

The Challenge of Exemplification in Crisis Communication

Deborah D. Sellnow and Timothy L. Sellnow

Abstract

This case study characterizes the crisis communication challenges and potential response strategies of organizations facing crises of perception created by media exemplars. Exemplars are created through repeated news stories made memorable by highly vivid language, shocking visual materials, and evocative personal testimonies. ABC's portrayal of Lean Finely Textured Beef as "pink slime" is provided as a case for analysis. The study concludes that organizations responding to crises of perception are at an extreme disadvantage when their standard operating procedures are portrayed negatively as exemplars. In addition, stigmatization increases an organization's susceptibility to exemplars. Finally, appeals to neutral parties have the potential to bring some degree of added credibility to organizations responding to crises of perceptions caused by exemplars.

Key Words

Food safety, risk communication, crisis communication, news framing

Introduction

At their most fundamental level, organizational crises are rooted in public perception. Although some organizational crises create clearly visible harm, others emerge solely from a loss of public confidence. For example, a food product tainted by such microbial contaminants as *Salomonella* or *E. coli* O57: H7 manifests in a clear pattern of illnesses for which the responsible organization is held accountable. Conversely, other crises emerge due to what Coombs (2009) identifies as "rhetorical problems" creating a "gap in agreement" between the organization and its consumers and stakeholders (p. 238). In other words, organizations can face a crisis of public perception. Even when organizations believe the accusations or public concern causing the agreement gap is not warranted, they still must communicate in response to the loss in public confidence.

Gaps in agreement leading to crises based on public perception often result from the way an issue is framed in the media. As Hook and Pu (2006) explain, "reporters and editors routinely choose among various approaches to the presentation of news stories" (p. 169). These choices result in patterns of coverage that can alter the public's perception of risk and decision-making about those risks (Hallahan, 2005). If a product is framed negatively, a gap in agreement about the safety of the product develops between the organization and consumers (Slovic, 2000). In fact, "nuclear and chemical

This research was supported in part by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (Grant number N-00014-04-1-0659), through a grant awarded to the National Center for Food Protection and Defense at the university of Minnesota. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not represent the policy or position of the Department of Homeland Security. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the meeting of the Central States Communication Association, Kansas City, MO, April 6, 2013.

technologies (except for medicines) have been stigmatized by being perceived as entailing unnaturally greater risks” (Slovic, 2000, p. 390). A crisis occurs when the gap is wide enough to threaten the organization’s survival. The objective of organizations facing such crises of perception is to reframe the issue in a more favorable light.

We argue that reframing an issue is particularly challenging when the issue is initially framed by an exemplar (Zillmann, 2006). Exemplars are created through repeated news stories made memorable by presenting an issue using highly vivid language, shocking visual materials, and evocative personal testimonies (Aust & Zillmann, 1996). Such exemplars sway public opinion about risk issues and pose severe crisis communication challenges for organizations. Thus, the objective of this case study is to characterize the crisis communication challenges and potential response strategies of organizations facing crises of perception stemming from the media’s presentation of an exemplar. To do so, we first provide an overview of exemplification theory. As a means of pursuing our research objective, we next apply exemplification theory to the controversy surrounding the portrayal by ABC News of Lean Finely Textured Beef (LFTB), produced by Beef Products, Incorporated (BPI), as “pink slime.” Specifically, we summarize how the ABC News accusations manifested in an exemplar and then analyze the BPI response to ascertain the crisis communication challenges the company faced. We selected this case because, although no negative health effects were documented, the news coverage using the phrase pink slime created a public outcry that has devastated the LFTB industry (Schultz, 2012). We conclude our analysis with implications and conclusions about the crisis communication challenges and opportunities in crises of perception based on exemplary news coverage.

Exemplification Theory

Exemplification theory “focuses on assessments of risks to safety and health, as well as on contingent apprehensions that motivate risk avoidance and related protective behavior” (Zillmann, 2006, p. S221). Exemplification theory posits that perceptions of such risks are altered through exposure to exemplars. Exemplars are “elementary occurrences that can be expressed in simple propositional form, mostly as attributional or causal relationships” (Zillmann, 2006, p. S224). Exemplars are made memorable by their “visually vivid and emotionally strong” content (Aust & Zillmann, 1996, p. 788). Thus, pictures or “any combination of image and text” can serve as exemplars (Zillmann, 2006, p. S224). Exemplars increase in influence about risk issues when they are seen recently and frequently. Of these two variables, frequency is most influential because repeated viewing “of exemplification fosters an enduring influence on the perception of phenomena and issues” (Zillmann, 2006, p. S223).

