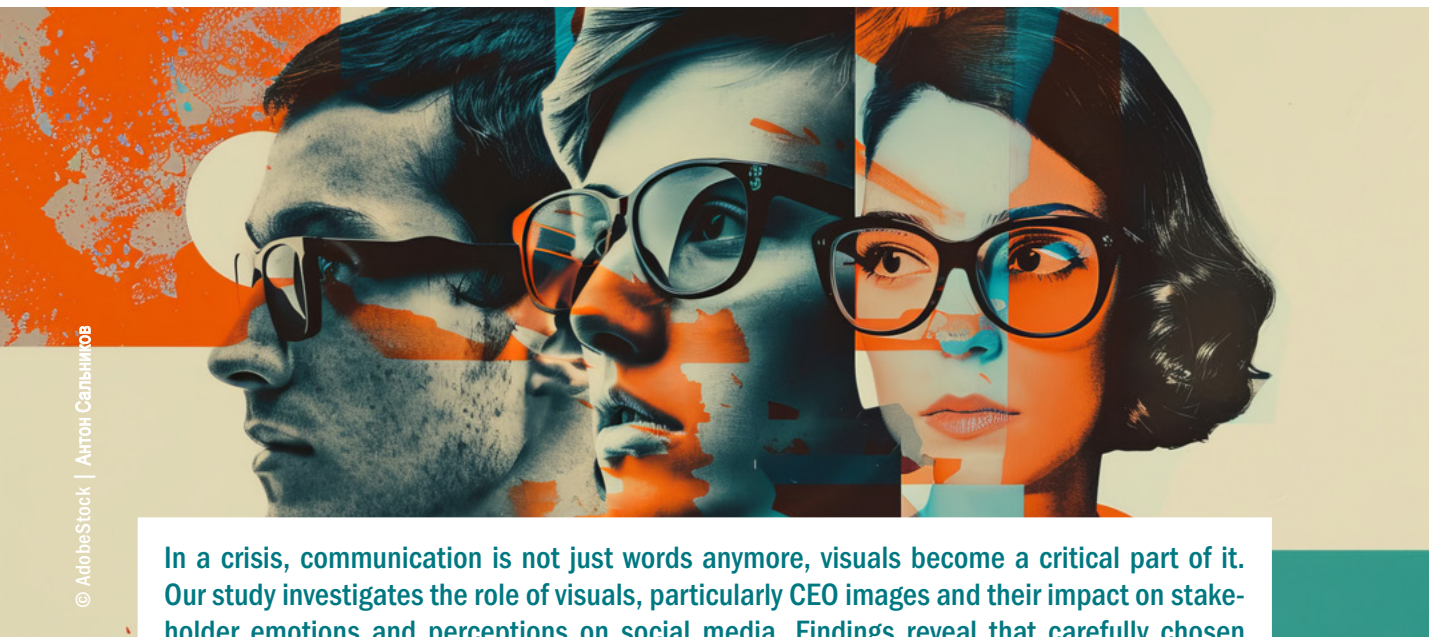


DO CEO VISUALS MATTER IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION?

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In a crisis, communication is not just words anymore, visuals become a critical part of it. Our study investigates the role of visuals, particularly CEO images and their impact on stakeholder emotions and perceptions on social media. Findings reveal that carefully chosen visuals can mitigate anger and improve reputational outcomes. For corporate communication professionals, this research provides actionable insights into leveraging strategic visuals to navigate crises effectively.

INCORPORATING VISUALS IN CRISIS RESPONSES

In today's media landscape, a crisis can escalate within minutes, with social media serving as the primary battleground. While verbal strategies in crisis communication have been widely studied, the role of visuals – particularly CEO images – has received less attention. This study bridges that gap by examining how different image types affect stakeholder perceptions of responsibility, anger, and reputation during a corporate crisis.

This study employs the *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (SCCT; Coombs, 2007) and *Associative Network Theory* (ANT; Anderson, 1983) to evaluate how verbal and visual strategies intersect. SCCT guides the messaging strategy by categorizing crises into victim, accidental, and

preventable clusters depending on level of responsibility and prior crisis history, each requiring distinct responses. ANT adds a layer of understanding by explaining how visuals trigger associations in stakeholders' memories, influencing their emotional and cognitive responses.

Through an experimental design, the study tests three message strategies – apology, excuse, and attack accuser – paired with four visual types: no image, product image, a stereotypical CEO (formal attire at a podium), and a CEO reflecting the corporate character (e.g., casual clothing in a setting aligned with corporate values). This combination reveals key insights into the power of visuals in corporate crisis responses.

SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY (COOMBS, 2007)

- Posits that an organization's previous crisis history (i.e., repeated behaviors), perceived attribution of responsibility for the crisis, and prior reputation shape stakeholders' perceptions of the crisis situation.
 - Categorizes crises into three clusters:
 - Victim: Stakeholders attribute a low level of crisis responsibility to the organization; lowest reputational threat (e.g., natural disasters, product tampering).
 - Accidental: Stakeholders assign a moderate level attribution of crisis responsibility to the organization.
 - Preventable: Stakeholders attribute a high level of responsibility to the organization because of the organization's wrong-doing.
- Recommends the most appropriate crisis message strategies based on the crisis clusters, considering how much responsibility is attributed to the organization and the reputational threat.

ASSOCIATIVE NETWORK THEORY OF MEMORY (ANDERSON, 1983; KRISHNAN, 1996)

- Posits that human memory consists of information pieces (nodes) and those information pieces are linked with one another, like a network.
- When people see one piece of information, it can activate a network and association in memory to react in various ways.
 - Visual cues in social media messages during a crisis can trigger direct or indirect associations with the organization and the crisis.

EFFECTS OF VISUALS

CEO images and reputation perception

The presence of a CEO in crisis communication can influence how stakeholders perceive an organization's accountability and leadership. The study found that a CEO image in a formal setting, wearing professional attire and speaking at a podium, was associated with the highest reputational scores compared to other image types, particularly a product image. This suggests that formal CEO images may reinforce a sense of accountability and control, making it particularly effective in crises where the organization has partial or significant responsibility of the crisis. Given that stakeholders often expect a high-ranking executive to publicly address such situations, a CEO appearing in a traditional leadership role can help mitigate reputational damage.

However, it's important to consider the context in which the CEO image is presented. While a formal CEO image strengthens perceptions of leadership, it may not be the best choice for all types of crises. In cases where stakeholders seek empathy and personal connection, a different type of CEO image – one that reflects the company's values in a more relatable setting – may be more effective.

Authenticity mitigates negative emotion

The study found that CEO images that reflected corporate character, such as a leader in a mission-driven setting aligned with company values, appeared to reduce anger levels among stakeholders compared to product images or no-image conditions. In the study, the hypothetical company was a restaurant chain facing a food-related crisis. When the CEO was photographed in a local farm setting which in alignment with the brand's core values, the negative emotional response was minimal. The CEO image was embedded in an environment that reinforced the company's connection to ethical food sourcing and sustainability.

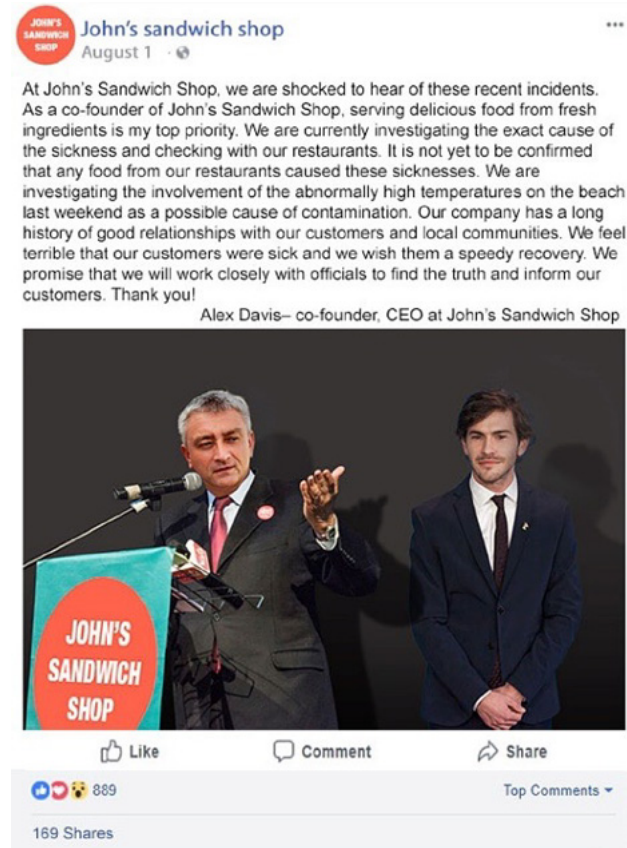
Although the statistical significance was marginal, the trend suggests that when a CEO is depicted in a more relatable and mission-driven environment, stakeholders may interpret the response as more genuine and emotionally engaging. This finding has implications for corporate crisis communication strategy. When selecting visuals for crisis response, organizations should consider whether a formal or informal CEO image aligns better with stakeholder expectations. In crises that require a strong display of leadership and accountability, a formal CEO image may be more effective. However, when emotional connection and brand authenticity are more critical, a CEO image that aligns with the company's mission and values may help diffuse negative emotions and foster goodwill.

