

In the Wake of Toys Recall Crisis in 2007: A Content Analysis of Image Restoration Strategies Employed by Four Toy Companies

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the crisis responses provided by four toy companies that were affected by the huge toys recall crisis in 2007: Mattel; Marvel; Hasbro; and RC2. The purpose of the study is to a) identify the patterns of image restoration strategies employed by these organizations during the crisis; b) identify the frequency of Benoit's (1995) image restoration strategies that were utilized by the organizations during the crisis; and c) find out if there were other strategies used beyond the typology of image restoration strategies suggested by Benoit. In order to accomplish these, press releases and other relevant documents between June and December 2007 were content analyzed. The study concludes that 'bolstering' was the most frequent image restoration strategies employed by these organizations. It also reveals that in most cases, when 'bolstering' was used as the first strategy of image restoration, 'minimization' was used as the second strategy, followed by 'shifting blame'. Additionally, the analyses illustrates that these companies had attempted to employ other image repair strategies beyond the ones laid out by Benoit (1995), such as avoidance, identification, and transparency.

Introduction

In June 2007, RC2 Corporation recalled various Thomas and Friends™ wooden railway toys due to illegal level of lead paint on toys that were manufactured in China (RC2 Corporation recalls various Thomas and Friends wooden railway toys due to lead poisoning hazard, 2007, July, 13). Unexpectedly, approximately two months later, parents around the globe began to be alarmed when various toy products manufactured by Mattel Inc. were also pulled-off the shelves due to the same reason; high level of lead paint was found on its toys (Company recalls products with possible lead paint content, 2007, August 2). Their anxiety built up, and they were once again shaken, when another recall was announced by Mattel, within the same month. However, this time the recall also involved toys with loose magnets (Mattel Announces Expanded Recall of Toys, 2007, August 14). These crises created consternation among parents, media, and other stakeholders. During that period, people began to question the quality of the products from Mattel, RC2, and many other toy companies that were known to have vendors in China. Not only was the quality of the products were questioned, but also the credibility of these companies, especially Mattel, that has been known as one of the largest and renowned toy manufacturers around the globe.

In recent years, product recall, one of the many organizational crises that could contribute to the destruction of a company's image and reputation, seemed to escalate. In August 2007 alone, various companies were reported to violate the standard compliance that caused 50 recall statements being issued by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). It was more disturbing to find out that more than 15 of these recalls were hazardous to children and youths (August 2007 Recalls and Product Safety News, n.d.). Mattel and RC2 were only two of the many companies that were affected by this crisis in 2007. In such cases, crisis

management teams were forced to make decisions under pressure, while hoping that their responses could “mold public opinion and protect the company’s image” (Dardis & Haigh, 2009, p. 102). In spite of the alarming phenomenon, such crisis is not a new occurrence in the organizational or corporate world. Many other big companies have faced similar situations in the past (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, AT&T, Firestone). In 1982, for instance, the death of several people in Chicago after consuming Extra-Strength Tylenol capsules had sent jitters to Johnson & Johnson, when the capsules were found to contain cyanide, a substance that is poisonous and deadly to humans (Mitroff & Anagnos, 2000). Although investigations indicated that the cyanide was injected into the capsules after the products were already on the shelves (i.e., Johnson & Johnson did not cause the poisoning), Johnson & Johnson decided to take a swift action by immediately recalling its Regular and Extra-Strength Tylenol capsules from the market. This giant company was said to have “assumed responsibility” (Mitroff & Anagnos, 2000, p. 16) when they took this action, despite of the fact that the damage was caused by a third party. In the attempt to restore its image, it later reintroduced Tylenol by initiating a new “triple safety-sealed” packaging for the capsules (Trinkhaus, Nathan, Bean, & Meltzer, 1997, p. 51). This classic action uplifted Johnson & Johnson’s image and reputation, and additionally, boosted its stock price that began to plummet at the beginning of the crisis. At the same time, Johnson & Johnson’s smart move had put Tylenol back in the market. This case illustrates that effective image restoration strategies could possibly eliminate negative perceptions towards the organization in crisis, while at the same time boost its image and reputation.

In this study, Benoit’s typology of image restoration strategies was used to analyze the crisis responses provided by four toy companies that were affected by the toys recall crisis in 2007: Mattel; Marvel; Hasbro; and RC2. However, unlike many previous studies on image restoration strategies that tend to be “heavy on description” (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000, p. 163), the current study employs a content analysis approach to quantify certain variables that may not be captured in a qualitative study. Therefore, this study was conducted to a) identify the frequency of Benoit’s image restoration strategies that were utilized by the organizations during the crisis; b) identify the patterns of image restoration strategies employed by the four organizations during the crisis; and c) find out if there were other strategies used beyond the typology of image restoration strategies suggested by Benoit (1995). In order to accomplish these objectives, various crisis responses from selected toy companies between June and December 2007 were analyzed (e.g., press releases, quarterly financial results, links or icons on Web sites).

