



BEYOND REACTIVE CRISIS COMMUNICATION WITH THE MEDIA: AN INTEGRATED CRISIS COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

For organisations to survive in an ever-changing milieu, as evident from the current business environment, sufficient crisis communication and management practices need to be in place to ensure organisational survival. Despite the latter, organisational crises are often inefficiently managed which could be ascribed to the lack of managing crises *strategically* coupled with an industry-wide mindset that crisis communication should only be practiced reactively. This paper explores the lack of strategic crisis communication processes within the *financial industry* as case study, to ensure effective crisis communication with the *media* as stakeholder group, through the proposition of an *integrated crisis communication (ICC) framework*, which focuses on: Combining integrated communication (IC) literature with Grunig's (1992) theory of communication excellence to build *sustainable media relationships* through *two-way communication*; and implementing a crisis communication process that has *proactive, reactive* and *post-evaluative crisis communication stages*, thereby moving beyond crisis communication as a predominant reactive function.

INTRODUCTION

Chong (2004, p. 43) argues that crisis management should form part of the strategic management process, however, Pollard and Hotho (2006, p. 726) maintain that this rarely happens due to the apathetic attitude of some managers towards crisis management and the lack of crisis preparedness or proactive crisis management which explains the established reactive nature of crisis management. Ashby and Diacon (2000, p. 7) emphasise the importance to integrate crisis management in the strategic management process which is echoed by Verwey, Crystal and Bloom (2002, p. 33) who contend that "any crisis that develops into a life-threatening or image-threatening event, is most certainly a matter of failure of the corporate structure and processes, and is ultimately the responsibility of the chief executive and directors." Furthermore, Pollard and Hotho (2006, p. 731) argue that because the media has the power to shape the public opinion of an organisation, sufficient communication and relationships with the media is of essence. Hence the main focus of this study is to explore the importance of *strategic* communication to ensure effective crisis communication with the media. An integrated crisis communication (ICC) framework based on the integrated communication (IC) principles and Grunig's theory of communication excellence is proposed based on the premises that both recognise communication as a strategic function; and the importance of stakeholder relationship building through two-way communication.

An exploratory case study approach focusing on the top ten South African financial services providers during 2008 is applied. The financial industry has been selected because it is a sensitive industry that is often scrutinised, as people entrust their money to these institutions (De Lange 2008, Van Tonder 2008) or as stated by Wu (2003, p. 14), "The financial sector is like the oil in an engine. Without oil, the economic engine will function defectively, if at all."

Strategic crisis communication is contextualised in terms of the main issues indicated in Table 1:

Table 1: Key issues underlining strategic crisis communication

Issues	Description
The reciprocal relationship between crisis management and crisis communication (Stocker, 1997, p. 189; Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p. 146; Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 9)	For the purposes of this study, to be strategic, the crisis management process resembles the stages of a strategic management process, namely, planning, implementation and evaluation. It is further argued that crisis communication is the interaction between an organisation and its stakeholders before, during and after a crisis. Media relations should be a continuous task – it is not a reactive effort only when publicity is required. Established media relations prior to a crisis will benefit and assist an organisation in resolving a crisis. It is hence argued that crisis communication from an IC perspective should prevail before, during and after a crisis to encapsulate the entire crisis management process integrating proactive, reactive and post-evaluative crisis management stages to enhance a <i>reciprocal</i> relationship between crisis management and crisis communication.
A crisis communication process comprised of proactive, reactive and post-evaluative stages (Benoit & Pang, 2008, p. 252; Diers, 2007, p. 8; Pollard & Hotho, 2006, p. 726; Kash & Darling, 1998, p. 180; Preble, 1997, p. 770; Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996, p. 85)	This study holds that a strategic management process possesses planning, implementation and evaluative stages and that crisis communication will occur during each stage of the crisis management process, thereby integrating proactive, reactive and post-evaluative stages. The proactive crisis communication stage implies that issues should be identified and resolved to avoid possible crises through two-way communication to build sustainable relationships with stakeholders. The reactive crisis communication stage refers to all communication activities that need to be employed to mitigate the crisis and to ensure accurate media reporting. Lastly, the post-evaluative crisis communication stage holds that interaction with the media after a crisis has to be evaluated, key areas of improvement should be identified and has to focus on repairing any misperceptions that could have been reported.
Sustainable stakeholder relationship building (Wright, 2001, p. 18; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p. 2)	Two-way symmetrical communication should be applied in order to build relationships with the media proactively to ensure the organisation obtains more favourable media reporting during a crisis.
IC for strategic crisis communication (Duncan, 2002, p. 8; Niemann, 2005, p. 30)	The importance of communication as a <i>strategic</i> function is inevitable, as communication is the connection between strategy and desirable outcomes. For the purpose of this paper, the need for <i>strategic</i> crisis communication will be addressed through the application of IC. IC can be defined as "the strategic management process of organisationally controlling or influencing all messages and encouraging purposeful data-driven dialogue to create and nourish long-term