Zillmann (2006) explains that the “influence on judgment” caused by exemplars “resides in the information they convey and, along with it, in the affective reactivity the information elicits” (p. S224). In other words, exemplars foster strong emotional responses that ultimately influence risk perception and behavior. Zillmann contends that, “in the assessment of health risks, for example, exemplars associated with affective reactivity will receive disproportional attention and thereby render overestimates of the incidence and magnitude of threats to health” (Zillmann, 2006, p. S224). By their nature, the messages embodied by exemplars “place few demands on processing and consequently should avail themselves from memory more readily than the specifics of abstractions” (Zillmann, 2006, p. S225). Thus, exemplars communicate stark messages that are both memorable and easily processed.

Aust and Zillmann (1996) observe that, when choosing exemplar testimonials in news stories, television reporters tend “to favor those that are dramatic, vivid, and possibly shocking” (p. 788). Emphasizing extreme or atypical exemplars in television coverage can “result in unwarranted, erroneous generalizations” causing inaccurate “knowledge and understanding” by viewers (p. 788). As a

result, viewers tend to overestimate risks, causing increased and unwarranted feelings of fear or threat (Westerman, Spence, & Lackland, 2009), potentially initiating crises based on audience perception. For example, those viewing stories about food poisoning from fast-food restaurants that included exemplars featuring emotional victim testimony perceived a significantly greater risk of contracting food poisoning than those who viewed a less emotional explanation (Aust & Zillmann, 1996).

The clear evidence that featuring exemplars in television news can create crises of perception is cause for meaningful reflection on how journalists use exemplars and how responsible parties respond to stories featuring exemplars. Exemplars can and have been used effectively to draw attention to highly probable health risks that are not widely recognized by the general public (Zillmann, 2006). Conversely, featuring exemplars in news coverage can notably distort the public's perception of risk. To avoid such distortion, Zillmann, Gibson, Sundar, and Perkins (1996) provide two practical recommendations, one for journalists and one for those responding to the stories featuring exemplars:

First, news writers must be made aware of the implications of exemplification, especially of those concerning selective, distorting exemplification. Cognizance of glaringly inappropriate exemplification should correct the practice of highly selective exemplification to some degree. Second, news writers must be appraised of the fact that pallid general information is likely to fail as a corrective for distorting exemplification. Efforts must be directed at presenting much needed base-rate information more compellingly than is commonly done. (Zillmann, Gibson, Sundar, & Perkins, 1996, p. 441)

Failing to recognize the potential for exemplars to influence public perception of risk is problematic for all parties. From the perspective of producers, exemplars have the potential to create a crisis by devastating sales due to misguided perceptions of a product's risk. From the standpoint of consumers, exemplars can move the public's attention away from risks with high probability and toward risks where the actual likelihood of harm is low.

Method

This analysis employs a case study method to provide, in rich detail, a description of how ABC's depiction of LFTB as "pink slime" created a vivid exemplar that devastated the LFTB industry. The case study method is particularly appropriate for the analysis of organizational crises because it "allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin, 2003, p. 2). In addition to reviewing the ABC News story that triggered the crisis, we focused our analysis on BPI's crisis response. Specifically, we analyze BPI's website entitled, "The Facts of Lean Finely Textured Beef" (initially available at <http://www.beefisbeef.com/faq-3/>). This website was accessible during the first six months of the controversy when media coverage was highest. We chose to analyze this website because it made BPI's approximately 1,500-word crisis response readily available to a broad public audience. A truncated version of this website (<http://beefisbeef.com/lftb-faq>) was still accessible as of December 2013.

The Case: ABC News Portrayal of "Pink Slime" as an Exemplar

The phrase "pink slime" was first introduced to a national audience in an ABC News investigative report that aired on March 7, 2012. Diane Sawyer, anchor of the news program, introduced the story as a "startling ABC News investigation" reported by Jim Avila. Avila narrates the story saying that a "whistleblower has come forward" to reveal that most ground beef is "padded with a filler" he calls

“pink slime.” The story features two former USDA scientists turned whistleblowers, Gerald Zirnstein and Carl Custer.

Avila narrates over video footage intermixing unsavory cuts of meat in processing plants with workers packaging fresh ground beef in grocery stores. Avila states:

70% of the ground beef we buy at the supermarket contains something he calls pink slime, beef trimmings that were once used only in pet food and cooking oil, now sprayed with ammonia to make them safe to eat and then added to most ground beef as a cheaper filler.

In the story, Zirnstein refers to this process as “economic fraud,” and both Zirnstein and Custer are said to have warned USDA officials not to approve LFTB for human consumption.

