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STRATEGIC SILENCE IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION – WHEN IS IT BETTER TO REMAIN SILENT?

ABSTRACT

The crisis is understood as a deep and pervasive disorder in a man's life, the functioning of a company and/or society as a whole, which leaves strong and sometimes severe consequences. The etymological word crisis comes from the Greek word 'krisis' which means ground-breaking, but transitive period. It is of great importance for companies to define a crisis as a transitive period. Therefore, responses to how companies react to crisis and which strategies of crisis communication they use, substantially determine their post-crisis success.

It is common to understand crisis communication as a process of information transfer necessary to face the crisis situation. Therefore, communication is, primarily, characterized by what we recognize as sound, voice or even noise. But, is that really so? Do we communicate even when we are silent?

From the problem point of view, this paper is determined through the following question: Is it possible that strategic silence intensifies the influence of marketing communication in crisis situations? That is when silence is a better choice for companies?

The purpose of the paper is seen in an attempt to systemize and analyse available scientific knowledge about planning and implementing silence as communication strategy of a company in crisis situations. It is primarily important because it is used almost on a daily basis by company practitioners, while the scientific public is generally silent about silence.

The commitment to research theoretical assumptions about strategic silence has been influenced by the fact that the appearance and implementation of this concept are relatively new (more serious scientific research started in the late 1970s and early 1980s). Research and scientific papers related to European areas, including the area of Bosnia and Herzegovina, dealing with the analysis of the application of the strategic silence, especially the scientific analysis of its implementation, are not available.

Keywords: crisis, crisis communication, strategic silence

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1. INTRODUCTION

If crises are as old as humanity, which they are, then it can be said with certainty that the appearance of a crisis was, at the outset, very rare. Indeed, in these cases, it was possible to observe it as a kind of phenomenon. However, as societies progress, crises are slowly becoming the rule, and not the phenomenon. Market development, continuous generation of new products and services, the daily increase in regard to the needs of humanity, and rapid development of technologies, all bring many benefits, but also take their toll on today's modern society. Crises today are diverse, rapid, often unpredictable, and sometimes they come with great and profound consequences. The focus of this paper is on economic crises and the crisis situation, i.e., the opportunities that stand, in communication strategic aspect, before companies in these more or less unexpected situations. The *conditio sine qua non* of successful businesses is adequate and completely customer-tailored market communication. During the crisis's situations in which an enterprise can possibly find itself, adequate marketing communication is essential for its own survival. It is a common opinion that, before a crisis, an enterprise must elaborate on all communication activities that will take place during and after a crisis. There is a whole range of possibilities available to companies in terms of communication. However, the question would be is it sometimes better not to say anything, and if so, in which case the company should be silent? This paper is based on available scientific literature in which the importance of implementing strategic silences in a crisis is analyzed and scrutinized.

2. WHAT IS A CRISIS?

Scientists dealing with this issue are unified only in the opinion that there is no single definition of a crisis. The reasons for this can be sought, first of all, in different types of crises and then in different angles from which one tries to define it precisely. Several authors, when speaking about the concept of crisis, actually start from the simplest

definition, based on the origin of the word itself. In this sense, it is said that the word crisis originates from the Greek *krisis*, which in literal translation would mean moment, reversal.