	profitable relationships with stakeholders” (Duncan 2002:8; Niemann 2005:30). Consequently, the four key IC characteristics guided this research, namely: stakeholder centricity; the combination of internal and external communication; the facilitation of two-way communication; and a strategic communication process. These characteristics are interrelated and it is contended that a stakeholder focus will initiate dialogue between the organisation and its various stakeholders, while a strategic management process implies that the communication process must permeate through the entire organisation, thereby building on the concept of internal and external communication integration.
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In conjunction with these insights obtained from the literature, various crisis communication and management theories and models were explored to support the key arguments of the study.

Grunig's (1992, pp. 3-28) excellence theory, developed in 1984, not only facilitates strategic communication, but also underlines the importance of utilising two-way communication to build sustainable relationships with stakeholders, thereby empowering communication as a management function which can facilitate *strategic* crisis communication through an IC perspective that is stakeholder centric. The excellence theory (Grunig 1992) evolved from the search to determine how public relations should be practiced and the communication function be organised in order to contribute to *organisational success* and also highlights the *monetary value* of public relations to the organisation if it aligns the organisation's goals with the prospects of strategic constituencies (Grunig, Grunig & Ehling, 1992, p. 86). Furthermore, sustainable relationships with strategic constituencies contribute towards organisational *effectiveness* if the public relations manager is a member of the *dominant coalition* (a group of individuals who has the power to set organisational direction) of the organisation where he or she has the ability to shape organisational objectives (Grunig et al, 1992, p. 86).

Fearn-Banks (2007, p. 54) and Marra (1992, p. 38) recognise the applicability of the excellence theory to crisis communication and management. According to Fearn-Banks (2007, p. 55), organisations are forced to practice two-way symmetrical communication in crisis situations, although most often organisations engage in asymmetrical, one-way communication practices. Marra (1992, p. 38) argues that sustainable stakeholder relationship building prior to a crisis as a key quality of the excellence theory, will assist the organisation to manage a crisis effectively. The absence of interrelationships creates conflict which significantly increases during crisis situations. Marra (1992, p. 39) therefore maintained that "excellent crisis communication is an organisation's ability to produce or maintain positive or neutral relationships with key publics." Hence, principles from the excellence theory and IC were utilised as key components in the case study to determine the existence of a strategic crisis communication process and formed the foundation of the ICC framework.

To further emphasise the need for an integrated communication approach to crisis communication, the evaluation of existing crisis communication and management processes exhibited a strategic framework and lacked strategic depth, as the processes failed to portray that crisis communication should be applied at each stage, emphasising the lack of reciprocal relationship between crisis management and crisis communication.

METHODOLOGY

An exploratory, qualitative case study approach was applied to determine whether crisis management and crisis communication processes are practiced strategically in order to contribute towards effective crisis communication with the media, which was evaluated against identified IC and excellence theory variables.

