

Of Pizzas, Politics, and Image

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In a media-saturated age, we are quite aware that organizations undergo periodic crises. Whether a recall of defective automobiles or see-through yoga pants, some precipitating event damages the public standing of the organization, resulting in efforts to repair organizational reputation. Ferraris and Backus explain that, “At some point, every organization undergoes the sort of crisis that demands a response to the public. Specifically, the organization must defend its reputation through both communication and behavior” (2008). Thomsen and Rawson note that the response is actually forced by the situation: “A crisis situation, an attack on credibility, or involvement in an allegedly illegal act threatens an organization's ability to prevent social sanction and forces that organization to engage in reparative behavior and communication” (1998, p. 35). That is, the situation within a particular social context determines organizational response.

The focus of this essay is a particular situation of reparative organizational rhetoric (Jerome & Rowland, 2009) strongly influenced by its context. Papa John's Pizza found itself in a reputation crisis when their CEO and founder, John Schnatter, fielded hypothetical questions about the impacts of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) from a reporter while he was addressing an entrepreneurship class at a Florida college. Among the reactions to Schnatter's comments was an editorial in the *Huffington Post*, in which the author repeated Schnatter's original statements along with more details and explanations (Bradford, 2012). This editorial prompted a response from Schnatter, which is the subject of this paper. To achieve this goal, the situation will be described, the theoretical grounding of image repair messages will be presented, and Schnatter's *Huffington Post* response will be analyzed as an example of attempted organizational image repair.

Genesis of Controversy: John Schnatter on the ACA

John Schnatter's answer to the reporter's questions about the impact of the ACA, taken to be the corporate statement of the company he owns, was widely reported: Schnatter will reduce employee hours and raise pizza prices eleven to fourteen cents in order to comply with the mandates of the ACA (Attacks on employer mandate, 2012; Charisse, 2013; Fisher, 2012; Guarino, 2012; Leaving logic, 2012; Pipes, 2013; Quimby, 2013;). In broader monetary terms, he cited a cost of \$5 million to \$8 million per year (Guarino, 2012). At issue are the ACA mandates requiring businesses with more than 50 workers to provide health insurance to employees working 30 hours a week or more or risk fines of \$2000 per employee each year (Guarino, 2012; Ungar, 2012, November 21). While any breach of expectations might arouse a negative public response, Schnatter's response to the questions had a political dimension. It is common knowledge that the ACA is highly partisan legislation, passed largely along party lines, and attacked and defended in a clearly political manner. Schnatter's introduction of this highly controversial topic, the ACA, drew more fire than a nonpolitical statement might have. In a highly bifurcated political environment, he elicited a polarized response—both blame and praise. In fact, restaurants represent much of the opposition to the ACA (Attacks on employer mandate, 2012, p. 8A). And increasingly, businesses were reacting against what they saw as the inevitability of the ACA (Guarino, 2012).

The responses to Schnatter's perceived threats against his employees were largely harsh. His assertion that the employer mandate of the ACA would cost both employees and customers was not received well (Pipes, 2012). One PR specialist is quoted as saying that Schnatter "was just being eviscerated in the media" (Greenwood, 2013, p. FP1). Much of the reaction to Schnatter's quotations appeared on the internet. For instance, reactions on Twitter blamed Schnatter's greed for his statement and linked his behavior to Republican Party politics and policy (Leaving logic, 2012, p. A12). Some called for a boycott of Papa John's, including a "Boycott Papa John's" page that collected over 2,000 likes (Fisher, 2012, p. B1). Others, emulating previous responses to perceived liberal attacks, called for a "National Papa John's Appreciation Day" on Facebook, with over 17,000 people indicating that they would attend (Fisher, 2012, p. B1). Without doubt, "the situation had morphed into a full-blown disaster" (Greenwood, 2013, p. FP1).

