do they all have in common?
Implications to Public Relations

• Cannot ignore mobile technology as critical component to crisis response planning
• Must develop a consistent presence in both online and mobile applications
• Long-term, online relationships are essential for creating symbolic trust
• Mobile technologies empower practitioners with fewer boundaries and more real-time information
• Crisis managers will increasingly rely on a participatory public for managing response efforts
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