This study concludes that ‘bolstering’ was the most frequent image restoration strategies employed by these organizations. It also revealed that in most cases, when ‘bolstering’ was used as the first strategy of image restoration, ‘minimization’ was used as the second strategy, followed by ‘shifting blame’. Additionally, the analyses illustrate that these companies attempted to employ other image repair strategies beyond the ones laid out by Benoit (1995), such as avoidance, identification, and transparency.

Literature Review

Organizational Crises

Organizational crisis is a phenomenon that could potentially tarnish the image and reputation of an organization. It is “a major catastrophe” (Argenti, 2003, p. 194) that all organizations hope to escape. When a crisis occurs, the organization needs to act fast to ensure that the situation is under control. For instance, a product recall crisis will force a company to address several issues to ensure the safety of their stakeholders: recalling the products that are still available at the retail stores; reassuring the investors that the organization

is in the process of improving the situation; and repairing the image of the organization that has been tainted due to the crisis. If the wrong steps are taken, it could lead to a disaster. Organizations need to be able to recognize the effective strategies that should be used to restore the image of the organization, in order to make the effort a success.

Image plays a crucial part in the business world. According to Benoit (1997a), "Image is the perception of a person (or group, or organization) held by the audience, shaped by the words and actions of that person, as well as by the discourse and behavior of other relevant actors" (p. 251). In other words, some of the ways in which stakeholders develop their perceptions towards an organization are through "words and actions" (Benoit, 1997a, p. 251) by the organization. Additionally, image is also a virtual representation of how the stakeholders perceive or see the organization (Argenti, 2003). The image of an organization can be damaged when a crisis occurs, especially when the organization is being accused of a misconduct or is caught doing wrong actions.

In this situation, it is common for the organizations to make attempts to restore its image. A possible way to rebuild the image is by providing tactical responses that are appropriate for the crisis situation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). This shows that the organization's communication and actions play a role in building its image, as it could shape the perceptions of its stakeholders. According to Goffman (1967), "when a face is threatened, face-work must be done" (p. 27). It is apparent that the accused must take action in order to reduce the offensiveness that has been caused by the wrongdoing. In doing so, one needs to consider the advantages and drawbacks of choosing appropriate strategies to maintain his/her image and credibility (King III, 2006). The strategies chosen should fit the context in order to make it more convincing. If the accused succeeded in changing the mind-set of its audience, he/she is said to have altered reality (Bitzer, 1999). Although Goffman tends to focus more on human communication, this concept is also applicable to an organizational setting. In this setting, the image of the organization is threatened by potential negative perceptions that its stakeholders may hold, due to the organizational crisis that occurred. If the situation is not handled strategically, the image of the organization can potentially be tarnished.

Image Restoration Strategies

The theory of image restoration or repair strategies is related to the studies of genre and apologia (e.g., Burns & Bruner, 2000). In many cases, organizations will attempt to use the strategies when "an offensive act has occurred and an individual or organization has been accused of being responsible for that act" (Benoit, 1995, cited in Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004, p. 96). In this scenario, Benoit (1997b) emphasizes the "message options". His typology of image restoration strategies focuses on five main types of strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action, and mortification. These five strategies include 14 sub-strategies, which are briefly described in the following sub-section.

Benoit's Image Restoration Typology

Denial: There are two sub-strategy in this category: a) *simple denial:* denies that the wrongdoing is caused by the accused; b) *shifting blame:* accuser attempts to blame other party(ies) for the wrongdoing, or mishap.

Evading Responsibility: Four sub-strategies fall under this category: a) *provocation:* saying that the act was done in response to something else; b) *defeasibility:* stating that the wrongdoing was caused by lack of

information or ability; c) *accident*: claiming that the wrongdoing was an accident; and d) *good intentions*: maintaining that the act of wrongdoing was meant well and had no intention to harm anyone.

Reduce Offensiveness: This strategy is used with the intention to reduce the damage that was caused by the wrongdoing. Six versions of this strategy are offered: a) *bolstering*: highlighting good things the organization or individual has done so far, to increase the credibility, b) *minimization*: reducing the damage caused by the wrongdoing, c) *differentiation*: “weaken negative feelings by favorably comparing the act to similar, but more reprehensible, acts” (Benoit & Brinson, 1994, p. 77), d) *transcendence*: emphasizing the benefits of the action, e) *attack accuser*: attack the accuser to reduce offensiveness, and f) *compensation*: reimbursing the people or other parties affected by the wrongdoing.