A Strategic Response

Schnatter's ultimate response to the charges leveled against him was to counter the *Huffington Post* editorial with an editorial of his own (Schnatter, 2012). The opinion piece, though, was not Schnatter's first strategy. Rather, Schnatter followed the advice of his PR firm: "keep a low profile and ignore requests from reporters (Greenwood, 2013, p. FP1). Schnatter then hired Michael Sitrick, a crisis management specialist, to advise his strategy (Greenwood, 2013, p. FP1). Sitrick's method of managing this situation was in stark opposition to advice Schnatter received earlier. Specifically, Sitrick guided Schnatter to: "Respond to the press and tell the other side of the story, that the pizza guy's statement on the earnings call was merely a common-sense statement of fact, given in response to a similarly common-sense question" (Greenwood, 2013, p. FP1). In other words, Sitrick told Schnatter to use image repair techniques rather than remain silent. As we will see, though, not all image repair techniques are equally effective.

Schnatter, with the help of Sitrick, crafted a fairly brief (777 words) editorial piece for the *Huffington Post* (Greenwood, 2013, p. FP1). Schnatter's (2012) statement offered a narrative to address the charge that Papa John's plans to cut hours and increase prices were due to the ACA. Initially, Schnatter established that the public expects the truth from journalists, the implication being that reporting on this issue has not been accurate. He then denied that he said what he had been quoted as saying: "I never said that," stated that the company has "no plans to cut team hours as a result of the Affordable Care Act." Schnatter then asserted that, "there was some sort of misunderstanding somewhere," noting that he did not know there was a reporter present until she identified herself. Next, Schnatter provided "the part of the interchange that was the genesis of the news," containing some of the questions and answers exchanged. In a shift of perspective, Schnatter reminded the reader that franchisees "own the restaurants they operate, who they hire, how many hours they give each employee and what they pay each employee is up to them, not me or Papa John's." Schnatter also offered other - he claims positive - statements he made about the ACA during the interview as an off-set to his more often quoted statements. Finally, he left the door open to future lawful actions concerning the ACA, offering no specific direction for Papa John's to follow: "Papa John's, like most businesses, is still researching what the Affordable Care Act means to our operations," concluding that, "we will honor this law, as we do all laws." Each of Schnatter's claims constituted an instance of organizational rhetoric crafted for the purpose image repair.

Organizational Rhetoric, Apologia, and Image Repair

Ware and Linkugel's (1973) seminal work on apologia identified "apologetic discourses" as a unique genre, comprised of characteristics defining a specific type of rhetoric. They described content categories common to any example of apologia: denial and bolstering, each with subcategories. This research served as the foundation for more recent work on image repair and restoration. For instance, Rowland and Jerome (2004) proffer what they call a "reconceptualization" of organizational apologia. Coombs (1995, 1998) constructs image repair from another angle: crisis communication.

William L. Benoit (1995) produced what has become a commonly used typology of image repair strategies. He describes his typology as "derived from the literature in communication and sociology" (1995). Benoit prefers the term 'image repair' to 'image restoration' because 'restoration' might imply that one's image has been restored to its prior state. Sometimes one has to settle for repair (or 'patches') and of course image restoration/repair may not work at all" (Benoit, 2000, p. 40). With that in mind, Benoit provides a systematic typology for image repair. First, Benoit (1997) described the necessary preconditions for image repair rhetoric to be appropriate. First, there must be an attack. Attacks have two elements. In 1997, Benoit described an attack as occurring when "1. The accused is held responsible for an action. 2. That act is considered offensive." Benoit (1997) noted that, "perceptions are more important than reality." Clearly, the responses to Schnatter's original position on the ACA held him accountable for a statement that many found offensive. What, then, are the response options for the attacked organizational rhetor? Benoit (1997) argued that, "the theory of image restoration discourse focuses on message options".

Regardless of the response option selected by the communicator, each of the techniques has image repair as its goal. Ideally, the organization would prevent crises using proactive behaviors, but "many organizations find themselves responding to crises rather than preventing them" (Baker, 2001, p. 513). Coombs (1998) observed that, "Crisis communication strategies (CCSs) are symbolic resources crisis managers employ in hope of protecting or repairing the organizational image" (p. 178). Protecting an organization's reputation is particularly important since reputation is the key to legitimacy (Metzler, 2001). For an organization to recover from a crisis, "they must regain or maintain their social legitimacy" (Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider, 1998, p. 61).