The target population included financial organisations within South Africa, while the sampling frame comprised the top 10 financial organisations in South Africa obtained from Financial Mail's review of South Africa's top listed organisations (based on financial performance) for 2008. It included financial organisations from various sectors of the financial industry, including the banking, investment and insurance sectors which is collectively referred to as '*financial services providers*'. The organisations that formed part of the selection, in ranking order, were Sanlam, Standard Bank Group, Old Mutual Plc, FirstRand, Absa Group, Nedbank, Liberty Holdings, Liberty Group, Investec and Investec Plc (Lünsche 2008:29-30). Each of these organisations' communication and marketing departments was contacted in order to construct a realised *sample* based on the feedback obtained. The sampling method was *purposive* with the focus on the top ten *financial* institutions in South Africa due to the industry's vulnerability to crises and to specifically conduct an interview and focus group discussion with participants that work in the *communication* departments and are responsible for developing and implementing crisis communication and management plans within the organisation; as well as *convenient* based on the accessibility and availability of the institutions to participate in the study. The realised convenient sample was the Absa group's group marketing and corporate affairs department.

Triangulation through an explorative one-on-one interview and focus group was utilised as data collection methods. Firstly, a semi-structured questionnaire was used in the interview with the Acting Manager: Chief Executive Communication for the Absa group with the aim to evaluate whether Absa's crisis communication processes were strategic and what measures, if any, were utilised to build sustainable stakeholder techniques. Secondly, a focus group was conducted to specifically measure Absa's crisis communication processes with the media. The focus group comprised seven senior communication managers situated in Absa's Group Marketing and Communication department. Thirdly, Absa's draft crisis communication plan was also evaluated to support arguments.

FINDINGS FROM THE CASE STUDY

The following key insights have been obtained from the case study based on the theoretical framework:

Strategic communication

It was argued that the proposed proactive, reactive and post evaluative crisis communication stages represent the planning, implementation and evaluation actions of a *strategic management process*. However, the participants did not indicate that strategy has anything to do with planning, implementation or evaluation, but rather a matter of *utilising resources optimally in order to maximise return*. Theoretically it was argued that strategic crisis communication was regarded as a necessity to implement strategy to give advice on the outcomes of business decisions, as opposed to merely implementing top management decisions and serving a technical function. From this it was evident that the boundary spanning role, as highlighted in the literature, was evident, which means that by having strategic crisis communicators to communicate answers initiated by themselves to the media, consistent and accurate responses will be ensured. The research also indicated that communicators work closely with stakeholders during a crisis, and that their insights were key determinants on various business decisions during a crisis to advise top management of the necessary actions to be taken during a crisis. Based on the results, it can be argued that the focus should be less on the various levels necessary to implement a strategic crisis communication plan, and more on the strategic advisory role that (crisis) communicators play on each level.



The crisis communication process

Although the crisis communication actions in Absa's draft crisis communication plan could be categorised according to the proposed crisis communication stages (although not presented as such), the participants regarded crisis communication as an independent process and not a key element of the crisis management process which did not support the viewpoint that a reciprocal relationship between crisis communication and crisis management should exist. Furthermore, participants viewed crisis communication as a *reactive* function and that planning and avoiding crises will never be the organisational agenda; the focus will always be on *positioning* Absa in the best possible manner. The participants did view actions that form part of proactive crisis communication (among others, risk communication, stakeholder relationship building and media liaison in order to create cooperation and openness with stakeholders prior to a crisis) as elements that form part of either reputation management or issues management. Additionally, there seems to be a contradiction in what the communication practitioners believe and what is stipulated in the crisis communication plan (as the plan does present an integrated structure), probably because the plan has not yet been formally implemented, or was developed by an external crisis communication specialist with a different outlook than the communication managers on the ideal crisis communication plan for Absa. Based on the results of the case study it is argued that proactive crisis communication should be rephrased in future to better define the two-way communication actions that have to be implemented prior to a crisis to ensure sufficient crisis management, specifically because the actions encapsulated by this phrase should not only be implemented for crisis communication only, but also for IC for sustainable stakeholder relationship building in general.

Participants placed less emphasis on post-evaluative crisis communication as opposed to reactive and proactive crisis measures, and indicated that it was only shared with top management no forum to share knowledge and to restore relationships was present. Although limited, the draft crisis communication plan did propose follow-up measures to some extent.