On the other hand, some authors systematize and then analyze from the point of view of an enterprise as many as twenty different definitions of crisis (Heath and Millar, 2004). In this regard, Coombs and Holladay (2016) in their work identify the crisis as a dramatic turning point in the business of an enterprise, that is, the need to show efforts beyond the usual or routine procedures. Others, in terms of conceptualizing the crisis, primarily emphasize stress and inadequate control over the enterprise. Finally, another view of the crisis is worth emphasizing, namely the one which describes it as a certain uncertainty in business, a violation of the law or ethics that inevitably leads to crisis situations (Coombs and Holladay, 2016). Different authors, therefore, define the concept of crisis in different ways. In this regard, Tomić (2008) accentuates a number of definitions and states that the corporate crisis is an unplanned and undesirable process of limited duration and the possibility of influence with an ambivalent outcome. Barton (1993) points out that a crisis is primarily an unpredictable event with mostly negative results, that is, an event that can cause damage to both the organization and its employees. In the same year, Pearson and Mitroff (1993) described an enterprise crisis as an incident that poses a particular threat to the enterprise itself, primarily a threat to the corporate reputation, as well as survival on the market. A crisis in the business of an enterprise is all that can cause sudden and serious damage to employees, reputation or financial result of the enterprise (Luecke, 2005), that is, any event that may interrupt normal business operations. In the same way, Jugo (2017) describes the crisis as an intense phenomenon with a potentially negative outcome that affects the organization, its general public, products, services or reputation. Any anomalous moment that may ultimately have a negative impact on the enterprise as a whole or in individual segments of it, can be understood as a crisis (Zaremba, 2010).

The analyzed definitions, undoubtedly, have certain similarities. Namely, all of them, to a greater

or lesser extent, emphasize that a crisis is a serious threat to the basic structure of the company and its core values. It is, in fact, a situation in which an enterprise feels certain pressure, which consequently requires a series of critical decisions to be made immediately. In order to minimize the possible damage resulting from an incident event-crisis, a crisis requires effective communication (Zaremba, 2010).

3. CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Accurately defining the concept of crisis communication is almost as challenging as defining precisely the term crisis. When talking about crisis communication, analyzing the available scientific resources, it is, above all, worth to emphasize its obvious interdisciplinarity. Crisis communication can be analyzed from at least two points of view; as a scientific discipline on the one hand and a practical one on the other. Crisis communication is indeed a practical discipline because it emerged as the resultant (oriented dynamically directing vector of structuring the public) of all possible crisis messages and communicative principles, especially those dealing with human behavior in dangers or crises (Plenković, 2015). Scientists in the field of marketing communication, and especially in the field of public relations, from the late XX and the beginning of the XXI century, offered a number of definitions of crisis communication, more or less leaning precisely on public relations. In this sense, Skoko (2006) sees crisis communication as a kind of public relations that enables an enterprise to simultaneously overcome a crisis and strengthen its reputation. Some authors even fully equalize crisis communication and public relations, and use the term crisis public relations in their work, citing it as the most significant form of contemporary marketing communication (Langford, 2009 according to Jugo, 2017). The reason why crisis communication and public relations are often integrated in theoretical and practical terms can also be found in the works of Fearn-Banks (2011) who understands crisis communication as a dialogue between an organization and its public, before, during, and after the crisis,

with the aim of minimizing the damage to the company.

However, regardless of the level of integration of crisis communication and public relations, crisis communication as such is necessary to successfully overcome unpleasant situations (Crandall, Parnell, & Spillan, 2014), and as a rule, involves identifying internal and external recipients who must receive information during a crisis, (Zaremba, 2010) and as quickly as possible (Crandall et al., 2014). A key feature of the contemporary communication during a crisis is the speed (Heide, von Platen, Simonssoni Falkheimer, 2018). We define strategic communication as the study of how companies purposefully use communication to fulfil their overall missions (Frandsen and Johansen, 2015, 2017; Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007). Dealing with the issues and specificities of crisis communication, Frandsen and Johansen (2017) have noted the complexity of this form of marketing communication. By trying to explain the complexity of crisis communication and all the challenges that the company faces in these specific key times, they have succeeded in developing a rhetorical arena model. The basic feature of crisis communication under this model is the “multi-vocal approach”. What is it, then? The multi-vocal approach to crisis communication implies that the rhetorical arena during a crisis involves a significantly larger number of communicators trying to influence stakeholders and the public during a crisis. Therefore, it is not only the company in a crisis that communicates. This makes communication significantly more complex. That is, the emergence of more communicators during the crisis opens the so-called rhetorical arena in which many actors try to enter and impose themselves as relevant communicators on a specific situation. Of course, at the same time, there is a possibility that this arena will be opened even before the crisis itself escalates. This, of course, further complicates the already complex communication (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017).

