

Chapter 1

Communication, Persuasion, and Image Repair

People and organizations—including companies, governments, and nonprofit organizations—frequently face accusations or suspicions of wrongdoing. A glance at newspaper headlines, televised news stories, or Internet news confirms the ubiquitous nature of threats to image. For example, recently we heard and read about several alleged scandals, including J. P. Morgan's two-billion-dollar loss, General David Petraeus's affair with Paula Broadwell, Rutgers men's basketball coach Mike Rice's abuse of players, and GM's recall of potentially lethal automobiles. So threats to image, face, or reputation are commonplace in society.

Threats to one's image, which usually arise from persuasive messages that attack, criticize, or express suspicion and thereby prompt attempts at image repair, are inevitable for at least four reasons. First, the world in which we live and work has limited resources: There is only so much money, equipment, resources, office space, or time. For example, window offices are coveted and corner offices even more so, yet there are more cubicles than window and corner offices. Raise pools are limited, as are opportunities for promotion. We often compete fiercely for these tangible and intangible goods, which means the allocation of these scarce resources often provokes the ire of those who wanted these resources distributed differently. Second, circumstances beyond our control sometimes prevent us from meeting our obligations. We may be delayed by traffic and arrive late to meetings; documents or computer files may become lost or corrupted; or a colleague may neglect to inform us that the time or location of an important meeting has changed. Our behavior is significantly influenced by the people, events, and environment around us, and frequently these factors create problems for us and those who depend on us. Third, human beings are not perfect, and at times we commit wrongdoings,

some of which are honest errors, whereas other actions are guided too much by our self-interests. We may forget to bring a report to a meeting or to stop and buy milk on the way home from work; a self-employed individual may send the IRS an insufficient quarterly tax payment; or a contractor may substitute cheaper and inferior parts in a building. Alcohol, drugs, or even lack of sleep may cloud our judgment and hinder performance of our duties. Finally, the fact that human beings are individuals with different sets of priorities fosters conflict among those with competing goals. For example, do we want the most effective prescription drugs (desired by patients) or the least expensive drugs (wanted by insurance companies)? Should a country's leader focus more time and energy on domestic issues (e.g., job creation) or foreign concerns (e.g., national security)? How do we balance protecting society from criminals with preserving rights of those accused of crimes? How do we balance cost and access to as well as quality of health care? So four factors combine to ensure that actual or perceived wrongdoing is a recurrent feature of human activity.

When such inevitable (apparent) misbehavior occurs, others are very likely to attack, berate, blame, censure, condemn, rail against, rebuke, reproach, or object to us and our behavior. They may complain about things we said or did, they may carp about things left unsaid or undone, or they might criticize the way in which we performed an action or phrased an utterance. Indeed, the simple fact that our language is rich in synonyms for *accuse* is an indication of the ubiquity of complaints or persuasive attack. Persuasive attacks are messages that attempt to create unfavorable attitudes about a target (person or organization), and these messages have been investigated in several studies (e.g., Benoit & Delbert, 2010; Benoit & Dorries, 1996; Benoit & Harthcock, 1999; Benoit, Klyukovski, McHale, & Airne, 2001; Benoit & Stein, 2009).

These attacks on our reputation are serious matters, for our image or reputation is extremely vital to us. Face, image, or reputation contributes to a healthy self-image. Others may shun us, taunt us, or mistreat us in other ways when they believe we have committed a wrongful act. We can feel embarrassed and even depressed when we become aware that others think we have engaged in wrongdoing. A damaged reputation can hurt our persuasiveness, because credibility generally and trustworthiness in particular are important to persuasion (e.g., Benoit & Benoit, 2008; Benoit & Strathman, 2004), and credibility can be impaired by fallout from actual or perceived wrongdoing. We may be liable to punishment such as fines or jail time for

our misdeeds. Although organizations, including companies, may not feel embarrassed, officers, workers, and shareholders do have feelings, and those feelings can be hurt when their organization is the target of accusations. Furthermore, in the private sector, other companies or organizations may take their business elsewhere when a company has a tarnished reputation. For example, Rush Limbaugh attacked Sandra Fluke on his talk show. Carusone (2013) reported, "It's been one year since Rush Limbaugh's invective-filled tirade against then-Georgetown Law student Sandra Fluke. With hundreds of advertisers and millions of dollars lost, the business of right-wing radio is suffering." People and companies jealously guard their reputations and work hard to repair tarnished images. Hence, attacks on one's image can be very serious concerns, and most people recognize the importance of these threats to reputation.