Crisis communication with the media

The participants stated that obtaining all the facts and having a single spokesperson as the most important elements of successful crisis communication with the media. The participants regarded *two-way communication* as a matter of course and not as a *stakeholder relationship building* tool. Despite this, the participants indicated that Absa has valuable two-way communication tools that are utilised to build relationships between the various business units and the media, such as media roundtables and forums. Furthermore, they said that although sustainable media relationships are essential to ensure sufficient crisis communication, it depends on the ethics and integrity of the journalist and publication to determine what will be reported on in a crisis.

This is in line with the literature review where it was argued that two-way crisis communication with the media is the preferred approach, but that it is not always possible due to the confidentiality of information, as the media is not the only stakeholder to consider during a crisis. The literature review also indicated that in order to decrease the risk of false reporting, the organisation's spokesperson should always be available for comments and provide information on the latest developments of the crisis, and to communicate with journalists after a crisis to stipulate what will be done to avoid similar occurrences in future. The results of the study indicated that in reality one cannot always control what will be reported in a crisis, despite following this relationship building recipe. For example, the focus group participants argued that the core focus in a crisis should not be on two-way communication with all stakeholders, but rather on how to resolve the crisis, although they agreed that the value thereof should be evident at a proactive crisis communication level.

IC variables

Theoretically it was argued that IC variables necessary for crisis communication are organisational mission marketing; a combination of internal and external communication; and the utilisation of cross functional departmental expertise. It was also argued that an organic organisational structure to generate a participative internal climate and purposeful interactivity is regarded as ideal, but not essential for crisis communication. In the research some participants did indicate that an IC department will contribute towards strategic communication practices, but others felt that it will only ensure more structured communication messages during a crisis. Participants agreed that the success of IC depends upon the employees' willingness to work together and that two-way communication, a key variable of the excellence theory, was not consciously utilised to build sustainable stakeholder relationships (an IC element), but was regarded as a matter of course.

Excellence theory variables

With regards to excellence theory variables, the participants supported the viewpoint of conducting research proactively and post-evaluatively to a crisis. However, they stated that proactive research will not necessarily assist the organisation to manage (reactive) a crisis more effectively and that post evaluation could assist the organisation to make the necessary adjustments to the crisis plan in order to ensure more sufficient crisis communication in future. A further variable of the excellence theory supported by the participants was access to top management. Some participants argued that in order to make a crisis communication plan strategic it has to be elevated to top management level. However, the predominant viewpoint was that communication should be practiced strategically through communication practitioners that give top management advice on the outcomes of their business decisions. Furthermore, it was also confirmed that all the variables of the excellence theory and IC do not have equal merit on each stage of a crisis as stipulated in the results of the one-on-one questionnaire. Consequently, it is evident that an excellence and IC mindset still need to be instilled within the communication department, and be supported by the organisation as a whole in order to facilitate strategic and efficient crisis communication. Participants realised that by institutionalising IC principles within the communication department, the elements necessary to ensure a strategic crisis communication process could be evident.

In summary, to answer the research sub-problem of determining whether Absa's crisis communication plan can be proactively, reactively and post-evaluatively applied and categorised as part of the crisis management process to contribute towards strategic crisis communication with the media, the following insights have been obtained: Firstly, respondents from Absa indicated that they do not regard crisis communication as a function that encapsulates the crisis management process, rather as a reactive function upon the occurrence of a crisis. However, important preparation and evaluation actions that have to be implemented to ensure sufficient crisis communication reactively were realised, but these actions were regarded as part of risk management or issues management. Secondly, it was agreed that the variables of IC and the excellence theory need to be evident to ensure a strategic crisis communication plan, together with a process that has proactive, reactive and post-evaluative crisis communication stages.