The story then shifts to an animated video providing a succinct summary of how LFTB is produced. Animated graphics demonstrate how the beef trimmings are heated, spun to remove fat, sprayed with ammonia gas to kill bacteria, pressed into bricks, frozen, “for shipment to meat packers and grocery stores where it is added to most ground beef.” Avila also emphasized that LFTB “doesn’t have to appear on the label because, over objections from its own scientists, USDA officials with links to the beef industry labeled pink slime meat.”

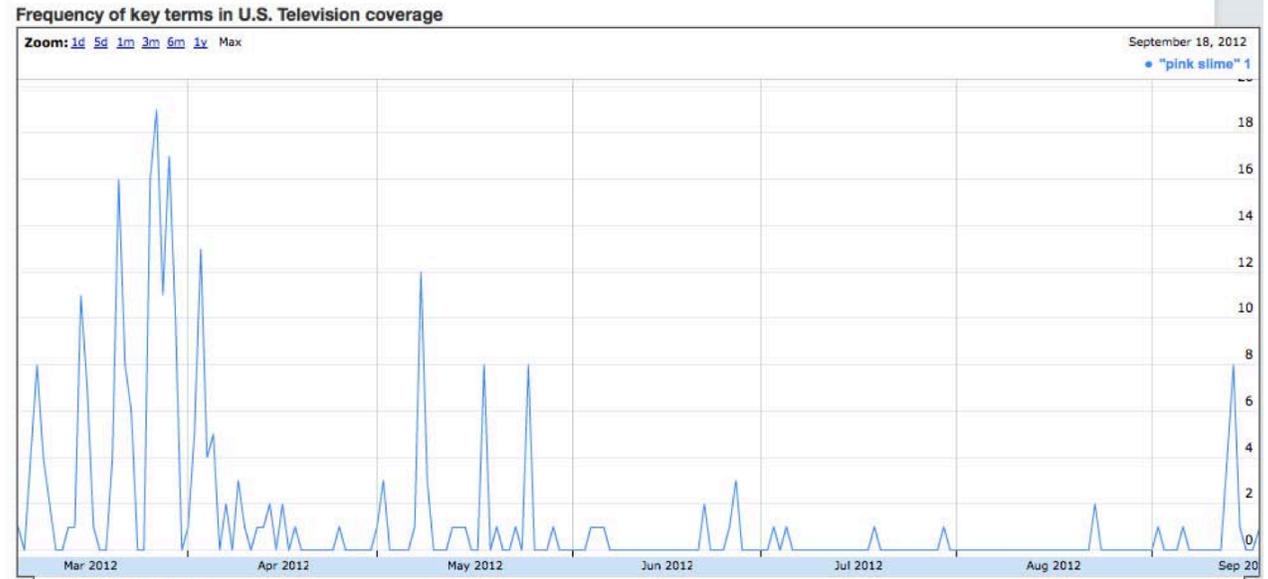
The story ends by revealing a potentially unethical relationship between former USDA undersecretary JoAnn Smith, who is said to have made the decision to consider LFTB as beef, and one of the suppliers to the main distributor of LFTB, Beef Products, Inc. Carl Custer is quoted as saying “The undersecretary said it’s pink, therefore it’s meat.”

Avila then describes Smith’s decision as “a call that led to hundreds of millions of dollars for Beef Products, Inc.” The reporter reveals further that, “when Smith stepped down from the USDA, BPI’s principal supplier appointed her to the board of directors where she made at least \$1.2 million over 17 years.” He concludes the story by saying, “BPI says it had nothing to do with her appointment and the USDA says, while legal then, under current ethics rules she could not immediately have joined that board.” When the camera returns to Diane Sawyer, she ends the segment by saying, “And we know this raises so many questions. Jim Avila is going to stay on this case.”

The story launched a wave of media coverage featuring the unprecedented phrase *pink slime*. The story inspired a surge of similar stories on multiple networks. The term was repeated frequently over several weeks and was accompanied by visual images of unappetizing meat scraps. Figure 1 shows a sudden peak in frequency of the term *pink slime* in television news coverage.