Those who believe that their face or reputation has been injured or even threatened rarely ignore these perils. When our image is threatened, we usually feel compelled to offer explanations, defenses, justifications, rationalizations, apologies, or excuses for our behavior. This book investigates verbal responses to perceived damage to reputation—image repair strategies—because threats to image are pervasive, reputation is important, and discourse has the potential to mend our face or reputation. This first chapter provides a backdrop for the remainder of this book.

Defensive utterances (justifications, excuses, apologies—i.e., image repair) are persuasive attempts to reshape the audience's attitudes, creating or changing beliefs about the accused's responsibility for an act and/or creating or changing values about the offensiveness of those acts. I distinguish image repair discourse from crisis communication, a broader category. Figure 1.1 illustrates how image repair discourse fits into crisis communication, communication generally, and human behavior. Human behavior includes both physical acts and communication. Communication includes a variety of contexts, including health communication, political communication, and crisis communication. Crisis communication includes image repair discourse, but it also includes messages about other kinds of crises, such as natural disasters and terrorism. The theory of image repair discourse focuses exclusively on messages designed to improve images tarnished by criticism and suspicion (it is also possible to try to preempt anticipated criticism).

This book updates the theory of image repair discourse (originally referred to as the theory of image *restoration* discourse) with

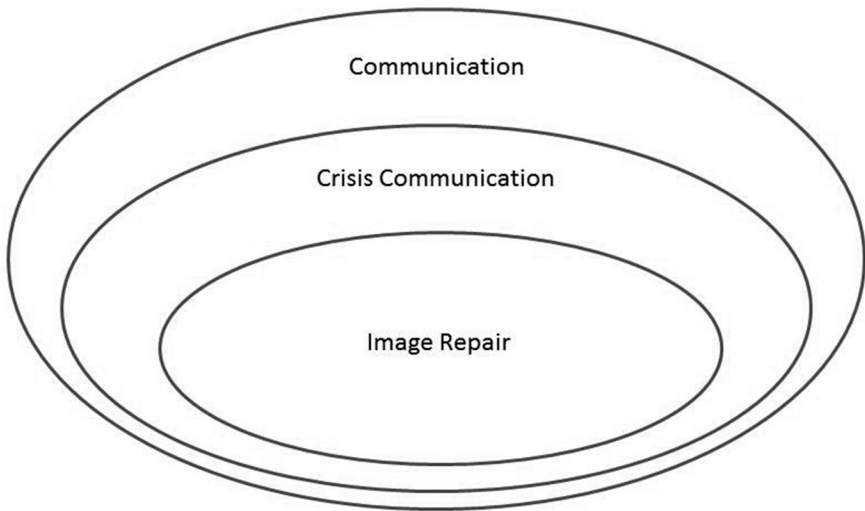


Figure 1.1. Communication, crisis communication, and image repair.

discussion of developments since the first edition was published in 1995. The case studies in this book are all new, and it extends this theory in several directions. I begin here with an overview, discussing the nature of communication, and then I proceed with addressing the nature of persuasive communication, introducing the idea of persuasive attack, and providing an initial treatment of image repair.

The Nature of Communication

Communication can be viewed as a process in which a source sends a message or messages to an audience or audiences. Of course, at times communication is an interaction where two (or more) sources exchange messages or interact in a conversation, and image repair can occur in such situations; however, in mass media situations, most often a sender disseminates a message to an audience. The source is almost always interested in learning how the audience reacts (getting some feedback in some form from the intended audience), but these mass media situations are not interactive in the same way as a conversation. Furthermore, at times even dyadic communication or conversations can be usefully understood as one person (who can be considered a source) who is trying to persuade another person

(who can be thought of as an audience). The fact that both of the participants can send messages and receive messages as an audience does not invalidate the perspective of a source sending a message to a receiver as long as we keep this duality in mind as we investigate these persuasive attempts.

Communication is vital because most of our knowledge is acquired through communication rather than from direct experience. For example, as early as the 1940s, Hayakawa (1948) explained, “Most of our knowledge, acquired from parents, friends, schools, newspapers, books, conversation, speeches, and radio, is received *verbally*. All of our knowledge of history, for example, comes to us only in words” (p. 15). For example, most people have heard of the current U.S. president, but few have met or talked with the president, and most, if not all, of what we know about the president has come from messages rather than from direct experience. Similarly, in the scandals mentioned earlier, almost no one learned about the image problems of J. P. Morgan, General Petraeus, or Mike Rice from their own direct experience with these scandals. Communication is absolutely vital as a way to change others’ attitudes about us.