Corrective Action: This image restoration strategy offered by Benoit (1997b) is employed when the organization or individual promises a way to rectify the wrongdoing.

Mortification: Using this strategy, the accused would admit the wrongdoing and apologize for what had happened.

In the literature, Benoit’s (1995) typology of image restoration strategies has been widely applied in various studies conducted on image restoration strategies (e.g., AT&T; Johnson & Johnson; Firestone). These studies usually looked at effective response strategies employed by organizations after the crises (e.g., Benoit, 1997a; Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002; Coombs & Holladay, 2009). For instance, a study conducted by Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal (2002) examined Firestone’s responses during its tire crisis in 1992. Firestone’s image was tarnished due to reports on its tires’ “tread separation” (p. 380). The study concluded that Firestone had applied three of Benoit’s image restoration strategies: a) blame shifting; b) corrective action; and c) bolstering. In addition to analyzing the image restoration strategies used by an organization after a crisis, this study also evaluated the success of each strategy used. The study found that the strategies used by Firestone were not effective. This illustrates the importance of recognizing appropriate strategies for different crisis. In other words, although one strategy may be effective for an organization in a particular crisis, it does not mean it would be effective in a different type of crisis. Strategies suggested by Benoit (1995) do not serve as a cookie cutter for all crises. Instead, they serve as guidance for organizations that are facing crises.

Based on various previous studies, many studies on image restoration strategies analyzed the strategies employed by the organizations and individuals, from Benoit’s lens (e.g., Benoit, 1997a; Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Phahl & Bates, 2008). Additionally, most of these studies were conducted qualitatively. However, meager studies (if any) on image restoration that used Benoit’s lens have attempted to use the quantitative approach. This study, therefore, attempts to quantify the image restoration strategies employed by four toy companies, through a content analysis study. Exploring the possible use of content analysis in the study of image restoration would open the opportunity for future scholars and researchers to take a different approach to the study of image restoration strategies.

Research Questions

Analyzing the toy companies’ responses during the toy recall crisis in 2007 could possibly reveal the strategies used by these companies in their attempts to restore the image of their respective companies. With that thought in mind, the analyses address the following research questions:

- RQ1: What was the frequency of Benoit's image restoration strategies utilized by the four toy companies during the toy recall crisis?
- RQ2: What was (were) the pattern(s) of image restoration strategies employed by the four toy companies during the crisis?
- RQ3: Did the toy companies attempt to employ other image restoration strategies beyond the typology suggested by Benoit (1995)?

Method

This study is interested in the strategies used by four toy companies that were affected by the recall crisis in 2007: Mattel, Marvel, Hasbro, and RC2. Mattel, for example, recalled the Sarge truck, a die-cast toy from the movie CARS (Mattel Announces Expanded Recall of Toys, 2007, August 14). Marvel on the other hand, recalled its Curious George Plush dolls (Marvel Announces Voluntary Recall for Four Styles of Curious George Plush Dolls, 2007, November 8). Hasbro also announced its recall on its Easy-Bake Ovens (New Easy-Bake Oven Recall Following Partial Finger Amputation: Consumers Urged to Return Toy Ovens, n.d.), and finally, RC2 recalled several of its Thomas and Friends™ wooden train sets (RC2 Corp Recalls Various Thomas and Friends™ Wooden Railway Toys due to Lead Poisoning Hazard, 2007, June 13). These companies were chosen due to the toy recall announcements made by each company between June and December 2007.

In a crisis, affected companies would usually attempt to reach their constituents via several media, such as newspapers, televisions, press conferences, press releases, corporate Web sites, and many others. Although newspapers and televisions seemed to be the main media used by most affected companies, information from these media is usually filtered by the media company. Therefore, it is believed that responses which were not filtered by a third party would be the best way to identify the strategies used by these toy companies. As such, the samples for this study include press releases, quarterly financial reports, icons or links available on each company's Web site, and other documents that were deemed to be relevant. In other words, these responses were chosen because they were all crafted, produced, and issued by the affected companies or their representatives. In the context of this study, icons or links that were chosen, were those available from the companies' Web sites, and that were considered relevant to the responses provided by the organizations. For example, on Mattel's Web site, a red blinking box labeled as 'Recall Information' was present during the crisis. Since this eye-catching icon was related to the recall crisis, it was considered as one of the ways in which, Mattel used to communicate the crisis to its stakeholders.

Based on the recall announcements made by all four companies, the cases selected were those issued between June and December 2007. These approximate time period was chosen due to Mattel's huge voluntary toys recall incident that occurred in 2007, which was considered as "one of the top three longest running crisis stories of 2007" (Institute for Crisis Management, 2008).