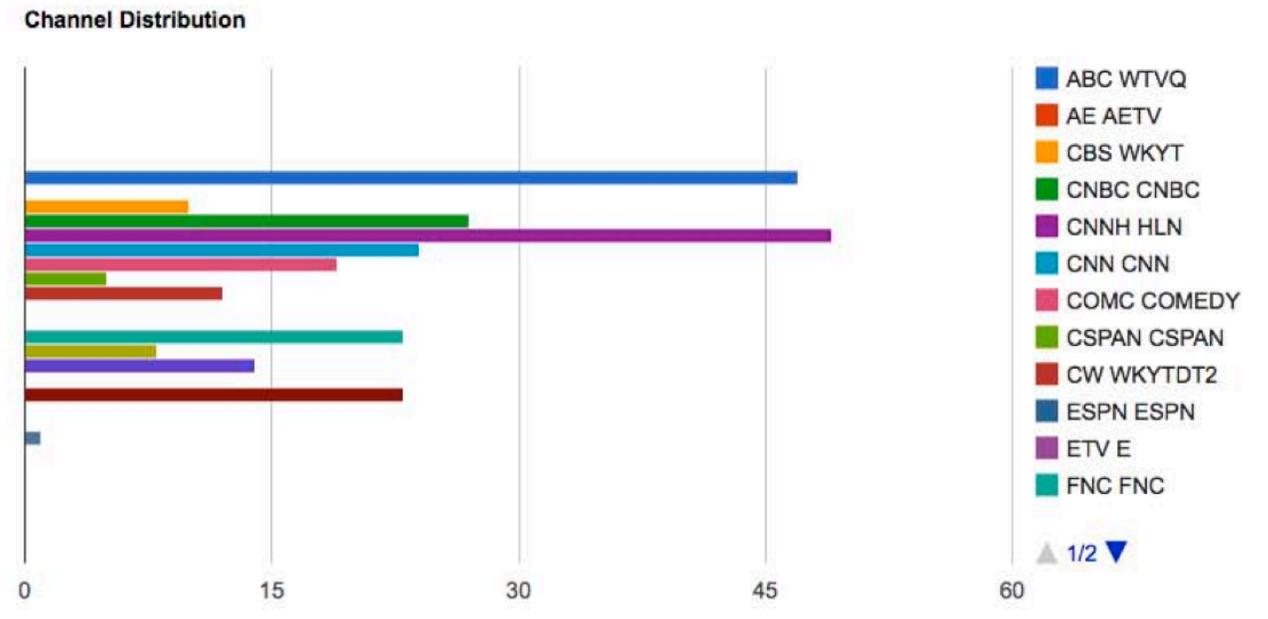
Figure 2 shows the coverage spanned beyond ABC to include most major news networks. The sudden frequency and prolonged coverage featuring the shocking and repulsive phrase *pink slime* accompanied by distressing visual representation of the product and production process clearly reflects the criteria Aust and Zillmann (1996) establish for an exemplar. The “vivid and emotionally strong” content along with the selective use of testimonials from the two USDA scientists provide a simplified explanation of the complex issues of food safety and meat processing (Aust and Zillmann, 1996). In short, ABC’s story initiated the exemplar that drew considerable attention to LFTB, a product that was not widely recognized by the general public (Zillmann, 2006).

As Zillmann (2006) explains, exemplars have the potential to create “disproportional attention and thereby render overestimates of the incidence and magnitude of threats to health” (Zillmann, 2006, p. 224). Although no health hazard had been established related to LFTB, the vividly disgusting portrayal of the product by ABC and subsequent reports preceded a drastic drop in demand for ground beef including LFTB. In a Congressional Report published on April 6, 2012, one month



Calculations include 24 all stories broadcast on CNN, CNNH, CSPAN, CW, CBS, Fox, FNC, NBC, ABC, PBS, and MSNBC for the months of March 7-September 15, 2012.

Figure 1. Frequency of Television Reports Including the Phrase "Pink Slime"



Calculations include 24 all stories broadcast on CNN, CNNH, CSPAN, CW, CBS, Fox, FNC, NBC, ABC, PBS, and MSNBC for the months of March 7-September 15, 2012.

Figure 2. Frequency of Television Reports Including the Phrase "Pink Slime" by Television Station

after ABC's first story introducing *pink slime*, Joel L. Green, an analyst in agricultural policy documented the decline of LFTB. He noted that within a month of ABC's first report:

USDA announced that, due to consumer demand, it would allow school districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program to choose whether or not to buy ground beef that includes LFTB for the next school year. (p. 6)

Safeway, SuperValu, Food Lion, Kroger and other grocery retail chains announced they would no longer sell ground beef that includes LFTB. (p. 7)

As a result of falling demand for LFGB, BPI suspended production at three of its four processing plants, laying off 650 employees. (p. 7)

Without question, the declining sales of LFTB occurring after the appearance of the pink slime exemplar threaten the survival of BPI and the LFTB industry. Next, we analyze BPI's response to the accusations initiated by ABC News.