It is important to stress that both message sources and audiences operate on their own individual perceptions of the world and the people, things, and ideas in the world. The person (or organization) who seeks to repair a damaged image does so because he or she *believes* (or has a perception) that an important audience holds an unfavorable attitude. Of course, if the audience really has an unfavorable attitude, the source’s perception of an unfavorable attitude is appropriately based on the audience’s perceptions. But it is also possible that I could believe that an audience thinks badly of me even if they do not—or I could be unaware of an audience’s unfavorable attitudes toward me. Similarly, when one constructs an image repair message, one does so based on perceptions of the audience’s beliefs and values. These perceptions may or may not reflect an accurate understanding of the audience’s perceptions, but those perceptions are what the persuader has to work with to create a persuasive message. One cannot look “inside” the audience’s heads to determine their “real” attitudes, and we must realize that persuaders and audiences operate based on their perceptions or misperceptions about reality.

Often our perceptions overlap; this overlap in perceptions is what makes communication possible. However, people do not share every belief. For example, some people express doubt that President

Obama was born in the United States, although that group is in the minority. Nor does everyone share the same values: Is the idea of providing health care to every American a good one or a bad one? This is why meaning resides in people, not in words or other symbols (Berlo, 1960). We use symbols in our messages in hopes of eliciting in the audience the ideas we wish to convey to them. In other words, we believe that the audience attaches the same meaning to a symbol as we do, so using that symbol in a message should evoke in the audience the meaning we want them to experience. However, poor message design or differences in the perceptions (beliefs and values) between the source and the audience can create misunderstanding. This means the person or organization attempting to repair an image must understand the audience's perceptions—and try to create the most effective message to persuade that audience. The fact that we often have similar meanings for symbols makes communication possible; the fact that we occasionally have different meanings for symbols makes miscommunication a possibility as well.

Ultimately, meaning arises from reality, but humans and their symbols give meaning to reality. A source can, potentially, persuade an audience that road salt is good (it melts ice and makes driving less dangerous) or bad (it damages cars). The “meaning” of road salt is not inherent in the salt but arises in people from their experiences with it, including messages from others about road salt. However, we are constrained by the nature of reality. If there is an object between us with a flat top and four legs, I could probably convince you that it was a desk or a table. However, unless you were impaired by alcohol or drugs, I could not expect to convince you that this thing was a car, a duck, or made entirely of water. Burke (1984) writes about the “recalcitrance” of reality. Communication is powerful, but reality imposes some limitations on what communication is capable of doing. If I am holding a sapphire gem, I might be able to get you to agree it is blue, azure, or indigo, but probably not black, yellow, or green. The recalcitrance of reality is a feature that limits all forms of communication, including image repair discourse. Furthermore, I believe that trying to convince an audience of something that is untrue (something the source *believes* is untrue) is unethical, and I would never recommend lying in a message. Furthermore, because the audience may know or learn the truth, lying is risky as well as wrong. Because image repair discourse is a form of communication, we must understand the nature of communication before we can understand image repair.

The Nature of Persuasion

Persuasion is communication that attempts to change, create, or strengthen attitudes. Attitudes are cognitions or thoughts that are developed through direct experience and communication (no attitudes are inborn) and influence our behavior. Attitudes have two components: beliefs (“facts”; descriptions of people, objects, and events) and values (favorable or unfavorable evaluations). Fishbein and Ajzen’s theory of reasoned action (2010) discusses beliefs and values (see also Benoit & Benoit, 2008). In order to have an attitude, we must have both components: a belief and a relevant value. For example, we know that Mitt Romney is a Republican (a belief), and most people either like Republican ideology (a positive value) or dislike Republican ideology (a negative value). Therefore people are inclined to have a favorable attitude toward Romney if they like Republican ideology or a negative attitude toward Romney if they dislike Republican ideology. On the other hand, if we like Republican ideology but do not know whether a particular candidate is a Republican, we cannot have an attitude toward that candidate. Similarly, if we know a certain candidate is a Republican but we have no political party preference (do not have either a positive or negative value about Republicans), we cannot have an attitude toward that candidate. So we must have both a belief *and* a relevant value to have an attitude.