In order to capture the strategies used by the companies in their attempt to restore their image, and also to answer the research questions for this study, all 544 cases that appeared between June and December 2007 were analyzed. Out of the total, 70 of them were press releases, 14 were other relevant documents (e.g., quarterly financial reports, CEO's Opinion Statements), and 460 were links or icons that appeared on the companies' front page Web sites between June and December 2007. Whereas the press releases and other relevant documents were obtained from archived documents that were available on each company's Web

site when this study was conducted, the links or icons were obtained from the *wayback machine* database that kept archives of various past Web sites.

To fulfill the purpose of this study, Benoit's (1995) typology of image restoration strategies were adapted in the coding system. Therefore, all of his 14 image restoration sub-strategies were among the main variables used for this study: 1) simple denial; 2) shifting blame; 3) provocation; 4) defeasibility; 5) accident; 6) good intentions; 7) bolstering; 8) minimization; 9) differentiation; 10) transcendence; 11) attack accuser; 12) compensation; 13) corrective actions; and 14) mortification. It is believed that by using Benoit's typology, it could capture the pattern of image restoration strategies used by the organizations in crisis. Since this study also attempted to find out if there were other types of strategies used by these companies, the coding sheet also included 'others' as a variable. Additionally, the coding sheet also included a section where the first three strategies used by the organization were coded to find out if there was a common pattern in the sequence of strategies used by these organizations.

An inter-coder reliability test was conducted based on three coders: the researcher, and two graduate students who have similar backgrounds in the field. The percentage of agreement for this study ranges between 75% and 100%. The lowest percentage obtained was from the 'other strategies' variable employed by the organizations, which is a very subjective variable to code because the coders may perceive an act by the organizations, differently. For example, the decision made by an organization to ignore the crisis may be perceived as a strategy by one coder, but not necessarily by the other coders. Since there were no specific categories assigned within the 'other strategies' variable, it made coding this variable less consistent.

Results

This study analyzed 544 cases, in which, 12.9% (n=70) were press releases, 2.6% (n=14) were other relevant documents (e.g., quarterly financial reports, CEO's opinion statements, etc), and the remaining 84.6% (n=460) were links or icons that appeared on the respective companies' corporate Web sites between June and December 2007.

The distribution of cases among the four toy companies were not equal ($\chi_{df=3}^2 = .00, p < .05$), where majority of the cases were from Hasbro with 39.2% (n=213), followed by Mattel with 34.9% (n=190), Marvel with 17.8% (n=97), and the least were obtained from RC2 with 8.1% (n=44) cases.

More than half of the cases were issued in response to the recall crisis with 55.5% (n=304), whereas the remaining 44.5% (n=242) were documents that were not related to the toy recall crisis.

RQ1: What is the frequency of Benoit's image restoration strategies utilized by the four toy companies during the toy recall crisis?

In analyzing the image restoration strategies employed by the four toy companies during the toy recall crisis in 2007, the result reveals that the following strategies were used: shifting blame (1.09%, n=8); good intention (2.6%, n= 19); bolstering (40.24%, n=295); minimization (1.51%, n=11); differentiation (0.14%, n=1); transcendence (0.14%, n=1); attack accuser (0.14%, n=1), compensation (1.51%, n=11), corrective action (2.08%, n=15), mortification (1.24%, n=9), and other strategies (49.31%, n=362). Four strategies that were not utilized at all by the companies were simple denial, provocation, defeasibility, and accident. Among Benoit's

14 image restoration strategies used by the toy companies, bolstering shows the most prevalent strategy employed, with a value of 40.29% (n=294).

Table 1 illustrates the percentage of image restoration strategies used by individual company. It reveals that most companies frequently used bolstering as a strategy to restore their companies' image (Mattel: 15.55%, n=114; Hasbro: 19.64%, n=144; and RC2: 4.91%, n=36). Marvel, on the other hand, did not show any significant use of strategy.