Beef Products Incorporated's Rebuttal to ABC

As part of the company's response to the maelstrom initiated by ABC's coverage of LFTB, BPI launched a website that serves as a rebuttal to the criticism. BPI explained the site was created because, "Unfortunately, recent media reports and so-called 'reality' shows have raised concerns about the product without the benefit of facts from those that produce or use it." We chose to analyze this website because it provides a comprehensive summary of statements made by BPI throughout the most acute media coverage of the controversy. In addition, the website, entitled "The Facts on Lean Finely Textured Beef," allowed BPI to include pictures, tables, and links to other documents necessary for moving beyond the pallid description of information against which Zillmann (2009) and others caution. In the Web document, BPI makes three primary arguments: a) LFTB is beef, b) ammonia is a naturally occurring product that actually enhances the safety of ground beef, and c) LFTB represents responsible use of the food supply.

LFTB is Beef

BPI begins its defense by clarifying that its product is accurately known by the technical phrase "Lean Finely Textured Beef." At no point in the entire rebuttal of LFTB is the phrase "pink slime" mentioned. After clarifying the product's name, BPI argues that LFTB is ultimately "a key source of the lean meat used to make ground beef." The company explains that all ground beef is made by "combining lean beef trimmings with other beef trimmings and grinding them together to make different lean blends that consumers desire (example 90% lean / 10% fat)." BPI then explains the confusion related to LFTB stems from the use of long-standing technology that improves upon the effort to separate lean beef from fat by hand. BPI explains: "State of the art food processing equipment allowed the removal of the fat from the beef trimmings. The finished product from this process is known as Lean Finely Textured Beef or LFTB." The product is finely textured through a stage in the process that strains out "any connective tissue, cartilage, and other pieces that may incidentally accompany the trimmings." They liken the process of making LFTB to "one used to separate cream from milk and a variety of other everyday foods."

Having established that LFTB is nothing more than a processed form of ground beef, BPI counters the claims that the product is not inspected like other meat products and that it had previously been used only as an ingredient for animal food. BPI argues that "LFTB is 100% beef and all beef is strictly regulated and inspected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)." The company explains further that, "Inspectors are present in plants where these products are made everyday to ensure they are produced in accordance with established regulations in a safe and wholesome manner." BPI then asserts that, "During the more than three decades BPI has been producing lean beef, they have had an unsurpassed food safety record." The company dismisses the claims that LFTB was previously fed only to animals as "absolutely false." They conclude this section by re-emphasizing the

claim that “What the LFTB production process simply does is allow the removal of fat from beef trimmings, which was previously near impossible to accomplish through knife trimming by hand.”

Ammonia is Safe

To answer claims that the use of ammonia makes LFTB dangerous to consumers, BPI explains, “Ammonia is naturally found in beef, other proteins, and virtually all foods.” This claim is repeated on six occasions in the document. To support this assertion, BPI provides a picture of a cheeseburger with the amount of ammonia in each ingredient posted on the side of the graphic. The company also provides a list of 61 foods, many of them vegetables that naturally include ammonia.

BPI broaches the topic of intentionally adding ammonia to a product through claims that doing so actually heightens the safety of the product. The company states that, “In addition, as part of our commitment to provide the safest lean beef possible, research drove us to create the pH enhancement process, which relies upon slightly increasing the level of Ammonia already present in beef in order to elevate its pH to combat deadly pathogens such as *E coli* O157:H7.” BPI then discusses how dangerous the *E. coli* pathogen is to “young children and elderly people.” BPI concludes its discussion of ammonia by arguing that the use of ammonia is “nothing new.” As support for their claim they cite a study completed in 1973 attesting to the presence of small amounts of ammonia in a variety of foods.

Responsible Use of the Food Supply

The final defense provided by BPI addresses the concern that LFTB is made by scouring bones to salvage small scraps of meat. The company poses the rhetorical question, “Is it really necessary to get every small bit of beef from a carcass?” They answer their own question by saying, “Necessary? No. Is it the right thing to do? Absolutely!” To justify their argument, they claim, first, that LFTB “makes it possible to have more of the leaner ground beef blends consumers desire at affordable prices.” BPI’s second justification is that eliminating LFTB would be “like throwing away 5,700 cattle a day.” They claim further that such waste contributes to the strain on a worldwide food system that must feed a population that “is increasing by 220,000 people everyday.”

BPI further asserted its responsible management practices by lauding the USDA’s decision to allow retailers to include LFTB as an ingredient on the labels of the ground beef they sell. In doing so, BPI first reminds the reader that “Ground beef is a single ingredient product (beef) and LFTB is 100% beef; therefore it is not required to be listed separately on any label.” The company then reassures consumers by explaining, “We believe USDA’s decision to allow companies to voluntarily include information on their label regarding LFTB content will be an important first step in restoring consumer confidence in their ground beef.”