We know several things about some attitude objects (people, organizations, events) and have values about those beliefs, which means that many attitudes comprise multiple relevant belief/value pairs. For example, a person’s attitude toward Bill Clinton can be based on a number of beliefs including the following:

- Bill Clinton was president of the United States for two terms.
- Bill Clinton is a Democrat.
- Bill Clinton signed the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).
- Bill Clinton signed the Brady Bill with a waiting period for handgun purchases.
- Bill Clinton is married to Hillary Rodham Clinton.
- Bill Clinton had an affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky.
- Bill Clinton had a dog named Buddy.

A person’s beliefs combine with his or her values to form an attitude. Different audience members can (and usually do) have a variety of

belief/value pairs. For example, one person may like dogs, whereas another one may dislike canines; this difference would incline the former to have a more positive attitude toward Clinton and the latter to have a more negative attitude. Or one person may, in addition to the previous beliefs, know that Bill Clinton had a cat named Socks; this belief would influence that individual's attitudes if he or she also had a value related to cats. Yet another person might know that Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton have a daughter name Chelsea. Some beliefs are associated with favorable values for many people (e.g., most people feel that presidents deserve respect). Some of these beliefs are associated with unfavorable values for many people (e.g., his affair with Monica Lewinsky). Other beliefs can polarize the audience: Some people prefer the Democratic Party, whereas others do not; similarly, some people like Hillary Rodham Clinton, whereas others intensely dislike her. Some of these beliefs may not be associated with values for some people (e.g., some do not have strong feelings about another person's pets). Some of these beliefs overlap between different people, but a given audience member can have some unique cognitions. An individual's attitude toward Bill Clinton is a conglomeration of all the belief/value pairs that are salient or remembered by that person at a given point in time.

It is important to realize that all a person's belief/value pairs might not give rise to the same attitude. For example, a person might have favorable values related to being president, being a Democrat, and signing the FMLA and the Brady Bill but have an unfavorable attitude toward Hillary Clinton and having an affair. This person might, all things considered, have a favorable attitude toward Clinton. Someone who instead had negative values associated with Democrats and the FMLA might have a negative attitude toward Clinton.

There are many, many facts (beliefs) that people can know about Bill Clinton. However, some of these facts a person does not know or might have forgotten. If you are unaware of a fact or have forgotten it, that belief cannot influence your attitude. Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) explain,

A person's attitude toward an object is, at any given moment, primarily determined by no more than five to nine readily accessible beliefs about the object. Of course, given sufficient time and motivation, people can actively retrieve additional beliefs from memory, and these additional beliefs may also influence the attitude at that point in time. We are merely

suggesting that under most circumstances a relatively small number of beliefs serve as the determinants of a person's attitudes. (p. 99)

So a person's attitude comprises the beliefs that individual holds (and their associated values) that are salient to that person at the time an attitude is activated. Notice that allegations of a scandal are often highly publicized, likely to be salient, and therefore likely to be a large component of current attitudes toward the target of allegations.

Similarly, people have attitudes about companies and other organizations that are shaped by multiple belief/value pairs. For example, Yahoo is a company about which people have beliefs. Some people could hold these beliefs:

- Yahoo is a large company.
- Yahoo has an Internet search engine.
- Yahoo offers e-mail.
- Yahoo's former CEO Scott Thompson falsified his resume.
- Scott Thompson resigned from his position as Yahoo's CEO after the controversy arose over his resume.

People's values probably vary about whether a large company is a good thing (positive value) or a bad thing (negative value), so the belief that a person is Yahoo's CEO could be a polarizing belief. Some people may like and use Yahoo's Internet search engine and/or Yahoo e-mail; they would presumably have a favorable attitude toward Thompson. On the other hand, most people probably feel it is bad to falsify a resume (an unfavorable value); those who hold this value could be inclined to have an unfavorable attitude toward Thompson. Again, a person's attitude emerges from all the belief/value pairs about a target that are salient to that person at a given time.

As noted, different people frequently have different sets of beliefs; they often have some beliefs in common but also some unique beliefs. Different beliefs can yield different attitudes for the people holding those beliefs. Furthermore, a given belief may be polarizing—associated with a favorable value for some people but an unfavorable value for others. So even two people who have the same beliefs about a person or organization will have different attitudes if they have different values. These two factors, beliefs and values, explain why attitudes vary between individuals. Two people may have similar but not identical attitudes; it is also possible for two people to

have very different attitudes. The person or organization intending to persuade an audience to change its attitudes, including changing attitudes to repair an image, must know the basis of those attitudes, the belief/value pairs that constitute an attitude for an audience.