Jerome and Rowland identify 14 "possible restoration strategies" in Benoit's typology (2009, p. 397). Benoit (1997) described "five broad categories of image repair, some with variants". He posited that, "Denial and evasion of responsibility address the first component of persuasive attack, rejecting or reducing the accused's responsibility for the act in question. Reducing offensiveness and corrective action, the third and fourth broad category of image restoration, concern the second component of persuasive attack: reducing offensiveness of the act attributed to the accused. The last general strategy, mortification, tries to restore an image by asking forgiveness" (1997). Not every category applies to the present analysis. Each one of Benoit's types utilized in the analysis will be explained in more detail in the analysis section following.

Schnatter Attempts Image Repair

In response to charges leveled in the media and online, John Schnatter produced an editorial for publication on the *Huffington Post* website. His obvious objective is to answer attacks on himself and his company. Schnatter used at least five of the 14 techniques outlined in Benoit's typology: simple denial, shifting blame, defeasibility, and act performed with good intentions. Schnatter crafted this message

based on the specifics of his situation, with a view to quell dissent stimulated by his original statements of the ACA. Important to the rest of his argument, John Schnatter starts his editorial by quoting Lewis Lapham: “People may expect too much of journalism, Not only do they expect it to be entertaining, *they expect it to be true* [emphasis added]” (para. 1). By introducing this “truth standard,” Schnatter is setting the standard for his own discourse as well as that of his detractors. His operationalization of “truth” figures prominently in each of his efforts at image repair.

Simple Denial

Schnatter’s first effort involved simple denial, precisely, denial that the offensive act occurred. Given that his words were recorded and spoken in front of witnesses, denial that the act occurred seems inappropriate. Enter truth. Schnatter’s first line after the Lapham quotation was that, “Many in the media reported that I said Papa John’s is going to close stores and cut jobs because of Obamacare. *I never said that* [emphasis added]. The fact is we are going to open over hundreds of stores this year and next and increase employment by over 5,000 jobs worldwide. And we have no plans to cut team hours as a result of the Affordable Care Act” (para. 2). Charges could be leveled against Schnatter for using a straw person argument when he mischaracterized the attacks as focusing on store closure, while he did not address price increases or reduced worker hours at the start of his argument. If Schnatter’s premise (that he did not threaten to close stores) is true, then he was accurate in his denial. Further, if his claim that Papa John’s is opening new stores globally is correct, then it appears much less likely that he would have threatened to close stores. Schnatter tries, here, to persuade the reader that he is telling the truth about what actually happened in that college classroom—that his narrative, since it is true, should be preferred to that of the media. By establishing himself as the truth-teller, he discredits media accounts of the event—proving that he is blameless.

Shifting Blame

Schnatter’s next image repair argument represented another form of denial: shifting blame. When one accused of wrongdoing points to the involvement of another, whether individual or group, the purpose is to refocus audience attention away from the accused, thus relieving the accused of scrutiny they might otherwise receive, ultimately resulting in image repair. And, again, truth plays a role. Schnatter declares, that, “Clearly there was some misunderstanding somewhere” (para. 3). This statement is a clear shift of blame away from Schnatter, although the responsible party is yet to be identified. “Wrong” people somewhere created the confusion Schnatter faced. He provided evidence, and an actor, to support his idea of a misunderstanding. He continues, “The remarks that generated the headlines were made during an entrepreneur class I was asked to speak to at a Florida college. I was asked to share my experiences as an entrepreneur and to provide students with real-life small business situations. *Unbeknownst to me, until she identified herself, a reporter was there*” (para. 3). In other words, Schnatter believed that the reporter ambushed him, creating the misunderstanding. Following this, intended as evidence, Schnatter re-creates a portion of the exchange between himself and the report. Without repeating the exchange, the reporter asked Schnatter if he believed that his franchisees would cut hours in the wake of the ACA employer mandate. He responded that they will “find loopholes” and referred to cutting hours as “common sense” (para. 4).

