Compassion Without Blame: Testing the Accident Decision Flow Chart With the Crash of ValuJet Flight 592

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Outgoing corporate messages used by ValuJet in the 1st month after the crash of its Flight 592 and the media coverage published in 2 newspapers were content analyzed and compared. ValuJet used both mortification and ingratiatio strategies as predicted by Coombs' (1995) accident decision flow chart, but the repertoire needs expanding to include corporate statements that express concern and sympathy without accepting blame such as an additional strategy, "compassion without blame." Also, organizations in crisis need to be prepared to weather the initial media onslaught because more than 50% of the 1st month's coverage was published in the first 6 days postcrisis.

Corporate crises occur at an alarmingly high rate. A survey of 114 Fortune 1,000 companies suggests some companies face as many as 10 major crises per year (Mitroff, Pauchant, & Shrivastava, 1989). Researchers in the fields of public relations, communication, business, and social science have attempted to explain and offer suggestions for how companies should handle crisis situations. Theoretical frames used to describe, predict, explain, and understand dynamics of crises and crises management have been drawn from research and literature in corporate image/impression management, reputation management, apologia, consumer behavior, information theory, organizational communication theory, and many other ar-

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The now defunct but once very successful ValuJet Airlines suffered a major accident in May 1996 when its plane crashed in the Florida Everglades killing all 110 passengers and crew aboard. The purpose of this study was to help explain the crisis communication strategies ValuJet used in communicating crash information and how media responded in their coverage. In doing so, in this study, we tested and refined Coombs' (1995) repertoire of crisis management strategies. Although additional research (Brinson & Benoit, 1996, 1999; Coombs 1998, 1999; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000) has led to conception of a multication, defensive-accommodative continuum, Coombs' (1995) repertoire seems to promise the greatest utility for practitioners facing crises in the field and was the set of guidelines selected for this study's further consideration and testing. An accident decision flow chart that has been tested and refined poses enormous theoretical and practical potentials. A practitioner in the throes of a crisis can use the flow chart as a checklist for decision making; it can be a useful diagnostic and planning tool, much more helpful in the field than a continuum.

PUBLIC RELATIONS CRISIS RESPONSE RESEARCH LITERATURE

The idea from communication research that the type of situation faced will affect the image repair strategies used by individuals (Cupach & Metts, 1990; Metts & Cupach, 1989; Sharkey & Stafford, 1990) and by organizations (Barton, 1993; Cheney, 1991; Cheney & Vibbert, 1987; Kaufman, Kesner, & Hazen, 1994; Kruse, 1981; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Ware & Linkugel, 1973) guided the conception of the accident decision flow chart (Coombs, 1995). Denial, distance, ingratiation, mortification, and suffering were the five crisis response strategies derived by Coombs (1995) from attribution theory and grounded in Allen and Caillouet's (1994) synthesis of impression management strategies and Benoit's (1992, 1995, 1997) work on image repair. Coombs (1995) distinguished between unintentional and intentional crises and internal versus external crises by forming a matrix of four crisis types: (a) accidents (unintentional and internal), (b) transgressions (intentional and internal), (c) faux pas (unintentional and external), and (d) terrorism (intentional and external). Several decision flowcharts were developed to assist crisis communication managers in deciding which crisis response strategy would be most appropriate for the specific situation faced (see Figure 1).

Accidents were described (Coombs, 1995) as unintentional events that happen during normal company operations. Divided into two categories, human induced
and acts of nature, they are often uncontrollable and unstable. The excuse response to accidents has often served to reinforce an organization’s potential lack of responsibility for the accident. Damage in accidents includes deaths, injuries, property destruction, and environmental harm; damage requires some form of atonement to alleviate stress on the publics involved. It was suggested that mortification strategies be used to help maximize concern for publics while minimizing need for protection of the organization’s image (Coombs, 1995). A follow-up study (Coombs & Holladay, 1996) found transgressions are perceived as having a stronger internal locus than accidents because organizations are thought to have more control over transgressions than accidents. Interestingly, both transgressions and accidents were perceived similarly in terms of being viewed as involving little control by external groups. Also, organizations with a poor performance history are viewed more negatively than those companies with a positive performance history.

Additional research (Coombs, 1998) taking a symbolic approach found negative past performance history increases the public’s perception of crisis responsibility for a company, and crises considered high in personal control elicit stronger corporate responsibility. Various crisis response strategies were organized into seven categories and placed on a defensive–accommodative continuum. At the defensive end of the continuum are responses that seek to protect the organization. Responses that attempt to address concerns of the victims oppose at the accommodative end. The seven categories, arranged from defensive to accommodative, are as follows:

1. **Attack the accuser** involves aggressively denying claims of crisis and punishment of the accuser.
2. **Denial** claims there is no crisis or that the organization is uninvolved in the crisis.
3. **Excuse** admits there is a crisis but minimizes organizational responsibility for the crisis.
4. **Justification** admits a crisis exists but downplays its severity.
5. **Ingratiation** tries to create positive impressions of the organization by reminding stakeholders of past good works, associating the organization with positive qualities, or both.
6. **Corrective action** attempts to repair crisis damage, prevent a repeat of the crisis, or both.
7. **Full apology and mortification** takes responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 1998).

It is possible for an organization to use two or more strategies in one sentence, and it is usually possible to identify the dominant strategy intended by the organization. The following statement is an example: “We are very sorry about the suffering this accident has caused, but this incident was not the result of any negligence
on our part.” Although the beginning of the sentence suggests a mortification strategy, it can be argued the second half of this statement reflects the dominant strategy of excuse and/or denial.

In an analysis of Texaco’s effort to combat its racism crisis (Brinson & Benoit, 1999), multiple image restoration strategies were investigated: (a) bolstering, reminding people of Texaco’s policies against discrimination and noting actions when outrageous; (b) corrective action, indicating an investigation of the allegations and policies designed to prevent a reoccurrence of the problem; (c) shifting blame, identifying the problem employees as bad apples who are not representative of Texaco as a whole; (d) mortification, admitting guilt and apologizing for the racist comments; (e) separation, a combination of bolstering, shifting blame; and (f) corrective action that the analysts argued was a new form of image restoration strategy (Brinson & Benoit, 1999).

Separation involves the three components of bolstering, shifting blame, and corrective action. Bolstering occurs when an organization notes that an act violates its policies. Shifting blame creates a scapegoat responsible for that problem that can be separated from the organization itself. Corrective actions are steps taken by an organization to prevent a repeat of the crisis. Some earlier work (Hearit, 1994, 1995) identified an individual or group disassociation strategy that also captured the separation strategy, such as disassociation through blaming or scapegoating. Also, mortification has been identified as a successful crisis response with its image repair value rooted in taking responsibility for the crisis and asking for forgiveness (Benoit, 1995).

In an experiment, Coombs and Schmidt (2000) tested the claims of Brinson and Benoit’s (1999) image restoration analysis of Texaco’s racism incident. There were no differences in effects of five response strategies (bolstering, shifting blame, corrective action, mortification, and separation) on a set of three social-oriented outcomes (organizational reputation, account honoring, or potential supportive behavior). It was thought similar effects could be achieved by using only the bolstering or corrective action strategies, both victim-oriented strategies. Victim-oriented strategies are believed to publicly demonstrate that a company in crisis has learned its lesson and will work to prevent the crisis from happening in the future. These results ran counter to the Texaco image restoration case study’s findings. Bolstering and corrective action with mortification may be more effective than initially believed.

