Apologies and Axings: Image Repair and the Scandalized Nonprofit

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Nonprofit organizations are under increased scrutiny from watchdog organizations and the public alike when it comes to how funds raised are spent. As such, when financial scandals strike, nonprofits must be prepared to guard their reputations, lest donations diminish and organizational power and prestige wane. To date, however, the literature on image repair has focused minimally on the world of nonprofits, and much of the research analyzes single cases after the fact and in qualitative fashion. This approach, while valuable, makes it difficult to determine whether or not attitudes toward the traits of scandal-stricken nonprofits are affected by various image repair strategies and to what extent one image repair strategy might perform better than another in the wake of fiscal malfeasance.

Such questions will be asked via an original survey experiment. Some participants are presented with a simulated press release describing a scandal (describing either inefficient use of funds raised or executive extravagance) at a fictional nonprofit organization. Other participants are presented with a similar press release describing both scandalous activity and an attempt on the part of the nonprofit at image repair, either through apologizing or firing the CEO. The experiment will allow us to determine if image repair attempts are at all successful (and if so, which attempts) at affecting attitudes toward traits of the nonprofit as well as giving patterns on the part of the respondent.