Table 1. Frequency of image restoration strategies used by four toy companies, June-December 2007

	Mattel	Marvel	Hasbro	RC2	Total
Simple Denial	-	-	-	-	-
Shifting Blame	0.68% (n=5)	-	-	0.41% (n=3)	1.09% (n=8)
Provocation	-	-	-	-	-
Defeasibility	-	-	-	-	-
Accident	-	-	-	-	-
Good Intentions	2.32% (n=17)	-	0.14% (n=1)	0.14% (n=1)	2.60% (n=19)
Bolstering	15.55% (n=114)	0.14% (n=1)	19.64% (n=144)	4.91% (n=36)	40.24% (n=295)
Minimization	0.14% (n=1)	0.14% (n=1)	0.41% (n=3)	0.82% (n=6)	1.51% (n=11)
Differentiation	-	0.14% (n=1)	-	-	0.14% (n=1)
Transcendence	-	0.14% (n=1)	-	-	0.14% (n=1)
Attack Accuser	0.14% (n=1)	-	-	-	0.14% (n=1)
Compensation	0.68% (n=5)	0.14% (n=1)	0.14% (n=1)	0.55% (n=4)	1.51% (n=11)
Corrective Action	0.82% (n=6)	0.14% (n=1)	-	1.12% (n=8)	2.08% (n=15)
Mortification	0.55% (n=4)	0.14% (n=1)	-	0.55% (n=4)	1.24% (n=9)
Others	16.62% (n=122)	0.14% (n=1)	27.40% (n=201)	5.15% (n=38)	49.31% (n=362)
Total	37.50% (n=275)	1.12% (n=8)	47.73% (n=350)	13.65% (n=100)	100% (n=733)

RQ2: What is (are) the pattern(s) of image restoration strategies employed by the four toy companies during the crisis?

This study also attempted to reveal the pattern of Benoit’s image restoration strategies used by the toy companies selected. Table 2 reveals that only five strategies were used as the first strategy in the attempt to restore the image of the organizations, and the two highest number of first strategy used by the companies were bolstering (50.6%), followed by good intentions (3.5%). The highest number of second strategy used was also bolstering (3.7%). Additionally, corrective action (1.1%) seems to be the favorite third strategy used by the companies, mortification (0.7%) for the fourth strategy, and compensation (0.6%) as the fifth strategy.

Table 2. Percentage and rank of image restoration strategies by sequence (for all companies), June – December 2007

	1 st Strategy (%)	Rank	2 nd Strategy (%)	Rank	3 rd Strategy (%)	Rank	4 th Strategy (%)	Rank	5 th Strategy (%)	Rank
Simple Denial										
Shifting Blame			(0.2%)	5	(0.6%)	2	(0.2%)	3		
Provocation										
Defeasibility										
Accident										
Good Intentions	(3.5%)	2								
Bolstering	(50.6%)	1	(3.7%)	1	(0.2%)	4	(0.2%)	3		
Minimization	(0.4%)	3	(1.1%)	2	(0.2%)	4	(0.2%)	3	(0.2%)	2
Differentiation									(0.2%)	2
Transcendence										
Attack Accuser										
Compensation	(0.2%)	4	(0.4%)	4	(0.4%)	3	(0.4%)	2	(0.6%)	1
Corrective Action	(0.4%)	3	(0.7%)	3	(1.1%)	1	(0.4%)	2	(0.2%)	2
Mortification			(0.4%)	4	(0.4%)	3	(0.7%)	1		

Tables 3 and 4 show that when good intention was used as the first strategy, it was most likely that bolstering was used as the second strategy (14.05%), but no indication of a strategy was used after bolstering. However, when bolstering was used as the first strategy, most companies chose minimization (4.13%) as the second strategy, followed by shifting blame, or corrective action as the third strategy (both yielded 0.4% each). In order to show a clearer picture of the patterns, Figure 1 was developed to illustrate the first three strategies that were employed by the toy companies between June and December 2007.