In another experiment (Coombs & Holladay, 2001) based on an accidental explosion of a Ford truck plant in Kentucky in which performance and relationship histories were manipulated, results found these histories shape how the public perceives a crisis and the organization in crisis. Unfavorable relationship and crisis histories lead to perceptions of the organization being responsible for the crisis. When no relationship history is given, people give the organization the benefit of the doubt and assume positive histories. However, negative performance or rela-
tionship histories create what Coombs and Holladay (2001) termed a "velcro effect" in which performance history acts "like velcro; it attracts and snags additional reputational damage" (p. 335).

Applying Coombs' (1995) Framework to Airline Accidents

Unfortunately, no airline is exempt from the possibility that one of its airplanes could go down at anytime, and when planes do crash, it is always a shocking crisis situation. Coombs (1995) defined mortification strategies as most effective in attempts to win forgiveness of publics, intending to create acceptance for the crisis. Mortification strategies include (a) remediation, which willingly offers some form of compensation or help to victims. Negative feelings may lessen as the organization takes positive actions to help those injured by the crisis. Publics should begin to forgive the organization as it willingly helps victims. Also, (b) repentance asks for forgiveness. The organization apologizes for the crisis. The negatives associated with the crisis should be lessened as people accept the apology and forgive the organization for its misdeeds. Finally, (c) rectification takes action to prevent a recurrence of the crisis in the future. The organization seeks forgiveness as it establishes a mechanism designed to protect publics against future threats.

Allen and Caillouet (1994) identified ingratiation strategies as most effective in gaining public approval by connecting the organization to things positively valued by publics. There are three types of ingratiation strategies: (a) transcendence places the crisis in a larger, more desirable context. The publics are led away from the specifics of the crisis to a more abstract consideration of the crisis. The crisis is defined in terms of some larger goal that the publics accept. Then (b) bolstering, reminds publics of the existing positive aspects of the organization. Finally, (c) praising others is used to win approval from the target of the praise. The organization's praise of the target group should lead that group to like the organization.

Crisis Media Relations

There is a rich body of extant literature regarding source–journalist relations (for a review, see Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997). There have been studies of press coverage of the term public relations (see, e.g., Spicer, 1993). There is some academic and professional literature on media relations during crises (see, e.g., Birch, 1994; Carney & Jordan, 1993; Dilenschneider & Hyde, 1985; Hobbs, 1995; Kuklan, 1986; Maynard, 1993; Mitroff et al., 1989; Sturges, 1994; Tyler, 1997; Werner, 1990; S. Wilson & Patterson, 1987). However, little, if any, research analyzing actual news coverage resulting from crisis management has been published. Given the importance academic and professional literature places on spokespeople in crises situations, media coverage results stemming from crisis response strategies seem a worthy research topic. Although the primary purpose of this study was to test the accident decision flow chart (Coombs, 1995), a secondary
purpose was to look at the evolution of media coverage and its links to management strategy, including media attribution to and acknowledgments of corporate spokespersons in coverage of a crisis in a scientific way. This analysis will help bridge these gaps in the crisis communication extant literature.

VALUJET'S BACKGROUND/PERFORMANCE HISTORY, CRISIS, AND AFTERMATH

In 1993, ValuJet Airlines opened up a new market in air travel with budget airfares, attracting passengers who had not been able to afford air travel. ValuJet was a "fun" airline with a "happy" logo, and it became one of the most notable "upstart" airlines. After only 3 years in business by 1996, ValuJet was proposed by The Atlanta-Journal Constitution as the top public company in Atlanta, besting both Coca-Cola and Delta Airlines. At its peak, ValuJet offered service to 31 cities in 19 states with a fleet of 51 McDonnell Douglas DC–9 and MD–80 aircraft. However, ValuJet had a history of some previous safety issues, had been cited by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and had paid fines for the safety violations. Two months before the Flight 592 crash, ValuJet was put under an ongoing FAA review.

The May 11, 1996 crisis of the crash of ValuJet Flight 592 began when the Douglas DC–9 left Miami International Airport at 2:30 p.m., the day before Mother's Day, on its way to Atlanta. A pilot indicated electrical problems about 7 min after takeoff; seconds later, smoke had entered both the cockpit and cabin. Then, 10 min after takeoff, the aircraft plummeted in the Florida Everglades. All on board were killed.

ValuJet had a crisis plan and activated it. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) was informed immediately and the "GO" team, officers and company representatives preassigned to board a company plane and go to an accident site within hours, was marshaled. At the accident site, the GO team sets up a command center, assists the NTSB and local emergency crews with the investigation, and serves as the airline contact on the scene. A group of airline representatives works with the families of victims to make travel arrangements; provide lodging, meals, and other support; and offer information. In 1996, these tasks were almost completely the airline's responsibility. ValuJet was one of the first carriers to assign every family a company representative to communicate directly one-on-one.

The day after the crash, the NTSB investigation began, focusing on operations, systems, power plants, maintenance, aircraft performance, hazardous materials, survival factors, meteorology, air traffic control, and human performance. Following its standard operating procedure after incidents or crashes, the NTSB forbid ValuJet officials to discuss anything related to the accident except for the passenger-crew manifest, information about the DC–9 aircraft, and flight hours the crew had accrued.
The first indications that old chemicals used to release oxygen stored in 50 to 60 canisters in the cargo hold may have ignited an explosion causing the demise of Flight 592 came 3 days after the crash. As the investigation progressed the 1st week, ValuJet came under intense scrutiny by the NTSB for its safety practices, especially its use of maintenance personnel subcontracted to SabreTech in Miami. The oxygen canisters were mislabeled by SabreTech workers as empty and did not have safety caps required to prevent a triggering effect. It was believed that the fire occurred during takeoff, fueled by oxygen in the “empty” canisters. ValuJet claimed it had no way of knowing there was oxygen in the mislabeled canisters. Furthermore, oxygen was classified as a chemical that ValuJet was not authorized to carry. By the 3rd week of investigation, ValuJet and SabreTech pointed fingers at each other as the party responsible for the disaster.

With ValuJet already under FAA safety review, the crash prompted the FAA to step up its investigation, forcing the airline to ground half of its flights. For almost a month, the FAA conducted more than 2,000 inspections on ValuJet’s operations. According to the FAA, deficiencies existed, particularly in maintenance control, and ValuJet was told to stop flying its planes on June 17, 1996, and the next day, ValuJet was shut down for 3 months; many ValuJet employees were laid off. Congressional hearings were held before a House transportation subcommittee to investigate problems with ValuJet as well as the FAA while 200 ValuJet employees rallied outside the Capitol and the White House, declaring the airline safe (Ray, 1999).