Product images may reinforce crisis associations

The study found that using a product image in crisis communication can have unintended negative consequences, as it may reinforce stakeholder associations with the crisis itself. Participants who viewed a product image during the crisis scenario reported higher levels of anger and lower reputational evaluations compared to those who saw CEO images or no image. One possible explanation for this effect is that the product image directly reminded them of the crisis, reinforcing negative associations rather than shifting attention to the company's response efforts, particularly in situations where the product itself is linked to the issue. In the case of a food safety crisis, for example, an image of the company's product may inadvertently reinforce stakeholder concerns about safety and quality, leading to greater frustration and distrust.

This finding highlights the importance of carefully selecting visuals that shift attention away from the crisis itself and toward the organization's response. When managing reputational threats, human-centric imagery, such as a CEO or employees actively addressing the situation, may help direct stakeholder focus toward corrective actions rather than the problem itself.

Example of an image stimuli in the experiment



Source: Yook & Stacks, 2024

VISUAL STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

- Strategic use of CEO visuals:** While CEO visibility in crisis response can enhance credibility, its effectiveness depends on the crisis context. A stereotypical CEO image (formal, podium-style) may reinforce authority and responsibility, making it a useful choice for accidental crises where companies need to provide explanations. However, in crises where reducing negative emotions, such as anger, is crucial, a CEO reflecting corporate character may be more effective in softening stakeholder response. This approach is especially effective for brands with strong corporate values.

- › **Limit product images in crisis messaging:** Organizations should be cautious when incorporating product images into crisis messages. While products represent the brand, they can also serve as reminders of the crisis by keeping the focus on the problem rather than the company's response. Instead, focus on visuals that highlight the company's leadership or values to shift stakeholder focus away from the crisis itself.
- › **Prepare for visual-text integration:** Crisis communicators should ensure that visual choices align with verbal messaging strategies to maximize impact. For example, an apology message paired with a CEO image may be more effective in preventable type of crises than an apology with a product image, which could appear impersonal. Similarly, excuse messages may benefit from a formal CEO image to reinforce the company's reputation. Without alignment, visuals may dilute the intended message or even contradict the organization's strategic response.
- › **Pre-test visuals for crisis response:** Given the variability in audience responses, communicators consider pre-testing visual strategies before deploying crisis messages on social media. Conducting small-scale audience testing or leveraging real-time feedback mechanisms can help organizations refine their visual choices to better match stakeholder expectations.

OUTLOOK

As social media continues to dominate corporate communication, organizations must recognize that crisis response is no longer just about having right words – it's about creating a cohesive message where visuals and text work together to influence stakeholder perceptions. This study highlights the increasing role of visuals in public reaction to crisis messages, demonstrating that integrating visuals with verbal messages is a strategic decision that can impact corporate reputation and stakeholder emotional responses. While verbal messaging remains the primary, our study findings suggest that carefully chosen visuals can complement message strategies and enhance the effectiveness of communication.

The results indicate that CEO images can add value in certain crisis scenarios, particularly when an organization needs to demonstrate accountability in preventable and accidental types of crisis. Product images, in contrast, may reinforce negative associations in crises related to product failures or safety concerns, signaling the need for caution in

their use. The effectiveness of different image types is context-dependent, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. These insights underscore the importance of aligning visual choices with crisis type, messaging strategy, and organizational values.

In addition to the use of visuals, the use of video-based responses should also be considered, given the increasing use of videos on social media platforms. Additionally, cultural variations in how CEO presence and visual messaging are perceived should be explored, as interpretations of authenticity, leadership, and corporate responsibility may differ globally.

For corporate communicators, the takeaway is clear: In crisis communication, strategic visual choices must align with both the organization's values and the crisis context. This way, organizations can create more compelling crisis responses that resonate with stakeholders, manage reputation and navigate crises more effectively in an ever-changing media landscape.

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MORE INFORMATION

A more detailed discussion of the study can be found in Yook & Stacks, 2024, on which this article is based.