Where, then, is the misunderstanding? Schnatter claimed that, “The reporter asked what I believed Papa John’s franchisees would do in response to Obamacare, not what Papa John’s would do” (para. 5). The first conclusion one might draw from this statement is that the reporter asked the wrong question. That is, she meant to ask him what his company would do, but instead asked him a question that

allowed him to avoid the real question. Schnatter answered the question truthfully, even if he suspected that the reporter misspoke. Another interpretation could be that the reporter asked the wrong question, but that the media, falsely, reported that his remarks were about his company. Either way, Schnatter positions himself as the more truthful party.

Defeasibility

Defeasibility is a technique used to repair image that involves claims that the blamed party either lacks information about the situation or does not have control over the situation. Without information and/or control, the accused cannot be held responsible, since in either instance, the accused could not have acted as the responsible party. Schnatter used both types of defeasibility and truth was at issue. Schnatter explained the role of franchisees in employment decisions: "Companies like Papa John's franchisees are largely a collection of small independent businesses. The average Papa John's franchisee owns three to four stores. Since our franchisees own the restaurants they operate, who they hire, how many hours they give each employee and what they pay each employee is up to them, not me or Papa John's" (para. 6). Schnatter explicitly stated that he and his company have no control over the pay of franchise employees. Schnatter's lack of knowledge about the details and specifics of franchise employment is implicitly argued, as well. Schnatter promotes the truth of his narrative that he is not to blame for the situation. He also assumed the persona of teacher in this passage, providing much needed information. Schnatter seemed to believe that the public did not have sufficient information to cast blame. Schnatter's lack of responsibility was evidenced by his lack of control and lack of knowledge.

Act Performed with Good Intentions

Often, despite the best intentions of the actor, an action has unintended consequences. A well-intentioned statement, taken out of context or insufficiently reported, might create the online and news media outcry. Schnatter claims that he acted with good intentions, since he made other statements during the class session that he believed were supportive of the ACA. Schnatter argued that, "During the same interview, talking about Obamacare I said, though it wasn't widely reported: 'The good news is 100% of the population (full-time workers) is going to get health insurance. I'm cool with that.' 'We're all going to pay for it. There's nothing for free.' 'And this way I get to provide health insurance and I'm not at a competitive disadvantage ... our competitors are going to have to do the same thing.'" (para. 7). In general, people are likely to be more forgiving of others believed to have acted in good faith. If Schnatter convinced his readers that his actions were honorable, he calculated the repair of his image more likely.

Analysis of Schnatter's Statement

Message Appropriateness and Effectiveness

Without doubt, the primary objective of image repair rhetoric is to effectively change public perceptions of the purported wrong doer. The strategist attempts to create a message appropriate to the situation and the communicator's goals. The audience and situation offer parameters for determining message appropriateness. Successfully determining what kind of message would appear to meet the needs of this specific audience would make effectiveness more likely. Similarly, crafting a message that unambiguously addresses the exigencies of the given situation would also make effectiveness more likely. Benoit and Drew (1997) address appropriateness and effectiveness of image repair messages. Their subjects were asked to rate the effectiveness or appropriateness of Benoit's typology of fourteen

strategies. Benoit and Drew offer their results: "Participants reported clear preferences among the fourteen potential image restoration utterances. Ratings for appropriateness and effectiveness were generally consistent" (1997, p. 159). One product of this research is a ranking of image repair techniques from most appropriate to least appropriate and most effective to least effective. If these rankings represent actual public sentiment, the analyst should be able to use these findings to explain the success or failure of particular image repair efforts.