ValuJet resumed service in September 1996 with fewer planes; ValuJet’s top executives Priddy and Jordan took reduced salaries of $135,700 each and no bonuses in 1996 (“ValuJet Top Officers,” 1997). In July 1997, just over a year after the accident, ValuJet announced that it was acquiring and “merging with” Orlando-based AirWays Corporation, a much smaller airline. The new company was named AirTran Airways, and there was speculation that ValuJet made this move to acquire a new name, untainted by associations with the crash.

In August 1997, the NTSB indicated ValuJet had failed to monitor SabreTech’s work adequately (Ray, 1999). No longer president of the airline, in 1997, Lewis Jordan was retained as a $100,000-a-year consultant under a 5-year contract and remained a large shareholder in AirTran (“ValuJet Co-Founders,” 1997). By mid-1998, most of more than 50 lawsuits by families of victims against ValuJet and SabreTech had been settled (“Hyatt Family,” 1998). In early 1999, AirTran Holdings settled a class action lawsuit with shareholders for $2.5 million cash and $2.5 million in stock for not properly disclosing maintenance problems or growth prospects (“Accord With Shareholders,” 1999). In Fall 1999, AirTran and the defunct SabreTech reached confidential out-of-court settlements of suits against each other seeking to hold the other “responsible” for the accident (“Nation in Brief,” 1999).

In August 2000, the NTSB split blame for the crash among SabreTech, ValuJet, and the FAA for the FAA’s lax oversight. The defunct SabreTech was ordered to
pay $11 million in fines and for restitution, making it the first aviation company to be convicted of criminal charges stemming from a commercial jet crash; its parent, Sabreliner Corporation, has been paying its bills and is appealing (C. Wilson, 2000). It is important to note that although the brand name “ValuJet” went away, ValuJet the airline survived the crash and continues to operate under its acquired name of AirTran.

HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Hypotheses tested in this study included the following:

H1: ValuJet was more likely to use mortification and ingratiation strategies than any other crisis communication strategies in communicating with the public via the media in the 1st month following the crash of Flight 592.

H2: ValuJet’s corporate messages were more likely to appear with mortification and ingratiation strategies than any other crisis communication strategies in news editorial coverage in media accounts published in Miami and Atlanta in the 1st month following the crash of Flight 592.

Research questions explored were the following:

RQ1: What was the evolution of the news story of the ValuJet crash in the 1st month after the accident? Were there any differences in newspaper coverage of the crash in Atlanta and Miami? If so, what were they?

RQ2: How do media attribute information to and acknowledge information from corporate spokespersons/sources in their coverage of a crisis?

METHODS

Content analysis methods were used. Units of analysis were the strategic messages clearly originating from ValuJet that appeared singly or in multiples in each written corporate communication item (e.g., news release, statement, press briefing), spoken messages during ValuJet’s first press conference as captured on videotape, and in news/editorial items (e.g., articles, editorials, bylined columns, photo captions) published in the newspapers. First, a videotape of the initial press conference and copies of outgoing written corporate messages from ValuJet officials for the initial month following the May 11, 1996 crash were analyzed to determine if strategies of ingratiation and mortification were employed, as the accident deci-
sion flow chart suggests. Strategic messages were expected to resemble the following prototype examples:

Expected statements using ingratiation strategies:

- “Our planes are safe”—Corporate focus on ensuring safety.
- “Our pilots are well-trained and experienced”—Focus on ability of pilots to control the planes in the air.
- “Thanks to our stockholders for believing in ValuJet”—Praising a target public.
- “ValuJet’s president is a very experienced aeronautical engineer”—Focus on wealth of experience the company president has and his ability to get through the crisis.

Expected statements using mortification strategies:

- “We’ve sent grief counselors to Miami and Atlanta to assist family and friends”—Focus on helping victims’ families and friends.
- “We’ve set up a counseling program for our employees”—Helping the internal public.
- “ValuJet’s president and top PR [public relations] professional attend the victims’ Memorial Service”—Showing compassion for victims’ families.
- “We are sorry, and our thoughts and prayers are with the victims’ families”—Blatant apology.
- “We have implemented a ValuJet Safety Task Force”—Making sure the problem does not reoccur.

Units of analysis included strategic statements by ValuJet officials in news releases issued by ValuJet and made in a videotape of the initial press briefing held by ValuJet after the crash and in paid advertising in the 1-month period immediately following the crash.1

Strategic messages imbedded in ValuJet’s various outgoing communications described previously were compared with the accident decision flow chart (Coombs, 1995) to determine if ingratiation and mortification or other response strategies were used. A coding sheet was developed to guide the content analysis. The coding sheet included a subjective analysis of the five crisis response strategies: mortification, in-

1Copies of the news releases were obtained from Leslie Head, ValuJet’s corporate attorney. The videotape of the press briefing was provided by ABC News in Atlanta. The ValuJet advertisement was retrieved from The Miami Herald’s online archives. In addition, Marcia Scott, ValuJet’s former communications manager, was interviewed on numerous occasions for further clarification of the strategies behind the messages issued.
gratiation, distance, nonexistence, and suffering. A separate coding sheet was used to analyze each ValuJet communication vehicle.

Content Analysis of Newspaper Coverage

News coverage of the ValuJet crash published in two large, metropolitan, daily newspapers—*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and *The Miami Herald*—was subjected to content analysis. These newspapers were selected because the doomed flight was en route from Miami to Atlanta, greater Miami was the site of the plane crash, a majority of the victims were from Florida and Georgia, *The Miami Herald* was the largest paper in South Florida, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* was the largest paper in Georgia,\(^2\) and ValuJet’s corporate headquarters were in Atlanta.

Newspaper articles were retrieved directly from both *The Miami Herald*’s and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*’s online archives. All articles appearing in those two publications between the dates of May 11, 1996 and June 11, 1996—the 1st month after the airplane crash—were analyzed. The same coding sheets developed to analyze the ValuJet communications were used to content analyze the newspaper coverage. News articles, including headlines and subheadings; bylined opinion columns; editorials; and letters to the editor were assessed to determine whether statements attributed to ValuJet officials reflected the crisis response strategies actually employed by ValuJet in its outgoing corporate messages. In the analysis of media coverage, no attempts were made to link the news coverage specifically with the 11 written communications from ValuJet and/or ValuJet’s initial press briefing analyzed in this study; ValuJet strategies reported in the media were expected to result from these as well as other interactions of reporters with ValuJet executives, such as telephone interviews, unavailable for analysis. Content of the two newspapers was compared to see what, if any, differences existed.