From the above findings, four key insights underlined the proposed ICC framework (although not always necessarily supported by the participants): a strategic crisis communication plan should have proactive, reactive and post-evaluative crisis communication stages; the advisory role of crisis communication should be emphasised on each stage of crisis communication to contribute towards practicing crisis communication strategically; proactive crisis communication should be rephrased to *integrated crisis communication* to highlight that, upon

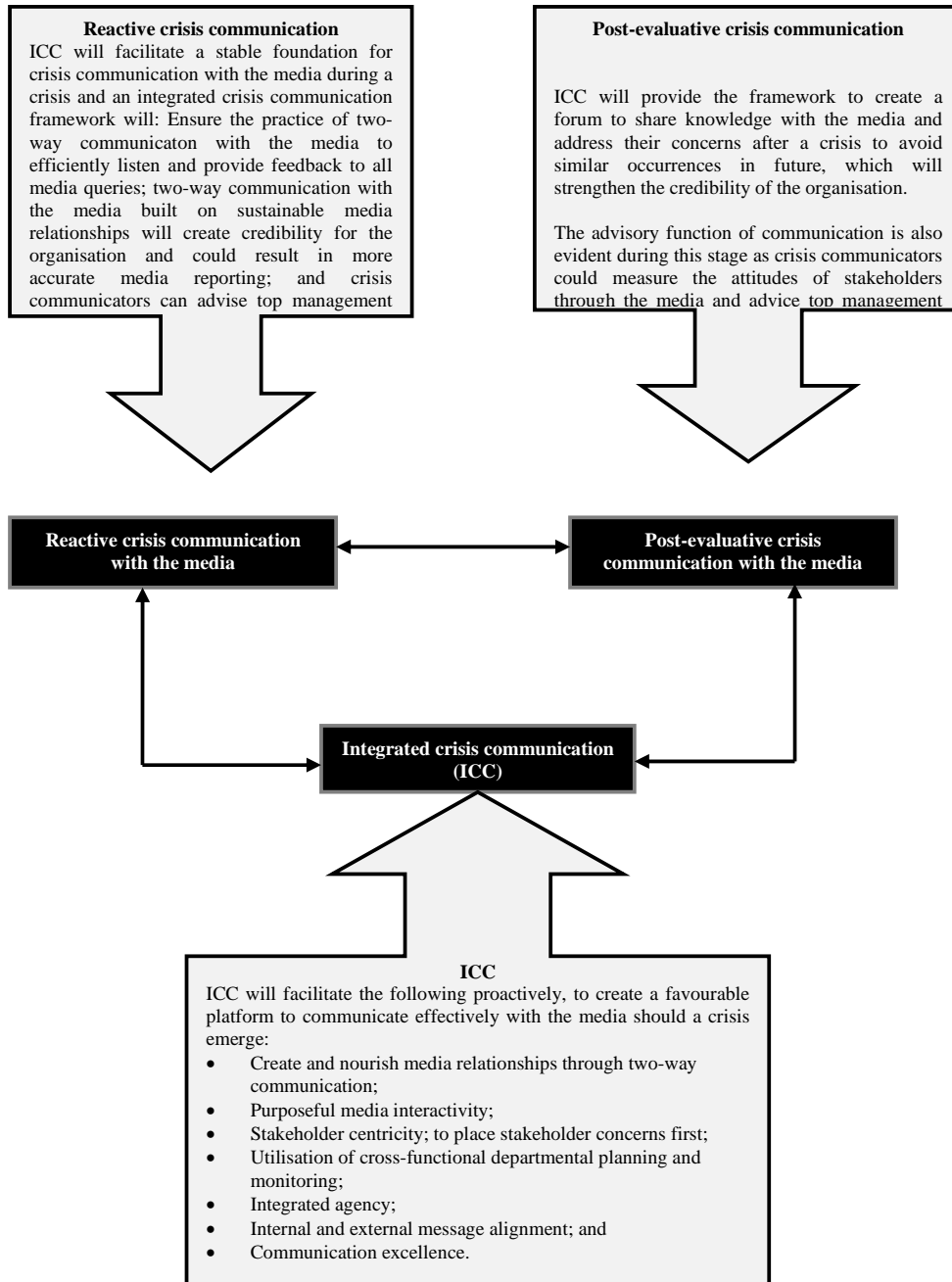


the implementation of IC principles, proactive crisis communication measures will by default be evident; and excellence theory variables need to be practiced alongside IC variables, as it became evident that these concepts overlap.