Undoubtedly, crisis communication is an area of marketing communication which, in the turbulent and dynamic environment in which businesses operate today, has become an area that

is constantly gaining importance in terms of scientific study. This is especially evident if we take into account information management capabilities in times of crisis. In this way, Coombs (2008) and Coombs and Holladay (2014, 2015) analyze the crisis communication precisely from the perspective of information management. Therefore, to provide the right information in the right way and with adequate channels of communication becomes a *conditio sine qua non* for the survival of the companies in times of crisis. Therefore, companies are forced, today more than ever, to have crisis communication teams ready to react when needed. Crisis communication teams, taking into account the interdisciplinary nature of crisis communication, should preferably include experts of different profiles - marketing communicators, psychologists, sociologists, etc. It is especially advisable that lawyers be involved in the crisis communication team. Their view is, in principle, contrary to one generally advocated by public relations professionals. This is primarily related to the level to which the company should show transparency. Namely, there are five most common advices from a lawyer: to deny blame for the crisis, to completely shift or share the blame with others, to remember that everything that organizations state, in the future can be used against them during the lawsuit, to say as little as possible, but find out the leaked information as soon as possible, be as quiet as possible and not say anything (Jugo, 2017). Although silence is referred to, by many theorists involved in crisis communication, as legal aid, it can nevertheless be a deliberate strategy as a communication activity. If all activities were not undertaken to readily meet the crisis, then the first and only real strategic move would be to say nothing, i.e. the strategic silence.

3.1. Strategic silence - when, how and why?

Although lawyers in communications teams are almost generally inclined to advise silence during a crisis, marketing communicators are also almost generally opposed to such a stance. More precisely, there is a clear gap between the the-

ory of crisis communication and the practice of its implementation in the market. There are frequent situations where there is no compatibility between them (Lee, 2004; Coombs, 2008; Swanson, 2012; Pang, 2012; Dimitrov, 2015; Woon and Pang, 2017; Le, 2018; Dimitrov 2019; Le Phuong et al. 2019). Scientific research in the area of Bosnia and Herzegovina addressing this issue is not available.

Even scientists who posit crisis communication as the focus of their research, do not have a common, general, position on silence. In fact, for many years, there has been a discrepancy in whether companies need to remain silent during a crisis or whether it is necessary to communicate with anyone who may be affected. The key questions raised in this regard are what strategic silence is in general, when, how and why use it.

Before answering these questions, it is necessary to define the concept of silence. According to the Croatian Language Portal, silence is a state without sounds. Human life takes place between silence and words (Guardini, 2009). A word is one of the basic ways of human communication in general. But this is just one of the ways. Another way to communicate is through silence. Silence is what happens when a person, after speaking, becomes quiet again. Only the one who knows how to remain silent can speak cleverly, and only the one who knows how to speak can stay silent properly (Guardini, 2009). From an enterprise perspective, silence is defined as a lack of corporate communication or its failure to provide adequate information at a given moment (Woon and Pang, 2017). Strategic silence is, contrary to popular belief, a carefully planned and designed communication activity of the company. It represents the intended, therefore deliberate, refusal of the company to engage in active verbal communication with the public (Brummett, 1980). Strategic silence is understood as communication silence, not when we talk about it, but when we talk through silence. That is when silence is the most powerful (Dimitrov, 2019). Although not considered as a particularly desirable theory of crisis communication (Coombs, 2008), it is still widely used by businesses today. Some authors emphasize that strategic silence means not only the complete absence of verbal commu-