RESULTS

Two coders (the first two authors, Englehardt and Sallot) independently conducted content analyses of 295 news items about the crash for crisis response strategies on the part of ValuJet appearing in any of them; there were 168 in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and 127 items in *The Miami Herald*. Only 60 of the 295 newspaper items contained crisis response messages obviously emanating from ValuJet. The remaining news stories contained reportage about the crash independent of any ValuJet sources. In addition, 11 written communications originating directly

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\(^2\)According to the 1997 Bacon’s Newspaper Directory (McFarland, 1996), in 1996, *The Miami Herald* had weekday circulation of 357,500 and Sunday circulation of 487,500, *The Atlanta Constitution*’s weekday circulation was 317,270; *The Atlanta Journal*’s weekday circulation was 123,500; and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*’s Sunday circulation was 715,400.
from ValuJet\textsuperscript{3} and a videotape of ValuJet's initial postcrash press conference also were independently content analyzed by the two coders. A total of 307 items were analyzed for crisis response strategies; 72 items were found to contain crisis response strategies. A third coder (the third author, Springston) also independently conducted content analyses of the 72 items. The three coders disagreed on a total of 11 (7\%) of the 156 crisis response strategies found in the 72 items. Taking into account the coding of all 307 items, intercoder reliability for the crisis response strategies was .89.\textsuperscript{4}

Analysis of Valujet Corporate Messages: The Press Conference

In the 1st month after the crash, the company distributed 11 written corporate messages (seven press releases, three statements, and one advertisement) and held multiple news conferences. However, only the first news conference immediately following the crash was analyzed for this study in conjunction with the first written statement issued by the airline. ValuJet's initial corporate crisis response messages—communicated only a few hours after the crash—were delivered in the May 11 press conference held in Atlanta. Presiding was Lewis Jordan, ValuJet's president acting as primary company spokesperson, with Marcia Scott, communications manager, at his side. Multiple crisis communication strategies were utilized during the press conference, including ingratiation and mortification. Although both strategies were present in statements made by ValuJet's president, mortification strategies were dominant\textsuperscript{5} in the following statement:

Certainly our thoughts and prayers and our sincere emotions go out to the people who were on board the airplane, their families, their loved ones, their friends, that includes both the customers aboard that airplane and ValuJet's crew members. It is impossible to put into words how devastating something like this is to human beings who care.

\textsuperscript{3}According to Marcia Scott (personal communication, August 10, 2001), ValuJet's communications manager at the time, these 11 represented all of the communications issued by the company during the period of this study. Strictly adhering to NTSB policy, ValuJet was severely restricted in what it was permitted to publicly say—only information it might have divulged before the crash. Although the airline was deluged with calls from reporters, which it reactively handled, there were very few proactive communications from ValuJet about the crash.

\textsuperscript{4}Scott's pi index, which corrects for the number of categories used and also for the probable frequency of use (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997), was used to calculate intercoder reliability.

\textsuperscript{5}Dominant strategies were those strategies most evident in newspaper coverage analyzed. When multiple strategies appeared in coverage, only one dominant strategy was coded in any single news-editorial item.
Additionally, when the president was asked to comment on how the crash would impact the financial standing of the company, he displayed concern for the families (mortification strategy of remediation) when he said:

I have no interest in talking about financial implications at this time. The concern of ValuJet’s management team is for the human beings involved in this tragic accident and we will talk about financial matters at another time.

ValuJet’s president emphasized rectification, also a mortification strategy, when he discussed corrections that would be made, if any were necessary, to show that the airline wanted to make sure another accident does not occur. He said:

Immediately upon learning anything that would indicate that actions should be taken to ensure the safety of those people flying other ValuJet airplanes…we will cooperate fully with the FAA, we will cooperate fully with the NTSB, and we will be very proactive in determining anything we can that might tell us anything at all about this particular accident, what may have caused it, and what we can learn to prevent anything like it in the future, either for ValuJet or anyone else flying a plane.

Analysis of Written Corporate Messages

In its corporate messages, ValuJet primarily used mortification strategies. For example, the first written statement from the company was released at 9:30 p.m., May 11, at the end of the first press conference. This statement included information regarding a future press briefing and distribution of the passenger manifest and a phone number for family and friends of the victims to call for information as well as a special phone number specifically established for media inquiries. The special services ValuJet implemented for the victims’ family members is evidence of mortification strategy.

A second written company statement, issued at 10:45 p.m. the day of the crash, included the numbers of passengers and crew on board the aircraft and an indication that passenger names would be released when families were notified as well as the following quote from ValuJet’s president:

All of us at ValuJet extend heartfelt sympathy and genuine concern for the family, friends, and loved ones of all customers and crew members. We are dedicated to doing everything in our power, in cooperation with the NTSB and FAA, to determine the cause of this tragic accident and assure that appropriate actions are taken. There are no words adequate to express the emotion we feel for these victims and their loved ones.
The dominant crisis communication strategies present in the president’s statement are the mortification strategies of remediation and rectification. Sympathy for the families was expressed and ValuJet indicated it would take action necessary to fix any problems.

The next statement, released on May 15, 1996, discussed a 4-year-old child who was traveling with her family on the plane and was not listed in the ValuJet computer system nor on the manifest and another error on the manifest with a passenger traveling under an assumed name. No crisis response strategies were in this statement.

The first official ValuJet news release was issued 5 days after the crash. “ValuJet Airlines Insurance Coverage” was the title of the release that did not include crash-specific information but instead stated that the company had liability insurance coverage of up to $750 million for any “one occurrence.” The ingratiating strategy of bolstering was dominant in this release, as ValuJet made known that it was fully insured for the accident.

“ValuJet Announces Aggressive Safety And Maintenance Review” headlined the company’s May 17, 1996 release in which ValuJet announced that the U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Federico Peña had initiated an extraordinary, aggressive safety and maintenance review of each of the 51 aircraft in ValuJet’s fleet. In addition to this safety inspection, ValuJet voluntarily reduced its flights by 50%, and ValuJet’s president stated he believed “our operations are completely safe,” an example of bolstering, an ingratiating strategy. However, the mortification strategy of ValuJet’s willingness to begin its own detailed inspection of its entire fleet was more dominant in the release.

On May 21, 1996, ValuJet placed an advertisement in The Miami Herald thanking those individuals who had been working hard in the recovery effort. The ValuJet advertisement praised others, an ingratiating crisis response strategy.

Ten days after the crash, the corporate release “ValuJet Airlines Issues Report To Financial Analysts” described the initial effects on the company following the crash such as the cancellation of flights, refunds to passengers, and the “considerable staying-power” of the airline due to $254 million in the bank. ValuJet Chairman Robert Priddy used mortification strategy and was quoted as saying

The steps we have taken, including a massive ongoing aircraft inspection program and a voluntary schedule reduction that provides almost two aircraft to fly every single trip, were appropriate and significant. ValuJet’s franchise with the public can be rebuilt over the months ahead, and we can emerge from this terrible accident as a safe, strong and profitable airline.

On May 30, 1996, ValuJet distributed a release responding to an alleged lawsuit filed against the company on behalf of three shareholders. ValuJet’s release indicated that its knowledge of the lawsuit came from the media and no lawsuits
against the company had been served. In this instance, ValuJet used denial, a non-existence crisis communication strategy, by stating

The Company emphatically denies that it has failed to discharge properly any of its obligations under the federal securities laws and believes any suit contending otherwise is without merit. ValuJet will vigorously defend the lawsuit.

Five days later, on June 4, 1996, ValuJet announced in a release that it had appointed retired Air Force General James B. Davis as its new “safety czar.” The release included a biography of the retired general as well as a description of his responsibilities at ValuJet. The mortification strategy of rectification was dominant in this release, as ValuJet showed the public it wanted to make sure future problems in the area of maintenance and operations did not occur.