Filing a Law Suit for Defamation of Character Against ABC

In September of 2012, BPI added to its risk communication defense of the company by filing a lawsuit against ABC News. The company is seeking \$1.2 billion in damages (Lopez, 2012). In the lawsuit, BPI alleges that “coverage of the ‘pink slime’ controversy misled consumers into believing that the product was unsafe, even though it had been approved for human consumption by the U.S. Department of Agriculture” (Lopez, 2012, p. 2). When interviewed about the lawsuit, BPI’s attorney, Dan Webb, argued that “BPI blames ABC for causing consumers to believe the product “is some type of unhealthy and repulsive liquid product that is not even meat” (Tomson, 2012, para. 3). Webb insisted LFTB is made completely of beef. In response to the lawsuit, ABC News Senior Vice President Jeffrey Schneider claimed: “The lawsuit is without merit. We will contest it vigorously” (Tom-

son, 2012, para. 3). As can be seen in Figure 1, the lawsuit created a second spike in the appearance of the phrase *pink slime* in television news.

Analysis

ABC's portrayal of LFTB as *pink slime* created an exemplar in television news that caused a crisis of public perception for BPI. The fact that no physical harm from the product was documented suggests the crisis was clearly based on the perceptions created by the *pink slime* exemplar. BPI continues to insist the product is both safe and comprised 100% of beef. From BPI's perspective, ABC News failed to meet the criteria established by Zillmann et al. (1996). Specifically, BPI claimed the ABC News story that framed LFTB as *pink slime* is an example of inappropriate exemplification that caused distortion in the minds of the public.

In contrast, ABC News insists LFTB is a filler tinged by ammonia that, prior to its reporting, has been added to ground beef without the public's knowledge. Moreover, the decision by the USDA to allow the use of LFTB was, according to ABC News, made under questionable circumstances. From this perspective, ABC News was using exemplification effectively and ethically to draw public attention to an overlooked health risk (Zillmann, 2006).

The Crisis Communication Challenges

The validity of LFTB as a health risk remains to be seen. At this point, there is no clear evidence that people who consume the product are at any greater risk than those who do not. Thus, BPI has not knowingly served a dangerous product to its customers. If LFTB had produced demonstrable harm to its consumers, BPI would be facing a tangible crisis with patterns of illnesses for which they would be held accountable. In this case, the crisis remains one of perception and warrants a crisis communication response. To that end, BPI faces two general crisis communication challenges:

Reframe the Product: BPI needs to reframe the product as safe and responsible by countering the claims established in the ABC News story.

Present their Rebuttal in a Compelling Manner: Because the ABC News story created an exemplar of the phrase *pink slime*, BPI needs to provide a compelling response in both form and content. This challenge accounts for the Zillmann et. al (1996) warning that pallid general information is likely to fail as a corrective measure for distorting exemplification.

In short, BPI needs to change perception by countering the claims made by ABC News and it needs to do so in a way that captures and holds the viewers' attention.

Reframing Claims made by ABC News

BPI systematically addresses each of the claims made by ABC News in the rebuttal they provide on their website. Initially, BPI seeks to reassert the product's name, Lean Finely Textured Ground Beef. The phrase *pink slime* is completely absent from BPI's rebuttal. Related is BPI's explanation that, at no point in the creation of LFTB, is any ingredient other than scraps of fat and muscle, introduced into the production process. Hence, they maintain their argument that LFTB is composed completely of beef. In doing so, they make no mention of the ABC News assertion that the USDA's decision to allow LFTB in ground beef was made under suspicious circumstances by then undersecretary JoAnn Smith.

Although BPI's argument is accurate, the visual representation of LFTB allows ABC News and others to create some doubt as to the integrity of product. The fact that the meat scraps are converted into a liquid state that must be compressed and frozen to return to a solid form creates a visual contrast to BPI's description of LFTB as beef. Moreover, the fact that, at least for a period of time during processing, the meat is in a pink liquid form gives some credence to the vivid and repulsive phrase *pink slime*.

Another troubling aspect for consumers was the revelation by ABC News that LFTB is exposed to an ammonia gas during processing. BPI provides two arguments related to ammonia in its rebuttal. First, BPI contends that ammonia is naturally occurring in beef and other commonly consumed products. Second, the company insists that the small dose of ammonia used in processing is essential to avoiding such dreaded bacteria as Salmonella and E. coli O157: H7. Both arguments provided by BPI are valid. Still, the fact that ammonia is intentionally applied to LFTB during processing creates two lingering questions that must also be addressed. If, as argued above, LFTB is simply a different form of beef, why is ammonia necessary for its creation and unnecessary for other forms of beef? BPI argues accurately that the levels of ammonia used in the processing of LFTB are well beneath any dangerous threshold. This argument, however, is potentially weakened by the fact that the public has a difficult time discerning between safe and unsafe levels of chemical exposure. Krause, Malmfors and Slovic (2000) explain that this difficulty often reaches the point where the mere presence of a chemical is seen as disconcerting. Thus, BPI faces an uphill battle in convincing some consumers that the use of ammonia in meat production is safe.