The present investigation proposes that John Schnatter's effort at image repair failed and that the findings of Benoit and Drew (1997) offer important clues as to that failure. Of Schnatter's techniques, none is ranked as the most appropriate or effective techniques (mortification and corrective action) (Benoit & Drew, 1997, p. 159). Further, message particulars increase the chance that these messages will be inappropriate and ineffective. Benoit and Drew explain the necessary criteria for apology message effectiveness: "Thus, apologies are likely to be effective in dealing with problematic situations. If a person is responsible for an offensive act, we expect that person to apologize and we are often willing to forgive them when the apology seems sincere" (1997, p. 159). That is, the message should address the situation, the speaker should take responsibility, the speaker should apologize, and the apology should be sincere. Thus, in addition to Schnatter's choice of strategies, the nature of his message predicts/explains his lack of success.

Failure to Persuade

Ungar provides a direct measure of Schnatter's success, the YouGov BrandIndex (2012, 4, para. 6). YouGov BrandIndex explains their purpose and methodology:

BrandIndex is the authoritative measure of brand perception. Unlike any other brand intelligence services, BrandIndex continuously measures public perception of thousands of brands across dozens of sectors. We interview thousands of consumers every day, yielding over 2.5 million interviews a year. BrandIndex operates at national and international levels, allowing you to track brand perception in just one country, compare across multiple countries or monitor a global picture. ("About", 2014)

An observer should be able to look at Papa John's "Buzz" score, the marketplace perception of the company, both before and after Schnatter's initial statement and before and after Schnatter's editorial response to criticism and use observed changes to determine the effects of Schnatter's communication.

Ungar explains that on election day, prior to Schnatter's first public statement on Obamacare, the Papa John's Buzz score was 32. A month later the Buzz score had fallen to 5 (2012, December 4, para. 6). BrandIndex CEO Marzilli explicitly links Papa John's plummeting rating directly to Schnatter's political comments and, more importantly for this analysis, Schnatter's response was not effective: "Despite Schnatter's Huffington Post op-ed on November 20th claiming his words were twisted, Papa John's perception levels continued to experience one of its sharpest drops of the year, sending it well below rival Pizza Hut" (Marzilli, 2012). In explaining these results, Ungar notes that, "It turns out, the pizza eating public did not approve" of Schnatter's ACA comments (2012, December 4, para. 4).

Technique Selection

That Schnatter selected the wrong image repair techniques is an obvious explanation for Schnatter's

failure to repair his or Papa John's image. As noted above, empirical data indicates that some image repair techniques are more appropriate than others and that some techniques are more effective than others. That observation is the basis for the first critique of Schnatter's editorial. Two of Schnatter's four techniques, shifting blame and simple denial, were adjudged inappropriate and ineffective by Benoit and Drew's subjects (1997). Accordingly, Schnatter's failure is not surprising and could have been predicted. The ineffectiveness of Schnatter's choice of image repair techniques was amplified, though, by his choices of information within these two techniques.

In his simple denial, equivocation obscures both Schnatter's intent and responsibility. He claims that media reports concern store closure and job cuts. He does not address his threat to increase price. He also does not face the charges of elitism and class privilege that were part of the protest, both implicitly and explicitly. Schnatter's blank denial speaks to only a portion of the criticisms against him. To the reader with basic knowledge of the situation, his narrative lacks fidelity, the ring of truth, due to his omissions. Similarly, Schnatter's use of shifting blame suffers from incomplete information and a questionable shift of responsibility. Schnatter leaves no doubt that he is not responsible when he says that, "Clearly there was some misunderstanding somewhere" (para. 3). After a brief description of the setting, Schnatter shifts his focus to a reporter who was present, but not identified until she spoke to Schnatter. The clear implication is that the reporter is responsible for the interpretation of Schnatter's words, either by not identifying herself or by being a member of the press. Neither of these appears a sufficient justification for blaming the reporter for the PR disaster Schnatter faced.

Defeasibility was another of Schnatter's efforts at image repair. This technique is ranked above shifting blame and simple denial, but is still not perceived as very effective. Much of the success of this technique would lie in its artful application and presentation. Schnatter argues that Papa John's corporate does not control franchisees. The first problem with this claim lies in the sentences directly preceding it in Schnatter's piece. He refers to "Companies like Papa John's" as "largely a collection of small independent businesses" (para. 6). It is easy to imagine that the reader unversed in business law would understand his claim. Rather, it may be simpler to see that collection as one company—every store says "Papa John's" on the door.