Almost a month after the crash, ValuJet released its reports of May 1996 traffic. Robert Priddy, ValuJet’s chairman, used a mortification strategy of rectification as he reiterated that ValuJet had cut down flights voluntarily to fix the problem of late departures due to any aircraft grounded or delayed by FAA inspections inconveniencing customers. He said

We know it has been challenging for the many customers who have continued to show their loyalty and support by flying ValuJet during this very difficult period. … Obviously, the flight reduction has led to decreases in enplaned passengers, RPMs [Revenue Passenger Miles] and load factor for this month.

On the 1st month’s anniversary of the crash, ValuJet disseminated a news release discussing the interim FAA Report. The company said that it was prepared to respond to the findings of the FAA in the inspection that took place from February 1996 to May 1996. ValuJet’s president was quoted as saying

Anything less than perfection where safety is concerned is unacceptable to ValuJet. While the report includes findings that are, at first reading troubling, it is filled with many items typical of those that would be reported at any established major airline if it were subjected to this extreme level of in depth inspection. We continue to welcome the input from the additional FAA inspectors on our property and will use their findings to further enhance our operation. Our review will extend to all company policies, procedures and practices and there is no point too minor for scrutiny.

Crisis communication strategies of ingratiating and mortification were present in the release. However, rectification, a mortification strategy, was the more dominant strategy used by the company in its insistence to fix any problems that needed to be fixed according to the FAA report. Overall, ValuJet’s corporate messages contained the following strategies: mortification was used seven times (63.6%), in-
gratiation five times (45.4%); and nonexistence one time (9.1%; see Table 1 for a summary). In terms of prominence, mortification was the dominant strategy used in ValuJet’s corporate messages during the 1st month after the crash of Flight 592. Mortification was used as the dominant strategy eight times (72.7%), gratification was used once as the dominant strategy (9.1%), and nonexistence dominated once (9.1%). Table 2 summarizes results.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>No. Times Used</th>
<th>% of Overall Messages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mortification</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratification</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonexistence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>No. Times Used</th>
<th>% of Overall Messages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mortification</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratification</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonexistence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No dominant strategies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

**Description of Newspaper Coverage and Response Strategies Covered**

Newspaper coverage of the ValuJet 592 crash differed in quantity and quality between *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and *The Miami Herald*. Between May 11 and June 11, 1996, there was a combined total of 295 news/editorial items consisting of articles, editorials, stand-alone photo captions, and bylined columns. *The Miami Herald* published 127 items compared with *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*’s 168 items. Topics covered by the newspapers in the 1st month are summarized in Table 3.

The most popular story topic during the 1st month was the investigation of the crash, with heavy emphasis on ValuJet’s performance, safety, and maintenance history\(^6\) followed by coverage of victims and their families and the maca-

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\(^6\)Within 48 hr of the crash, the media reported previous safety problems when two planes skidded off runways and an engine on another caught fire, injuring an attendant. News reports also included a study of upstart airlines that ranked ValuJet next to last for safety before the crash of Flight 592. Other coverage suggested ValuJet was a good, profitable airline, the “darling of Wall Street” before the crash.
bre Mother’s Day timing. Both papers frequently ran general airline stores as they related to the crash such as retrospectives on other airlines’ crashes and reliability of DC–9 aircraft. The Atlanta paper had far more stories on ValuJet as a company, including profiles of executives, stock details, and other business information as well as information about how ValuJet was a good corporate citizen with officials building a Habitat house when they learned of the crash. The Atlanta paper wrote about media coverage of the tragedy three times compared to the Herald’s one time, mostly chastising broadcast media for their coverage. The Miami Herald’s stories emphasized angles such as ways body parts of victims would be identified.

More than 50% of the total news coverage—163 news/editorial items—appeared between May 11, 1996 and May 18, 1996, with nearly 12% (N = 35) reported on the 1st day after the crash. Frustrated victims’ families were initially quoted as saying, “We’ve gotten nothing from ValuJet,” but news coverage did note that ValuJet had a crisis room at airports both in Miami and Atlanta with counselors on hand to assist families as well as a special 1–800 number for families. An example of mortification strategy appearing in news/editorial coverage the 1st day after the crash by both papers came directly from ValuJet’s press briefing on the day of the crash when ValuJet’s president said, “It is impossible to put into words how devastating something like this is to human beings who care.” An example of mortification strategy dominant in the Miami coverage was ValuJet’s major overhaul of its maintenance practices by deciding to no longer contract out almost all of its maintenance to dozens of private contractors. The action on the part of ValuJet displayed rectification and showed that the company attempted to make corrections in its operations to ensure no major accidents in the future.

Although The Miami Herald had the advantage of physical proximity, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution marshaled a large team of reporters and sent them to the site, and it published a special section report with twice as many stories as the

### TABLE 3
Summary of Topics Covered May 11 to June 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>AJC No.</th>
<th>AJC %</th>
<th>MIA No.</th>
<th>MIA %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investigation of crash</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims/victims’ families</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ValuJet corporate</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General airline</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the media</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>168</td>
<td></td>
<td>127</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. AJC = The Atlanta Constitution, The Atlanta Journal or The Atlanta Journal-Constitution; MIA = The Miami Herald.*
Miami paper the 2nd day after the crash. An example of ingratiation response occurred in the coverage the 2nd day following the crash with ValuJet’s bolstering about the fact that its maintenance checks were already stiffer than most other airlines because of its older fleet of aircraft. A dominant ingratiation strategy appearing in the Atlanta coverage was ValuJet’s bolstering of its commitment to safety with a statement quoting Communications Manager Marcia Scott: “As far as marketing in the future, we have an excellent story to tell ... safety is our No. 1 consideration, always has been.”

The Atlanta paper on the 3rd day published a feature about crisis management quoting several PR professionals’ mostly complimentary opinions about how ValuJet handled the crisis. On the 4th day postcrash, editorials and letters to the editor—positive and negative—began appearing in both papers. ValuJet’s distance strategy was covered, as ValuJet tried to distance itself from any violation when it was discovered a small child had not been listed on the passenger manifest or in ValuJet’s computer system. A spokesperson was quoted in stories as saying, “A lap child would not be entered into our records when the customer checks in. A lap child would not show up on our flight manifest.”

Coverage began tapering off on Day 6 postcrash. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution printed a very positive story about passengers’ support of ValuJet, with some passengers feeling ValuJet was being picked on because it was a discount airline. Other passengers said that an airplane crash could happen to any plane, but with all the FAA’s scrutiny of ValuJet, it was probably the safest airline flying. Atlanta coverage also included a general aviation story on the fear of flying among children in the aftermath of the ValuJet 592 crash and first reports that ValuJet had retired flight number 592 and had substituted another number for the flight.

In the 2nd week, news coverage focused on finger pointing between ValuJet and its maintenance subcontractor, SabreTech, over which company was to blame for loading the still-charged oxygen canisters on the aircraft. An example of distance strategy was covered in the news when ValuJet said it would not have placed the canisters aboard the flight had they been labeled properly, making SabreTech its scapegoat responsible for the mislabeling and the crash. The Atlanta paper carried an example of suffering strategy tied to revenue losses with ValuJet’s president stating, “It’s clear we’re going to forgo a significant amount of revenue. And we’re going to forgo the opportunity to carry a number of people, but we have said we’re putting safety first” (Ho, 1996).