nication, but also communication that provides little or no key information (Dimitrov, 2015). In this sense, strategic silence is understood as a deliberate lack of communication, and if it does exist, information is extremely scarce (Le Phuong et al., 2019). The decision not to respond verbally, that is, the decision to make strategic silence during a crisis in an enterprise, is in fact, a strategic public relation move that must be carefully planned in all its stages. When we say that this is a strategic move, we are de facto referring to the fact that the strategy of silence as such involves extreme patience but also extraordinary courage. Specifically, there are certain times in which companies, using strategic silence, can shorten the lifespan of a crisis. The responsibility of the crisis communication team is to recognize the moment to implement strategic silence. Significant benefits for the company can be achieved by strategic silence in a situation where the target public understands that the company is silent, not because it feels embarrassed or guilty, but because it is motivated by some higher intentions. In times of crisis, the higher corporate intentions are different, and they may be respecting the privacy of the victim of a relentless event, sympathy with the victim or members of the community, or other noble reasons. In the end, the company can effectively remain silent even when it genuinely works to remedy the problem that caused the crisis and, during that time, refuse to engage in extensive discussions (<https://www.ron-smith.com/25-strategies-for-crisis-communication> accessed 10/09/2019). In this way, we can emphasize that the application of strategic silence by a company during a crisis does not necessarily mean that nothing is happening. Absolute silence is often an extremely risky option as it is unlimited and thus involves the risk of creating a climate of mistrust. This is more so because during the crisis, new events may develop, or new data may become available. Finally, certain new circumstances may arise that, under the influence of different situational factors, may influence the modification of the strategic silence plan. Therefore, companies are prone to occasional slight breaks in strategic silence through statements that provide some very scarce information, usually in the form of a single sentence.

Breaking strategic silence should be part of the enterprise's plan as soon as the silence plan is adopted. According to Coombs (2008), common strategies for responding or breaking the silence can be classified into three categories based on communication goals: deny (attack, deny and detect rebuke), downplay (excuse and justification) and agree (integration, concern, compensation, regret). There is another market situation that can significantly affect the implementation of strategic silence. In some circumstances, the law requires companies to apply silence in public relations. In this case, companies usually explain the reasons for their silence.

Analyzing the aforementioned scientific insights into strategic silence, the key question is when to use it, how to plan it, maintain it, and when to break it. Strategic silence should and can be used when: a business needs to investigate a crisis, when the cause is unclear, when it wants to resolve a problem with a clear cause without inciting panic, and when it takes time to gather information or reach a primary response. In such cases, strategic silence can be used as a supportive strategy to prepare the formulation of the primary response (Le Phuong et al. 2019). It is crucial, in the event of unforeseen situations, to plan for the company to break through the silence strategically. Only after receiving sufficient information and preparing properly can the company come up with a primary answer. When a crisis occurs, an enterprise needs to formulate a response strategy by assessing the local context, answering the question of whether other market players will understand strategic silence in the right way (Coombs, 2008). During the silence, while working to investigate and solve problems, and prepare to issue a primary response, the company must continuously monitor threats and stakeholders' insights to detect any misunderstanding of silence (Le Phuong et al. 2019). Apart from organizational goals as internal factors that determine the possibility of applying strategic silence, it is also necessary to take into account factors outside the company. Speech culture is certainly one of the significant external factors (Hu and Pang, 2016). Depending on the different beliefs about how much communication is needed in a particular crisis, different

cultures may experience strategic silence differently. In other words, culture can be a predisposing factor in planning strategic silence as crisis communication (Pang et al., 2010). In this sense, Asian culture has a much higher tolerance for silence (Johannesen, 1974) which is completely understood as a fully meaningful activity (Fujio, 2004; Ye and Pang, 2011; Pang, 2013; Hu and Pang, 2018).

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the lack of communication can be decided on purpose or not on purpose (Woon and Pang, 2017). Deliberate and not intentional silence are not the same silence. Unintentional silence also referred to as "natural silence" by a number of authors, is the result of a series of adverse situations that prevent an enterprise from quickly gathering relevant information (Penuel et al. 2013). In essence, natural or unintentional silence occurs if the company has no choice but to remain silent (Woon, Pang 2017). In contrast, strategic silence is a deliberate and planned enterprise's decision. Silence is power. But the silence requires knowledge that harnesses this power, which provides guidance on how to identify it, make it relevant, use it strategically, and deal with all social, political, and moral implications responsibly (Dimitrov, 2019).