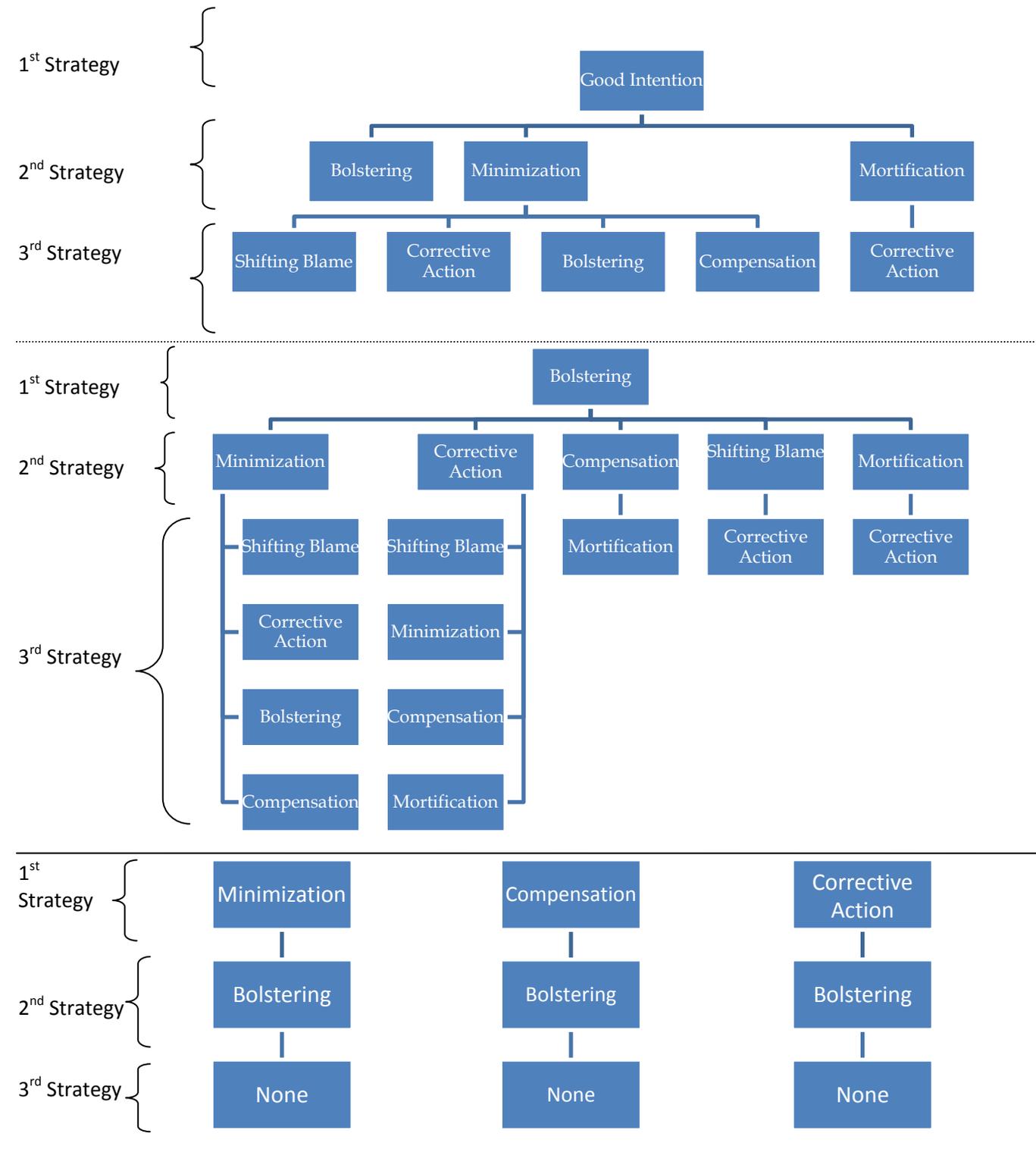
Table 3. Percentage of strategy used by sequence: First Strategy * Second Strategy (without others), June – December 2007

		<u>FIRST STRATEGY USED</u>					None	Total
		Good Intentions	Bolstering	Minimization	Compensation	Corrective Action		
<u>SECOND STRATEGY USED</u>	Shifting Blame	-	0.83%	-	-	-	-	0.83%
	Bolstering	14.05%	-	0.83%	0.83%	0.83%	-	16.54%
	Minimization	0.83%	4.13%	-	-	-	-	4.96%
	Compensation	-	1.65%)	-	-	-	-	1.65%
	Corrective Action	-	3.31%	-	-	-	-	3.31%
	Mortification	0.83%	0.83%	-	-	-	-	1.66%
	None	-	-	-	-	-	71.05%	71.05%
	Total	15.71%	10.75%	0.83%	0.83%	0.83%	71.05%	(100%)

Table 4. Percentage of strategy used by sequence: Second Strategy * Third Strategy (without others), June – December 2007

		<u>SECOND STRATEGY USED</u>							Total
		Shifting Blame	Bolstering	Minimization	Compensation	Corrective Action	Mortification	None	
<u>THIRD STRATEGY USED</u>	Shifting Blame	-	-	0.40%	-	0.20%	-	-	0.60%
	Bolstering	-	-	0.20%	-	-	-	-	0.20%
	Minimization	-	-	-	-	0.20%	-	-	0.20%
	Compensation	-	-	0.20%	-	0.20%	-	-	0.40%
	Corrective Action	0.20%	-	0.40%	-	-	0.40%	-	1.00%
	Mortification	-	-	-	0.20%	0.20%	-	-	0.40%
	None	-	3.74%	-	-	-	-	93.46%	97.20%
Total	0.20%	3.74%	1.20%	0.20%	0.80%	0.40%	93.46%	100%	

Figure 1. Patterns of the first 3 Strategies used by Toy Companies, June-December 2007



RQ3: Did the toy companies employ other image restoration strategies beyond the typology suggested by Benoit (1995)?