An example of nonexistence strategy appeared in the Miami paper when ValuJet officials declined comment but were reported to have acknowledged that circuit breaker boxes were replaced in the airplane before it left Atlanta. The story went on to say it was not known what, if any, repairs had been performed in Miami.

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7In 1962, Atlanta lost 122 citizens, many of them business and social leaders, in a plane crash in Paris, France; therefore, the Atlanta community is perhaps more sensitized to air tragedies.
Importance of local angles took precedence as well in the 2nd week. Only the Atlanta paper covered the memorial service ValuJet held in Atlanta for the victims and crew of Flight 592, for which the company received much scrutiny and some criticism. The Atlanta paper also covered ValuJet’s annual meeting on May 18 in Atlanta where shareholders displayed their support in the company’s ability to stay in the air and prosper after the crash. Meanwhile, for local angle, the Miami paper covered two Miami lawyers who solicited Flight 592 family members after the crash and were suspended for doing so from the Florida Bar Association and the first presence of political figures at the crash scene, such as the Hialeah mayor, even though the crash did not occur in his city. There was also a story about the Miccosukee Indians and their views on death.

There was a significant drop in coverage in the 3rd week, with less than 13% of the first month’s coverage, although the cockpit voice recorder was recovered. The Miami paper reported that the pilots might have been so overcome by the smoke in the cockpit and close to death that they intentionally grounded the airplane in the Everglades to avoid crashing into—and thereby “saving”—metropolitan Miami. Much of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution’s focus during the 3rd week centered around ValuJet’s financial strength, ability to manage the crisis, and future prosperity. The Atlanta paper’s coverage of ValuJet’s voluntary spending measures following the accident, such as hiring consultants, offering refunds, and raising employee bonuses, are examples of the dominant mortification strategies of rectification and remediation.

Coverage in the last 10 days of the 1st month postcrash again accounted for less than 13% of the two newspapers’ reportage; there were 2 days without ValuJet stories in either paper. Both papers focused on the continuing investigation, the grieving families, general aviation safety, ValuJet’s ability to prosper in the future, the FAA review, and ValuJet’s maintenance contracts. Two stories—ValuJet’s offer to its workers to take a voluntary unpaid leave of absence to help the company cut costs and Kiwi Airline’s “cheap shot” advertisement indicating its pilots had more than 20 years flying experience—were covered in Atlanta but not in Miami.

An example of a dominant mortification strategy appearing in the Atlanta coverage during the last 10 days of the month was a statement by Communications Manager Marcia Scott in which she said, “We want to give our customers our best fares as we build our schedule back up.” An example of mortification strategy

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8 Six candles were lit by ValuJet’s president at the service, one for each of the five crew members and one for all of the 105 passenger victims. Families were outraged that only one candle represented all of their loved ones. One family member called the entire memorial service a “publicity stunt.”

9 The Miccosukees, who live in the Everglades, were instructed by the police to stay away from the crash site. The Indians replied they would not go near the site because of their religious beliefs that proximity to death steals the soul of the living.

10 In the 4th week, June 2 through June 8, 32 news/editorial items were published (10.9% of overall coverage) compared with Week 3, which had 37 items (12.7%).
dominant in the Miami coverage was ValuJet’s major overhaul of its maintenance practices by deciding to no longer contract out almost all of its maintenance to dozens of private contractors. The action on the part of ValuJet displayed rectification and showed that the company attempted to make corrections in its operations to ensure no major accidents in the future. Both newspapers reported that the search for victims’ remains and aircraft parts had been called off on June 11, 1996. Remains of 36 passengers were found and identified, and 75% of the plane was recovered.

Results of Hypothesis Testing

Two hypotheses were tested. H1 stated ValuJet was more likely to use mortification and ingratiation strategies than any other crisis communication strategies in communicating with the public via the media. In reviewing 295 newspaper/editorial items, both mortification and ingratiation crisis response strategies appeared as a result of ValuJet’s communications with the media (see Table 1). ValuJet also used nonexistence, distance, and suffering strategies in its outgoing messages. However, mortification clearly was the primary dominant strategy used by the airline, with ingratiation having a secondary, moderate presence in the overall coverage (see Table 2). Therefore, H1 was supported.

H2 stated ValuJet’s corporate messages with mortification and ingratiation strategies were more likely to appear than any other crisis communication strategies in news/editorial coverage in media accounts published in Miami and Atlanta. Of the 295 newspaper articles, columns, editorials, letters to the editor, and captions, 206 (70%) of the news/editorial items analyzed did not possess any crisis communication strategy. Mortification was the overriding strategy present in both papers, as it appeared in 19% of the overall newspaper coverage (see Table 4). All five crisis response strategies emerged as dominant strategies in overall coverage analyzed. However, the strategies found to be most often prominent were mortification and ingratiation (see Table 5). Therefore, H2 was supported.

The first research question to be explored was what was the evolution of the ValuJet news story in the 1st month postcrash? Were there any differences in newspaper coverage of the crash in Atlanta and Miami? If so, what were they? The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and The *Miami Herald* differed in carrying dominant crisis communication strategies. Although both newspapers carried mortification strategies most often and ingratiation next often, dominant strategies appeared more often in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* than in *The Miami Herald* (see Table 6).

A series of chi-square tests were conducted to determine if any statistically significant differences existed in inclusion of ValuJet-originated crisis response strategies between *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and *The Miami Herald* coverage in the 295 news-editorial items content analyzed. A chi-square test for differences in expected frequencies between the two newspapers regarding inclusion of ValuJet’s ingratiation strategies in news/editorial items was significant, $\chi^2(1, N =$
TABLE 4
Strategies Used In Newspaper Coverage of 295 Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>No. of News/Editorial Items</th>
<th>% of Overall Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mortification</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonexistence</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

TABLE 5
Dominant Strategies In Combined Newspaper Coverage of 295 Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant Strategy</th>
<th>No. of News/Editorial Items</th>
<th>% of Overall Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mortification</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonexistence</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No dominant strategies</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

TABLE 6
Dominant Strategies By Newspaper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>No. of Items Found in MIA</th>
<th>No. of Items Found in AJC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mortification</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonexistence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* AJC = The Atlanta Constitution, The Atlanta Journal or The Atlanta Journal-Constitution; MIA = The Miami Herald.
295) = 8.6, p < .003. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* included more of ValuJet’s ingratiation strategies in its coverage (N = 32) than did *The Miami Herald* (N = 9). A chi-square test between the two newspapers regarding inclusion of ValuJet’s bolstering strategies was significant, \( \chi^2(1, N = 295) = 8.6, p < .003 \). *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* included more of ValuJet’s bolstering strategies in its coverage (N = 38) than did *The Miami Herald* (N = 8). A chi-square test between the two newspapers regarding inclusion of ValuJet’s mortification strategies was significant, \( \chi^2(1, N = 295) = 4.5, p < .03 \). *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* included more of ValuJet’s mortification strategies in its coverage (N = 39) than did *The Miami Herald* (N = 17). Chi-square tests were not significant for differences in expected frequencies between the two newspapers regarding inclusion in news/editorial items of ValuJet’s strategies of remediation, \( \chi^2(1, N = 295) = 2.19, p < .13 \); rectification, \( \chi^2(1, N = 295) = 2.19, p < .13 \); distance, \( \chi^2(1, N = 295) = 1.37, p < .24 \); non-existence, \( \chi^2(1, N = 295) = 0.12, p < .73 \); and clarification, \( \chi^2(1, N = 295) = 0.25, p < .61 \). Data for news-editorial items coded as transgression, praise, repentance, excuse intentional, excuse violation, justification, denial, and suffering strategies contained fewer than five cases in some cells and therefore were not subjected to chi-square analysis.