In response to criticism that LFTB is made with meat salvaged in the final stage of butchering beef, BPI claims they are engaging in a responsible use of the food supply. They argue that a failure to complete this final stage of meat production would constitute an indefensible waste in a world with a growing population and increasing demands on the food supply. There is no clear contrast to this argument in the pink slime exemplar. The beef used in the production of LFTB is portrayed as low grade, but there is no counter in the ABC News story to claims that failing to process this product is a waste of consumable food.

Presenting the Rebuttal in a Compelling Manner

Zillmann et al. (1996) caution that attempts to counter exemplars with pallid information are likely to fail, even if the information is logical, accurate, and well supported. The affect created by the exemplar is often simply too memorable and readily retrieved cognitively to be replaced by a plainly stated, accurate argument. BPI moves beyond a pallid presentation of their rebuttal in two ways. First, the company makes use of evocative pictures and graphs. Second BPI introduces a comparison, analogy, and contextual clarification into its discussion that create vivid mental pictures. We discuss these features in the following paragraphs.

BPI provides visual support for its claim that ammonia is safe. Their rebuttal features an appetizing picture of a cheeseburger with a listing of how much naturally occurring ammonia is in each ingredient. The picture is appealing and the numbers noted in the graphic are surprising. Second, BPI provides a graph listing dozens of common foods and including their naturally occurring levels of ammonia. The mathematical calculations of ammonia levels for comparison to the processing of LFTB are somewhat difficult to comprehend. The fact that so many foods are listed as having a notable degree of naturally occurring ammonia, however, may be potentially compelling for viewers.

In addition to the visual elements in BPI's rebuttal, the company creates several vivid mental pictures through language. For example, BPI makes the analogy that eliminating LFTB production

is akin to throwing away 5,700 full beef carcasses per day. They then make the inferential leap to conclude that doing so will hamper the world's efforts to feed its growing population. BPI provides another vivid mental picture by comparing the "state of the art technology" used to make LFTB to the alternative — having workers with knives painstakingly trim bits of muscle from scraps of fat. In this manner, BPI creates a mental picture of the LFTB processing equipment as an achievement in modern engineering. A third example of potentially evocative language establishes a historical context for LFTB. BPI mentions repeatedly that the process for creating LFTB has a 30-year history with a clean record of having caused no health problems.

Finally, BPI's decision to sue ABC News for defamation is itself a compelling act. One could infer from BPI's decision to engage in a legal battle that the company has reason to believe that ABC News knowingly presented false or distorted information. The fact that BPI would take this somewhat extreme measure could serve as an evocative and memorable act that implies innocence.

Discussion and Conclusions

In general, BPI's rebuttal is well argued and the language strategies and visual representations are compelling. Still, the pink slime exemplar poses a challenge that is difficult to overcome. In particular, the transition of the meat product to a liquid state and the use of ammonia are facts that BPI cannot explain away. Certainly, the decisions by ABC News to label the product pink slime and to imply that the use of ammonia is dangerous are extreme and perhaps unjustified. Nevertheless, these elements of the story are difficult to refute. Had these elements of the story been inaccurate or completely false, BPI would face less difficulty in reframing them. At best, then, one can argue that BPI has been only partially successful in its efforts to reframe the issue. Accordingly, we argue that, when an organization's standard operating procedures are portrayed negatively as exemplars, the potential for reframing them or perhaps even changing them becomes more difficult.

As mentioned earlier, the topic of ammonia creates an exceptional challenge. The general public comprehends that ammonia is a toxic substance. Stigmatized perceptions such as this have the potential to quickly push a risk dialogue, such as determining the thresholds at which a chemical is safe, into a perceptual crisis. In this case, the fact that ammonia was a central element in the media coverage of LFTB was particularly alarming for consumers. The fact that chemicals such as ammonia are stigmatized makes them more prone to exemplification and more difficult to reframe with a logical explanation of thresholds.

The LFTB case also reveals two insights involving appeals to neutral parties that expand upon the recommendations of Zillmann et al. (1996). First, a component of BPI's rebuttal included the mention of corrective action taken by a neutral party. BPI emphasized the fact that the labeling issue had, to some extent, been resolved by the USDA's decision to allow companies to voluntarily list LFTB on their labels. As mentioned above, the nature of the product meant that BPI could not change or correct the means by which LFTB was made. Similarly, the organization could not demand that those who make use of the filler in their ground beef label the final product as such. As a neutral party, however, the USDA gave BPI an opportunity to emphasize that one of the key complaints registered by ABC News had been largely resolved. Hence, neutral parties have the potential to bring some degree of added credibility to organizations responding to crises of perceptions caused by exemplars.