Aside from Benoit's image restoration strategies, the companies were also found to use various other strategies in their crisis responses -- 49.31%, n=362 (Table 1). Transparency, identification, and assurance were among the strategies used, and will be described in the discussion section.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the frequency of Benoit's image restoration strategies used by four toy companies (Mattel, Marvel, Hasbro, and RC2) during the huge toys recall crisis in 2007. Additionally, it also made an attempt to identify the pattern of strategies used by these companies, and to find out if the companies have shown any attempts to use other strategies besides the 14 image restoration strategies suggested by Benoit (1995).

The analyses prove that various image restoration strategies developed by Benoit (1995) were used by these four companies and the most frequently utilized was bolstering. Bolstering was a common strategy that companies used especially in a recall crisis. For example, in this study, many companies took action by announcing immediate voluntarily recalls of the products that were affected by the crisis. By doing this, it shows that they have done something right, in spite of the wrongdoing that have caused the crisis. In many cases, when the public perceives that a company is making an effort to rectify the problem, the chances of image restoration are very likely.

Perhaps an interesting outcome from the analyses is the possibility to predict the patterns or the sequence of image restoration strategies used by companies when facing a recall crisis. This study reveals that when bolstering was used as the first strategy, the most likely second strategy used by the companies was minimization, followed by shifting blame. The sequence is not a surprise outcome, as it seemed very logical. In many instances, the companies would initiate an immediate recall of the product, and continue to minimize the damage of the situation by showing that the incident was not as serious as it seemed to appear (e.g., no injuries were reported). They would then, try to shift the blame on their vendors in China.

An interesting finding from these analyses is that Marvel was the only company among the four that did not show any attempts to restore its image. Most of the press releases issued by Marvel were on its comic characters such as Spiderman, Iron Man, Captain America, and many others. Not a single link or icon statements on its Web site between June and December 2007 reflected Benoit's image restoration strategies. Likewise, only one of the press releases issued within the selected period addressed the recall of its Curious George Plush dolls. Although this seems to be out of the ordinary, it is also possible that *avoidance* is a strategy that Marvel had chosen to use, in the attempt to restore its image. One of the reasons that may have led Marvel to ignore any strategies suggested by Benoit could be due to the fact that between 2007 and 2008, several movies that were based on Marvel's comic characters were released at the cinemas around the world. For example, Spiderman-3 was first released on May 4th, 2007; Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer on June 15, 2007; Iron Man on May 2nd 2008; The Incredible Hulk on June 3, 2008; and Punisher: War Zone on December 2008. It is a fact that publicities are likely to take place prior to, during, and after the release of a particular movie, in order to promote a movie. Therefore, it is possible that the releases of these movies have allowed Marvel to escape from handling the recall crisis. The publicities that were given to Marvel's characters from the movies may have camouflaged the whole recall crisis. Furthermore, Marvel's recall item

(i.e., Curious George) is not a character that is as popular as its other characters, such as Spiderman, and Iron Man. This is another possible reason why Marvel was able to ignore the crisis. Although *avoidance* may not be listed in Benoit's typology of image restoration strategies, *avoidance* has been known as one of the strategies for interpersonal conflict management (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Marvel has shown that given the right time and situation, *avoidance* is a potential strategy that can be used to restore an organization's image during a crisis. Perhaps scholars in the future should explore this area and identify if Thomas-Kilmann's *avoidance* conflict management style can be adapted to the strategies of image restoration.

Besides avoidance, several other strategies were also identified. Among them were *transparency*, *identification*, and *assurance*. *Transparency* was detected in many of the cases where the companies tend to be more visible in their actions. This was evident from the links or icons that appeared during the crisis. With the exception of Marvel, the other three toy companies did not hesitate to reveal or make known to the public of their recall crisis. Links or icons labeled as 'recall information' were common on these companies' corporate Web sites between June and December 2007. By being transparent, the companies could gain credibility from their stakeholders, as it reflects that the companies were not trying to hide anything from them.

Identification was also another strategy that was detected from the toy companies. Mattel's CEO put himself among the audience, especially parents who were affected by the recall, when he identified himself as "a parent of four" in his opinion statement (A message from Bob Eckert, 2007, September 11). Additionally, by identifying himself among the audience, he portrayed his role as a 'father' who was concerned for the well being of 'his children' (i.e., the stakeholders).

Another strategy that emerged among the strategies used by the toy companies was *assurance*. In many instances, the toy companies (with the exception of Marvel) attempted to assure their stakeholders that the crisis was under control. The sense of assurance gave a personal touch to the crisis, and that could possibly be an effective strategy in restoring the image.