Persuasive Attack

A persuasive attack can be viewed as an attempt to create (or strengthen) a negative attitude toward the target. One can attack by describing a person's behavior—that is, creating a new belief (“He stole a car”)—if the audience has an unfavorable value about this action (“stealing is wrong”). In fact, some messages simply report what the source believes to be true without any intent to impugn the reputation of the target. The new belief, which attributes responsibility for an action to the target, coupled with the existing value that stealing is wrong, encourages the audience to have a negative attitude toward the target. On the other hand, one can rely on an existing belief (“Mitt Romney favors lower taxes”) and try to create a negative value for the audience, stressing the offensiveness of this idea (“reducing taxes increases the deficit, which is undesirable”). As noted, for a person to have a negative attitude, that individual must have a belief/value pair. Only if you have a belief about another person and hold a value relevant to that belief can that information help you form an attitude toward that person. One can also attack a group or organization in the same way. Persuasive discourse is enthymematic (see Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, 1954); this means that the persuader may be able to rely on the audience to provide some part of the argument. In other words, an attacking message does not always need to explicitly address both of these components. Pomerantz (1978) explains that when you blame someone (or criticize them), you must allege that the target committed an act (belief) and that the act is offensive (value).

Image Repair Discourse

Image repair discourse is a persuasive message or group of messages that respond(s) to attacks or suspicions that promote a negative attitude about the source of image repair (see Benoit, 1995a, 1997b, 2000a). As just noted, threats to an image have two components: blame and offensiveness (Pomerantz, 1978). These two elements correspond

to Fishbein and Ajzen's (2010) concepts of beliefs (blame) and values (offensiveness). One can respond to an attack (or to suspicions) by rejecting or reducing responsibility (altering beliefs about blame) or reducing offensiveness (altering values). It is also possible to admit wrongdoing and apologize; one may also propose to fix the problem or prevent it from happening again. These approaches can be pursued with persuasive messages that create or change the audience's beliefs or values (or their perceptions about blame and offensiveness).

Understanding that a threat to one's image is comprised of blame (belief) and offensiveness (value) means that we can use Fishbein and Ajzen's theory of reasoned action to develop ideas for persuading an audience or repairing one's image. Starting with the idea that an attitude is based on salient belief/value pairs, Benoit and Benoit (2008) offer six suggestions for improving an attitude based on this theory:

1. Strengthen a belief associated with a favorable attitude.
2. Strengthen a value associated with a favorable attitude.
3. Weaken a belief associated with an unfavorable attitude.
4. Weaken a value associated with an unfavorable attitude.
5. Create a new, favorable attitude.
6. Remind the audience of a forgotten favorable attitude.

Fishbein and Ajzen's theory helps us develop strategies for repairing a damaged image. For example, if the audience has both favorable and unfavorable attitudes toward Yahoo, image repair on behalf of Thompson or Yahoo can attempt to strengthen an existing favorable attitude (by strengthening either the belief or the value component of this attitude), weaken an existing unfavorable attitude (by weakening the belief or value element of the unfavorable attitude), or create a new favorable attitude (which must have a belief and a value).

Conclusion

This book explores the pervasive human discourse form of image repair messages. The first edition of this book developed the theory of image restoration discourse based on a review of the literature from rhetorical (frequently called *apologia*) and sociological ("accounts" and "excuses") perspectives. I decided to change the name of this theory from image *restoration* to image *repair* because I thought the former might imply that persuasive defense ought to be able to completely

restore the image. Although it is possible that image repair might be completely successful, fully dissipating all bad feelings, a persuasive defense often only partially succeeds, *repairing* the damaged image. In this edition, chapter 2 presents the theory of image repair discourse, focusing on key research reviewed in the first edition and on more recent work. This theory is informed by my understanding of communication, persuasion, and persuasive attack, discussed here in chapter 1. After chapter 2, I discuss several contexts or kinds of image repair. Chapter 3 discusses corporate image repair. Political image repair is taken up in chapter 4. Chapter 5 investigates image repair in sports and entertainment. Chapter 6 discusses image repair in international contexts. Third party image repair—messages in which one person or organization defends or helps defend the reputation of another—is the subject of chapter 7. The book ends with conclusions in chapter 8.