AN ICC FRAMEWORK FOR STRATEGIC CRISIS COMMUNICATION WITH THE MEDIA

The definition proposed for ICC follows on the definition of IC proposed in the literature review and is adapted to address strategic stakeholder relationship building with the *media* as stakeholder group proactively, reactively and post-evaluatively. ICC is defined as *an IC*

Figure 1: An ICC framework for strategic crisis communication with the media*



process in which two-way communication is utilised to build sustainable media relationships which will serve as the platform for purposeful dialogue between the media and the organisation before, during and after a crisis.

Based on the four key insights of this study, an ICC framework to facilitate strategic crisis communication with the media is proposed in Figure 1: * Adapted from Swart (2010, p. 185)



From Figure 1 it is evident that an ICC framework presents a process that should have proactive, reactive and post-evaluative stages. Although the proactive crisis communication stage is not regarded as a separate stage, the implementation of ICC serves as the foundation for effective reactive and post-evaluative crisis communication with the media thereby fulfilling the necessary proactive crisis communication measures. ICC should always be practiced within the organisation to contribute towards effective communication with all stakeholders, while the reactive crisis communication stage, followed by post-evaluative crisis communication stage, will only be practiced once a crisis occurs. ICC therefore focuses on building and maintaining sustainable media relationships which could serve as a prevention and preparation function to communicate effectively with the media during a crisis.

As the research problem focused on exploring crisis communication processes' lack of strategy to contribute towards effective crisis communication with the media, it is vital to highlight the ICC framework's facilitation towards a *strategic* crisis communication process. In addition to the application of IC principles, which is seen as the key facilitator of a strategic crisis communication process, it can further be achieved through a crisis communication structure with proactive, reactive and post-evaluative crisis communication stages, which correlate with the stages of a strategic management plan; the promotion of stakeholder relationship building through two-way communication, since organisations rely on the goodwill of stakeholders for survival, which highlights the necessity of stakeholder relationship building on strategic level; and the facilitation of the advisory role of crisis communication in which crisis communicators assist top management on the outcome of their business decisions.

CONCLUSION

This paper focused on determining whether crisis communication processes, in theory and in practice, are strategic and contribute towards effective crisis communication with the media. This problem was addressed through exploring existing literature and conducting a case study at Absa bank through a three-fold data collection approach consisting of a case study, focus group and an evaluation of a draft crisis communication plan.

The main contribution of this study is the promotion of a *strategic crisis communication* process through predominantly focusing on stakeholder relationship building through two-way communication which were absent and/or limited in existing literature. However, other vital elements still need to be considered to contribute towards this strategic process, including the alignment of the crisis communication strategy with the overall communication and organisational strategy. In addition, this study signified the need that crisis communication should have a reciprocal relationship with crisis management; thereby emphasising that crisis communication is not only a reactive process but that two-way crisis communication has to be practiced before, during and after a crisis. Subsequently a unique coherence and complementary relationship between IC and the excellence theory variables was identified, emphasising the proposition of ICC to facilitate *strategic* crisis communication with the media and the importance to build sustainable stakeholder relationships in general. The main limitation is probably the question of generalisability as Absa is not an accurate representation of all successful South African financial services providers. However, the scope of qualitative research is limited, and a sample in qualitative research is not meant to be a representation of the population, but rather a generalisation to theory. Regardless of the latter, the purpose of utilising a case study was specifically to compare *theory* and *practice* and can serve as a benchmark for future research through the proposal of an ICC *framework* as guideline to instil effective crisis communication with the media

Future research could go beyond the focus of this study on the perspective of the organisation in crises scenarios and explore the viewpoint of the media on how an organisational crisis should be managed. Similarly, the focus could also be on the perspective of any other stakeholder group on a crisis, such as employees. The research proposed an ICC approach; thereby focusing, among others, on the crisis communication process translated into proactive, reactive and post evaluative crisis communication stages. Future research can address the lack of post-evaluative crisis communication specifically through the installation of a two-way crisis communication forum, or solely focusing on ICC as a proactive crisis measure. Furthermore, the value of stakeholder relationship building through two-way communication and the value of relationships with the media during a crisis could also be measured. It is concluded that the ICC framework will not only assist in managing and resolving a crisis effectively, but will also ensure sustainable stakeholder relationship building within the organisation as a whole - going beyond traditional reactive approaches.

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