Schnatter's fourth technique, good intentions, rated quite well among Benoit and Drew's subjects—third most appropriate and fifth most effective of 14 techniques (p. 158). This technique is far more likely to be successful than the previous techniques—people expect to hear good intentions and believe that they work to some degree. To demonstrate his good intentions, Schnatter reminds readers that some of his message had not been reported on—and he thinks that part of the message is important. He does not go so far as to label these statements as exculpatory, but clearly implies that the reader should understand that his motives are pure, as evidenced by his positive comments about Obamacare. Positive commentary may have indicated to audience members that Schnatter was not biased against the ACA and that his words that day should be viewed in that positive light. Schnatter's remarks, though, are difficult to take in a constructive sense.

At best, his words indicate resignation and at worst can be read as threats. First, Schnatter quotes himself as saying, "The good news is 100% of the population (full-time workers) is going to get health insurance. I'm cool with that" (para. 7). A sentence like, "I'm cool with that" does not indicate a high degree of support, but rather speaks to Schnatter's sense of resignation over the coming ACA. His words indicate that he won't fight it, but won't support it either. The next comment Schnatter identifies as pro-ACA is, "We're all going to pay for it. There's nothing for free" (para. 7). This wording looks as if Schnatter is condescending to explain things to children. A comment like this seems to be an answer to

another statement or question—a rebuttal of something, not a clean statement of support. Rather, he reminds his audience that they will have to pay for what they get—a threat at some level. In the remaining comment, Schnatter intended to demonstrate goodwill—he won't be in a bad position economically because the ACA will affect his competitors, as well (para. 7). This statement is neutral, neither supporting nor attacking the ACA. No one gets money; no one loses money. Again, this statement does not serve as evidence of his support of or neutrality about the ACA.

Conclusion

The present analysis offers information useful for two broader purposes: future research and crisis communication instruction. This empirical analysis aids future research, first, by providing preliminary verification of Benoit and Drew's (1997) predictions about the effectiveness of various strategic options for the corporate apologist. Specifically, Schnatter's use of techniques expected to be less successful was, indeed, unproductive. Also, his use of techniques expected to be more successful failed due to Schnatter's inappropriate execution of the form of the technique. In addition, though, to confirming Benoit and Drew's analysis, this research suggests that future empirical research on image repair/restoration strategies will likely further contribute to the body of knowledge on this common form of corporate communication.

This analysis may serve as an instruction aid in crisis and/or organizational communication courses. Several features suggest the appropriateness of this case study. First, the rhetorical artifact is fairly brief and clearly written. Student should be able to read Schnatter's statement quickly, allowing a greater amount of time to spend on analysis. Second, Schnatter's image repair efforts correspond unambiguously to Benoit's taxonomy. This provides students with the opportunity to see what Benoit envisioned for the relevant categories—using actual crisis communication. The individual instructor may guide the discussion of Schnatter's try at image repair toward the specific lesson at hand without losing precious class time dealing with a complicated case or a questionable application of Benoit's ideas.

“It turns out that being a good corporate citizen is as important to selling pizzas as the thinness of the crust or the quality of the cheese” (Ungar, 2014, December 4, para. 1). Papa John's CEO and founder, John Schnatter, found himself in the midst of a crisis in public confidence in him and his company after his remarks on the ACA. Schnatter was attacked in the news media and online, even having a Facebook protest page opened about him and his company. Schnatter's response to this reproach was an editorial written for and published in the *Huffington Post*. In this piece, Schnatter set a standard of truth that the audience expected. Unfortunately, Schnatter did not meet his own criterion. His omissions of important information, misdirection of his audience to blame a reporter, shifting responsibility to franchise owners, and providing inadequate or contradictory evidence of his good intentions, were untruthful and/or inadequate evidence of Schnatter's blamelessness. Instead, his words of defense ultimately convict him of the charges he tries to avoid. Schnatter should have known better than to “mix his politics with his pepperoni” (Ungar, 2012, December 4).

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