Findings from this study illustrate the possibility of exploring other potential image restoration strategies beyond the 14 that were developed by Benoit (1995). Furthermore, it has also proved that using a quantitative approach is possible when conducting a study on image restoration strategies. Unlike studies that were conducted in a qualitative manner, a quantitative approach, such as content analysis, allows researchers to quantify the frequency of a particular strategy being employed or used by organizations. Due to the nature of qualitative methods, obtaining frequencies is a little out of the scope. Furthermore, a content analysis approach made the patterns of image restoration strategies used by the organizations easier to identify. In other words, a qualitative study may only identify the different strategies being used by the organizations, but it would not be able to identify the patterns of strategies being used. However, this study does not imply that a particular method is superior to another. On the other hand, it suggests that a quantitative approach can be conducted to complement studies on image restoration strategies that were usually qualitative in manner. It is hoped that this study would trigger new interests among future researchers, and open their opportunities to look at image restoration from a different angle.

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APPENDIX A
Coding Sheet (2007 Toys Recall/Image Restoration Strategies)

Case # _____

Document Type (1 = press release; 2 = link or icon ; 3 = others) _____

Document Date (year/month/date) 2007/____/____

Company Name _____
 (1 = Mattel; 2 = Marvel; 3 = Hasbro; 4 = RC2; 5 = others)

For Press releases: Is this a voluntary recall announcement? (1 = Yes; 2 =No) _____

Strategies of Image Restoration (Count)

Denial

1 = Simple denial _____
 (e.g. saying that they did not perform the wrongdoing)

2 = Shifting blame _____
 (e.g. blaming others for the wrongdoing)

Evading Responsibility

3 = Provocation _____
 (e.g. saying that the act was done in response to something else)

4 = Defeasibility _____
 (e.g. saying that act/wrongdoing was caused by lack of information or ability)

5 = Accident _____
 (e.g. act/wrongdoing was a mishap)

6 = Good intentions _____
 (e.g. saying that they meant well and had no intention to harm anyone)

Reducing offensiveness of event

7 = Bolstering _____
 (emphasizing the good things that happened. E.g. immediate recall)

8 = Minimization _____
 (e.g. saying that the act/wrongdoing was not serious)

9 = Differentiation _____
 (saying that the act/wrongdoing was less offensive than a similar act/wrongdoing. E.g. "it's a preventive act")

10 = Transcendence _____
 (e.g. providing reasons that justifies wrongdoing)

11 = Attack accuser _____
 (trying to reduce the credibility of the accuser)

12 = Compensation _____
 (e.g. reimbursing victim)

13 = Corrective action _____
 (planning to solve the problem/prevent from spreading)

14 = Mortification _____
 (apologizing for the wrongdoing)

15 = Others _____
 (any other strategies that attempt to restore the company's image)
 Brief description _____

Sequence of strategies (Count)

(For this section, please specify which strategy comes 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th. Indicate the strategy number based on the list above. For example, if the first strategy used by the company is 'mortification', put '14' in the first strategy row.)

First Strategy used _____

Second Strategy used _____

Third Strategy used _____

Fourth Strategy used _____

Fifth Strategy used _____

APPENDIX B
Code Book (Benoit's Typology of Image Restoration Strategies)

Strategy	Key characteristic	Example
<i>Denial</i>		
Simple denial	Did not perform act	Tylenol: did not poison capsule
Shift the blame	Another performed act	Tylenol: a "madman" poisoned capsules
<i>Evasion of responsibility</i>		
Provocation	Responded to act of another	Firm moved because of new taxes
Defeasibility	Lack of information or ability	Executive not told meeting changed
Accident	Mishap	Tree fell on tracks causing train wreck
Good intentions	Meant well	Sears wants to provide good auto repair service
<i>Reducing offensiveness of event</i>		
Bolstering	Stress good traits	Exxon's "swift and competent" clean-up of oil spill
Minimization	Act not serious	Exxon: few animals killed in oil spill
Differentiation	Act less offensive than similar acts	Sears: unneeded repairs were preventative maintenance, not fraud
Transcendence	More important values	Helping humans justifies testing animals
Attack accuser	Reduce credibility of accuser	Coke: Pepsi owns restaurants, competes directly with you for customers
Compensation	Reimburse victim	Disabled movie-goers given free passes after denied admission to movie
<i>Corrective action</i>		
	Plan to solve/prevent recurrence of problem	AT&T long-distance upgrades; promised to spend billions more to improve service
<i>Mortification</i>		
	Apologize	AT&T apologized for service interruption

Taken from Blaney, J. R., Benoit, W. L., & Brazeal, L. M. (2002). Blowout! Firestone's image restoration campaign. *Public Relations Review*, 28, 379-392.