CONCLUSION

No other term in marketing crisis communication evokes as much discussion as the term strategic silence does. Why is that so? Most crisis management scholars think that, in these most sensitive and crucial moments for the company, only articulated communication with key market players can prevent a possible catastrophe. However, the practice has demonstrated something else and it partly refutes such a dominant theoretical direction so far. Namely, practitioners, not infrequently, in delicate and sensitive moments for the enterprise, tend to be quiet. A number of studies which have been conducted support this fact. The disparity between the scientific and practical view of strategic silence, observed by analyzing the scientific expertise used in this paper, shows once again that crisis scien-

tific theory very often lags behind crisis practice (Coombs, 2015a), although crisis management should strive to merge theory with practice.

By merging the available scientific knowledge, and relying on recent research in the world (Le Phuong 2019), specific questions can be raised: to what extent do companies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also the wider region, decide to apply strategic silence in crisis situations? What factors influence a company to decide on such a communication strategy? What happens in the market and what inside the company during the silence? What can cause a company to break the silence and in what ways can it be done? These questions can certainly be a challenge for the academic public as well as guidelines for future empirical research in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Theoretical considerations stemming from empirical scientific results can significantly contribute to the advancement of scientific understanding of the benefits, but also of the harm, that strategic silence in crisis communication brings with it.

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STRATEŠKA TIŠINA U KRIZNOJ KOMUNIKACIJI – KADA JE BOLJE ŠUTJETI?

SAŽETAK

Krizu razumijemo kao dubok i sveobuhvatni poremećaj u životu čovjeka, u funkcioniranju poduzeća i/ili društva u cijelosti, sa snažnim i katkad teškim posljedicama. Etimološki riječ kriza dolazi od grčke riječi *krisis* što znači prijelomno, ali prolazno razdoblje. Za poduzeća je posebno važno određenje krize kao prolaznoga razdoblja. Stoga, odgovori na pitanja kako poduzeća reagiraju na krizu te koje strategije kriznoga komuniciranja koriste, bitno određuju njihovu uspješnost nakon krize. Uobičajeno je kriznu komunikaciju razumjeti kao proces prenošenja informacija potrebnih za suočavanje s kriznom situacijom. Komunikaciju, prvenstveno, obilježava ono što prepoznamo kao zvuk, glas ili čak buku. No, je li uistinu tako? Komuniciramo li i kada šutimo?

Problemski se ovaj rad određuje pitanjima određuje pitanjima: *Može li strateška tišina pojačati utjecaj marketinške komunikacije u kriznim situacijama? Odnosno, kada je tišina bolji izbor za poduzeća?* Svrha rada ogleda se u nastojanju da se sistematiziraju i analiziraju dostupne znanstvene spoznaje o planiranju i implementiranju tišine kao strategije komuniciranja poduzeća u kriznim situacijama. Ovo tim prije jer je marketinški praktičari u poduzećima gotovo svakodnevno koriste, a znanstvena javnost o tišini uglavnom šuti.

Na opredijeljenost za istraživanjem teorijskih postavki o strateškoj tišini utjecala je činjenica kako je pojava i implementacija ovoga koncepta relativno novijeg datuma (ozbiljnija znanstvena proučavanja počinju tek koncem 70-ih i početkom 80-ih godina prošloga stoljeća). Istraživanja i znanstveni radovi koji se odnose na europska područja, uključujući i područje Bosne i Hercegovine, a koja se bave analizom primjene strateške tišine, posebice znanstvenom analizom njezine implementacije, nisu dostupna.

Ključne riječi: kriza, krizna komunikacija, strateška tišina