**Use of Corporate Spokespersons in the News**

The second research question to be explored was how do media attribute information to corporate spokespersons/sources in their coverage of a crisis? Of all newspaper coverage in both *The Miami Herald* and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 22% included attribution to an official ValuJet spokesperson. A chi-square test between the two newspapers regarding identification of ValuJet spokespersons/sources included in news/editorial items was significant, \( \chi^2(1, N = 295) = 12.8, p < .0003 \). *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* acknowledged ValuJet spokespersons far more often (N = 49) in its coverage than did *The Miami Herald* (N = 15).

Altogether, 10 individuals were identified as ValuJet spokespersons by the Atlanta newspaper as having provided information; most quoted were the ValuJet’s president, the communications manager, and the manager of investor relations/corporate communications. There were also indications of unofficial spokespersons for the company, including flight attendants who claimed ValuJet was safe to fly and former executives who voluntarily came forward to defend ValuJet’s maintenance practices. Spokesperson attributions in *The Miami Herald* almost exclusively were to ValuJet’s president.

**DISCUSSION**

The accident decision flow chart (Figure 1) predicts ValuJet should have used both mortification and ingratiation strategies or mortification alone in its strategic re-
sponses to the crash of its Flight 592, depending on how ValuJet's mixed performance history is interpreted. When performance history was both positive and negative, the use of ingratiation strategies by the company may not have been as effective as mortification alone. ValuJet's accident was human-induced and with the deaths of passengers and crew, involved serious damage. Coombs (1995) suggested that companies experiencing such an accident need to utilize mortification strategies to help maximize their concern for publics while at the same time minimizing damage to the organization's image. In this study, we found, as expected, that mortification strategies dominated ValuJet's corporate messages. However, ValuJet also used ingratiation, nonexistence, distance, and suffering strategies, perhaps to its own detriment.

Image Repair Response: Admit Fault and Rectify for the Future

Corporate officials in organizations worry about their corporation's image, especially when in crisis. Benoit (1997) offered ways for a corporation to repair a tarnished image: First, admitting fault immediately is essential if the company is to blame for the crisis, and second, corporations should make notice of their plans to correct or prevent the problem in the future. With the deaths of passengers and crew, ValuJet's corporate image was at stake. ValuJet never came out publicly and said, "We're sorry." Publicly saying "we're sorry" in theory is an excellent crisis strategy on the part of a corporation. Benoit (1997) also suggested a company make known what changes are being made to correct its crisis situation. Our content analysis of newspaper coverage in this study shows ValuJet was effective in publicizing safety improvements; whether the publicity reached its publics is beyond the scope of this study.

The Role of Apologia

ValuJet's actions immediately after the crash echoed in part Hearit's (1994) guidelines to convey regret and concern and to limit negative associations. At the press conference, ValuJet's president expressed sympathy for the families and sorrow for the victims and crew but assured the public that the airline was safe to fly. However, as previously discussed, the company never officially claimed any fault or responsibility for the crisis to limit its culpability, whereas Hearit (1994) recommended admitting full responsibility. It is possible legal considerations may have guided ValuJet's avoidance of responsibility; most certainly, legal considerations existed, although they are beyond the scope of this study.

ValuJet later fell in with Hearit's (1994) third prescription—to disassociate from wrongdoing, kin to Brinson and Benoit's (1999) separation-shifting blame strategy—when ValuJet blamed its maintenance company, SabreTech, for mislabeling the oxygen canisters, making the subcontractor the scapegoat. However,
consistent with Coombs and Schmidt’s (2000) study questioning the efficacy of shifting blame, this action was ineffective and may have backfired. ValuJet was never able to fully disassociate itself from responsibility for the crash because the fact that ValuJet was not licensed to carry the oxygen canisters came to light in the 1st month following the accident. In using apologia as a framework for its crisis response strategy, ValuJet displayed sorrow but in a way to limit culpability and used disassociation to distance itself from the wrongdoing, blaming SabreTech for mislabeling the oxygen canisters. If a company at fault does not apologize and then blames another for the crisis, as ValuJet did with SabreTech, it may only make the company in crisis look like it has something to hide. It seems, in general, companies should avoid finger pointing.

Need for “Compassion Without Blame” Strategy

In this study, the three coders experienced difficulty in assigning a ValuJet crisis response strategy in several instances to just one of Coombs’ (1995) categories. It became apparent that Coombs’ five categories, at least in the case of the ValuJet crisis, are not in practice discrete or mutually exclusive, just as J. Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) “four models” of public relations are not discrete in practice (see, e.g., Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; J. Grunig, 2001; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1990; Leichty & Springston, 1993). Crises—like the practice of public relations in general—are complex and demand complex, situation-driven responses.

The coders in this study found that Coombs’ (1995) crisis response strategies do not allow for corporate statements that express concern and sympathy without placing blame on the company. Even though mortification is quite often recommended for transgressions, the strategy places the company in a legal dilemma (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995). The organization acknowledges responsibility for the crisis when using mortification strategy. Accepting responsibility may open doors for future liability lawsuits against the company. Lawsuits can be easily won by plaintiffs when a defendant has previously accepted responsibility (Fitzpatrick, 1995; Tyler, 1997). The results of Coombs and Schmidt’s (2000) study suggest that the same social benefits of mortification can be achieved through using the bolstering or corrective action strategies, two strategies that do not carry such a heavy liability.

However, ValuJet needed to express concern and sympathy for the victims of Flight 592 while avoiding blame. Neither Coombs’ (1995) repertoire nor Coombs’ (1998) continuum provides such a response. Also, the flow chart conceptualization (Coombs, 1995) seems to promise more value in its ease of application for crisis response managers. Perhaps in the future the flow charts can be reconceptualized to include the more recent research (Brinson & Benoit, 1996, 1999; Coombs, 1998, 1999; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000) and preserve the utility of the flow charts in the field.
This study suggests that there may be a need for an additional strategy, perhaps called “compassion without blame.” This category could be added to the recontextualized flow chart repertoire to allow companies a way to express compassion for individuals adversely affected in the crisis situation without accepting blame for the crisis. Had the crisis response repertoire tested allowed for a compassion without blame category, this study’s respectable Scott’s pi of .89 intercoder reliability would have been further improved. Additionally, company statements such as “It’s too early to know if our airplane maintenance was a key factor in the crash” do not fall into Coombs’ (1995) crisis response repertoire. The company is not denying anything, it is not making an excuse, nor is it clarifying; it just does not have an answer. There is no category for this type of corporate statement, and a recontextualized flow chart repertoire could allow for this type of response. Of course, compassion without blame would be subject to empirical testing.