BPI's decision to file a defamation lawsuit against ABC News constitutes a second appeal to a neutral party. If the lawsuit progresses through the stages of litigation, BPI will be able to move the case from metaphorically being tried in the court of public opinion to literally being tried in the

court of law. The legal proceedings give BPI the opportunity to publicly defend its practices while questioning the veracity of the claims made by ABC News. Naturally, this tactic could work against BPI if the lawsuit is rejected or if a favorable decision in the case is rendered. Still, the strategy of moving a case involving an exemplar to a legal setting where it can be judged by a neutral party has the potential to boost an organization's credibility.

The LFTB case also extends exemplification theory by revealing the potential for unanticipated consequences in the use of exemplars that draw attention to health issues. Zillmann (2009) argues that exemplars are useful in calling attention to health hazards previously unrecognized by the public. Ironically, the LFTB case suggests that exemplars can also function in the opposite direction. When LFTB was withdrawn from many supermarket shelves, the cost of lean ground beef increased as did sales of ground beef with a higher fat content. In addition, the USDA forecast increased beef imports from countries such as Australia and New Zealand (Greene, 2012). Consequently, one could argue that the attempt by ABC News to use an exemplar to raise awareness of a potentially dangerous practice actually resulted in poorer health choices for consumers and increased competition for American ranchers and meat processors.

This analysis is limited to the inception of an exemplar and the initial rebuttal provided by the organization. Future research on organizational crises of perception should focus on how such exemplars gather momentum and spread among various media forms. Also, exemplars in settings other than the food or health industry should be analyzed. For example, are there characteristics in exemplars that cause crises of perception in the transportation or tourist industries that differ from those described and analyzed here? This study has also shown that exemplars have the potential to harm consumers rather than protect them. Further research analyzing this dangerous potential is also warranted.

Exemplars can dramatically diminish an organization's credibility. The crises in perception that exemplars create can literally devastate an organization. For this reason, media sources should, as Zillmann et al. (1996) suggest, carefully consider the potential ramifications of the decisions they make in reporting a controversial story. In the LFTB case, the repeated use of the term *pink slime* has created a complex series of outcomes that few if any likely anticipated.

About the Authors

Deborah D. Sellnow is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication at Wayne State University. Timothy L. Sellnow is a professor in the Risk Sciences Division of the College of Communication and Information at the University of Kentucky.

References

- Aust, C. F., & Zillmann, D. (1996). Effects of victim exemplification in television news on viewer perception of social issues. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 73, 787-803.
- Coombs, W. T. (2009). Crisis, crisis communication, reputation, and rhetoric. In r. L.
- Heath, E. L. Toth, & D. Waymer (Eds.), *Rhetorical and critical approaches to public relations II* (pp. 237-252). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hallahan, K. (2005). Framing theory. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of public relations* (pp. 340-343). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hook, S. W., & Pu. X. (2006). Framing Sino-American relations under stress: A reexamination of news coverage of the 2001 spy plane crisis. *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 33(3), 167-183.

- Krause, N., Malmfors, T., & Slovic, P. (2000). Intuitive toxicology: Expert and lay judgments of chemical risks. In P. Slovic (Ed.), *The perception of risk* (pp. 285-315).
- Lopez, R. (2012, September 14). ABC News sued by meat company. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.uky.edu/hottopics/lnacademic/>
- Schultz, E. J. (2012). Beef industry bruised by 'pink slime' battle. *Advertising Age*, 83(14), 2-20.
- Slovic, P. (2000). Trust, emotion, sex, politics and science: Surveying the risk-assessment battlefield. In P. Slovic (Ed.), *The perception of risk* (pp. 390-412).
- Tomson, B. (2012, September 13). ABC sued for "pink slime" defamation. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444709004577649552576092254.html>
- Westerman, E., Spence, P. R., & Lachlan, K. A. (2009). Telepresence and exemplification effects of disaster news. *Communication Studies*, 60, 542-557. doi: 10.1080/10510970903260376
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd ed.). Applied Social Science Research Methods Series, Vol. 5. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zillmann, D. (1996). Exemplification theory: Judging the whole by some of its parts. *Media Psychology*, 1, 69-94.
- Zillmann, D. (2006). Exemplification effects in the promotion of safety and health. *Journal of Communication*, 56, S221-S237. doi:10.1111/j.14602466.2006.00291.x
- Zillman, D., Gibson, R., Sundar, S. S., & Perkins, J. W. (1996). Effects of exemplification in news reports on the perception of social issues. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 73, 427-444.