Media Relations: News Coverage Peaks in 1st Week

Although The Atlanta Journal-Constitution criticized ValuJet for “a hastily called press conference” following the crash of Flight 592, ValuJet was obviously following the dictum to “tell it all and tell it fast” (Dilenschneider & Hyde, 1985). Although criticized by some, ValuJet immediately came forward to provide information and willingly answered questions from reporters about the accident. Because more than 50% of news coverage during the 1st month postcrash was published in the first 6 days, ValuJet’s experience suggests that if companies in crisis can survive the initial media onslaught, then they are on their way to surviving the crisis.

Corporate Spokespersons: One Company, One Public Face

Depending on the industry, some companies may suffer government restraints on the amount of information they are allowed to provide as in the case of airlines postcrash. The initial press conference held hours after the crash was one of the only times after the crash that ValuJet was able to speak freely. The next day, the NTSB prohibited ValuJet’s spokespersons from discussing the accident other than providing facts about the aircraft and supplying a passenger manifest. Lewis Jordan’s willingness to answer questions and even personally take phone calls from reporters in the days and weeks following the accident is an example of Druckemiller’s (1993) protection of

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11 It would have been difficult for the company to have planned this press conference in advance.
12 ValuJet’s Communications Manager Marcia Scott noted she “was getting 100 messages an hour” postcrash and had to expand her voice mail capacity. ValuJet initially staffed the telephones 24 hr a day to handle the flood of media inquiries (“Rebounding From Tragedy,” 1997, p. 10).
corporate image via accessibility to the CEO in action. No analyses of ValuJet communications for May 13, 14, 18 through 20, 23 through 29; May 31 through June 3; and June 6 through 10 were included in this study. It is possible ValuJet—restricted by the NTSB as it was—simply did not communicate anything about the crash on those days. ¹³ Such a communication void, including “no comment” responses to media, is contrary to crisis response theory.

ValuJet was praised by prominent public relations practitioners in the Atlanta coverage for its use of its top executives as spokespersons during the crisis, specifically ValuJet’s president. This is consistent with S. Wilson and Patterson’s (1987) suggestion to identify one key spokesperson to ensure the company speaks with one voice, and preferably, the spokesperson should not be from the public relations staff but should be a corporate executive trained by public relations professionals. S. Wilson and Patterson (1987) identified a technique corporate spokespersons use to bolster the company’s position with media in times of crisis. In the “bump and run” tactic, the spokesperson slightly touches the negative question and then makes a positive comment about the situation. ValuJet’s president used the bump and run tactic in the first press briefing when he referred to the accident and then assured the public that ValuJet performed sufficient safety checks on the aircraft.

It is clear from the analysis of the newspaper coverage that ValuJet spokespersons interacted one-on-one frequently with the news media and held other press briefings and conferences, in addition to the 11 written outgoing ValuJet communications and the first postcrash ValuJet press briefing analyzed in this study. Our finding in this study that 22% of all newspaper coverage in both papers included attributions to a ValuJet spokesperson is important because it supports the theory that news reportage of a corporate response strategy requires the presence of a corporate spokesperson. Interestingly, given the compliments of the Atlanta-based professionals that ValuJet had a single spokesperson, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution included attributions to 10 ValuJet spokespersons. It is possible that the Atlanta paper quoted more spokespersons because ValuJet’s corporate headquarters were in Atlanta, facilitating access for Atlanta reporters to ValuJet sources. Also, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution overall produced more articles than The Miami Herald, therefore allowing more opportunities for official spokespersons to be present in newspaper coverage.

Because Miami was a major city served by ValuJet, the company might better have served its own interests by cultivating stronger relationships with media in Miami precrash. Postcrash, ValuJet could have established a corporate presence near the accident site to serve as an information center for media—at least in the critical 1st week after the crash—to strengthen its relationships with the Miami

¹³ValuJet did not keep video archives of its press briefings. The video from the first ValuJet press conference after the crash was obtained from ABC News; no other videos were available for analysis. Written communications (e.g., releases, statements, etc.) were obtained from ValuJet corporate attorneys for this study. It is possible that ValuJet did not issue other statements about the crash or, less likely, that the attorneys withheld documents from the researchers.
(and other) media. Such a move would have been supported by reporter-source research that has suggested journalists are more responsive to sources with whom they have a relationship (see, e.g., Cameron et al., 1997; Jeffers, 1977).

As would be expected, there were also differences in how the two papers employed the news value of local angle. Many of these differences are detailed in the sections “Description Of Newspaper Coverage and Response Strategies Covered” and “Results of Hypothesis Testing”. Public relations practitioners dealing with media during crises would do well to bear in mind the importance of local angles to journalists from media in different geographic areas implicated in the story. The stronger the local angles, the more prominent the story will be, and the life cycle of the story is likely to endure longer in news media in that particular geographic location.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations. Because only one organization in crisis was analyzed, it is inappropriate to generalize to other organizations in crisis from this single case. Replication with other cases is needed. Only 1 month’s media coverage was analyzed. Analysis over a longer time frame would be helpful. This study did not include any measures of public opinion of ValuJet’s performance history. Such measures would help further test and refine predictive capabilities of the accident decision flow chart regarding efficacy of mortification alone or mortification with ingratiating strategies. A strength of the study is that we enjoyed privileged access to ValuJet’s records and key personnel.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

Because Coombs’ (1995) flow chart repertoire conceptualization seems so potentially useful to practitioners in the field, a reconceptualization of the repertoire accounting for findings of more recent research (Brinson & Benoit, 1996, 1999; Coombs, 1998, 1999; Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2001; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000), including this study, is called for. In particular, it would be valuable to examine how crisis response strategies may vary over time. Because ValuJet’s performance and relationship histories were mixed, this study raises more questions about effects of these histories on an organization’s reputation in crises. An airline tragedy such as ValuJet’s Flight 592 might be a heuristic situation to manipulate experimentally for effects of time and as a further test of “velcro effects” of performance and relationship histories (Coombs & Holladay, 2001).

It also would be valuable to study an organization’s internal culture to determine the degree to which this variable affects the crisis response strategies an organization chooses to deploy. It seems likely that organizational culture may play a strong role.
As research continues to tease out which specific crisis response strategies are most effective in which crisis situations, it might be useful to examine how differences among a company’s various publics might drive different organizational crisis responses to different publics. Considering that a company in crisis has to address multiple publics with different predispositions, response models that take into account different response strategies required to accommodate multiple publics would be worthy of testing and the results helpful to crisis managers.

Interestingly, this study’s content analyses revealed newspaper editorials and letters to the editor criticizing the media, mostly broadcast media, for their handling of the coverage following the crash. It would be beneficial to compare broadcast and print media coverage of crises to determine which media require particular responses. News cycles postcrises should be investigated further. Such investigations might examine effects of varying size news holes among media covering a crisis as well as further clarifying effects of differences in coverage between “home-town” versus “on-site” media.

With additional research to test them, the accident decision flow chart and other crisis response models can be further refined so that communication managers eventually can navigate their crises with confidence. With better understanding of crisis response options and their likely consequences offered by such theoretical models, companies facing crises may be able to find more efficacious solutions than changing their names to survive.

REFERENCES


