

Communication Strategies of the Chinese Dairy Industry Manufacturers to Rebuild Reputation and Maintain a Quality Relationship

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Abstract

After the Sanlu tainted milk powder crisis in China in 2008, the entire powdered milk manufacturing industry – and, in many ways, the food industry as a whole – faced a crisis of reputation and consumer confidence. Through a study of organisation and public relationships of dairy companies, this paper explores how the companies within the milk industry rebuilt their reputations to a point where customers and other key elements of the public once again felt confident about their products, and what crisis communication strategies they used and how they cultivated those relationships. This study explores the organisation-public relationships (OPRs) cultivation strategies of the dairy companies, and the communication strategies they used to rebuild that industry's reputation after the Sanlu crisis. The author interviewed dairy companies personnel and consumers in China (N=18) and conducted secondary document research. The communication strategies that dairy companies used to maintain the relationship with publics are analysed. This study develops the theory of relationship management and provides suggestions for other companies to utilise if they should face an industry crisis in the future.

Keywords: Organisation-Public Relationships; Crisis Communication; Dairy industry; Sanlu; China

After the Sanlu (三鹿) tainted milk powder crisis in China in 2008, the entire powdered milk manufacturing industry – and, in many ways, the food industry as a whole – faced a crisis of reputation and consumer confidence. After the Sanlu crisis, the author explores how the companies within the milk industry rebuilt their reputations to a point where customers and other key elements of the public once again felt confident about their products through a study of the organisation and public relationships of the dairy companies by examining what crisis communication strategies they used, and how they cultivated those relationships.

According to J. Grunig's (2001) speech, public here "consist of social groups who respond to the consequences that organisations have on them and in turn try to participate in management decision in ways that serve their interests." Examining the OPRs aids in analysing the communication strategies employed by the dairy companies after the crisis. Dairy companies use international authorisation and special advertising campaigns and strategies to promote their product and build reputation. Social media, point of purchase (POP) communication, and interpersonal communication are effective for the dairy companies, which use a differentiation strategy wherein ethical principles are essential.

Case History of Sanlu's Crisis

'Sanlu' once was one of China's biggest and most prestigious dairy brands (a New Zealand dairy cooperative, [Fonterra](#), used to share part of its stake.) China Central Television (CCTV) had broadcast many advertisements and programs to show its 'good' quality, but after the summer of 2007, the Sanlu Group began to hear

reports from customers that their babies had been stricken by illness after they consumed its infant milk powder. In June 2008, the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine of P.R.C. (AQSIQ) received the customers' complaints about Sanlu. Actually, Sanlu had already received the reports and knew its products were infected by melamine, but they kept it secret. On September 8, 2008, the first newspaper reported that Sanlu baby milk powder was contaminated with [melamine](#) and that many babies were poisoned – specifically, the milk caused kidney stones. On September 11, 2008, Sanlu denied to the media that its products had any problem. Later that day, the Chinese Health Ministry said it was investigating the Sanlu case and confirmed that the company's products contained melamine. That same evening, the pressure made Sanlu Group Co. confess the truth and it recalled the products produced before August 6.

A large majority of customers returned their products to the producers and supermarkets. Several executives were arrested, including the general manager of Sanlu, Tian Wenhua, and the people who put the melamine into the milk before it was sold to Sanlu. At the end of 2008, the Sanlu Group Co. was shut down. The reason the suppliers put melamine into the milk was to apparently increase the level of protein content, which could make dairy companies more likely to buy their milk. The Chinese government and World Health Organisation took this situation very seriously. A press conference regarding the crisis was held by the state council of information of PRC. On September 22, 2008, AQSIQ Director Li Changjiang resigned. The mayor of Shijiazhuang city, where the Sanlu group is based, was sacked. Sanyuan Dairy

Group Co. bought the equipment, rented the workshop, and hired the former Sanlu employees. In this crisis, contaminated infant milk powder made thousands of babies sick, caused the hospitalisation of 12,892 babies, and the deaths of four babies. The Chinese government began to check all dairy products and found 64 brands that were contaminated, including Mengniu and Yili, the leading Chinese dairy giants. As Sanlu used to be a test-free product, AQSIQ announced that no more food products would be free of inspection, and that more inspection programs and centres would be founded. The police confiscated the suspected poison chemicals.

Theoretical Framework

This paper attempts to analyse the OPRs in order to explore the communication strategies after the Sanlu crisis. This section will first conceptualise the cultivation strategies of OPRs and then explore crisis communication strategies and reputation management. The relationship of the concepts will also be discussed in terms of conceptualisation.

Organisation-Public Relationships

Grunig (2001) pointed out that public relations function within the social environment of organisations, instead of the economic environment. Stakeholders of the dairy company in this paper are the public in the social environment of OPRs. Stakeholders are 'any group or individual who can affect, or is affected by the achievement of a corporation's purpose' (Freeman, 1984: vi). According to Gronstedt (1996: 292), stakeholders can be divided into 10 categories which this

research supports: ‘government, financial stakeholders, media, scholars and industry opinions, employees, interest groups, communities, distributors, suppliers, and trade and professional organisations and competitors.’

After clarifying the concept of ‘public’ of OPR, the definition of OPR needs to be discussed and clarified in order to build the theoretical framework of this research. Huang (2008) summarised that OPR could be seen as: subjective reality (Duck, 1973; 1986), objective reality (Katz and Kahn, 1967; Miller, 1978; Laumann, Galashiewicz, and Marsden, 1978; Van de Ven, 1976; Van de Ven and Walker, 1984; Oliver, 1990; Klir, 1991; Broom, Casey and Ritchey, 2000), or a combination of subjective and objective reality (Huston and Robin, 1982; Gerso and Carter, 1985, 1994; Millar and Roger, 1987; Hinde, 1988; Surra and Ridley, 1991; Cappella, 1991; Anderson, 1993; Sexton and Whiston, 1994; Kerns, 1994). Besides these conceptual definitions, scholars have given OPR an operational definition by describing its state, which this paper has used: Hung (2005: 396) defined organisation–public relationships as follows: ‘OPRs arise when organisations and their strategic publics are interdependent, and this interdependence results in consequences to each other that organisations need to manage constantly.’ This definition gives the reader a detailed description of what OPR is, and this holistic scope matches my research. This definition is also the foundation of this research.

Organisation-Public Relationships Cultivation Strategies

Based on the literature of 'maintenance' strategies (e.g., Dindia and Canary,

1993), Grunig suggested using the word ‘cultivate’ instead of ‘maintenance’ (Hung, 2007). The relationship types could determine the use of cultivation strategy (Hung, 2007). Figure 1 shows the relationship cultivation strategies in the literature. Hon and Grunig (1999) and Grunig and Huang (2000) conceptualised seven symmetrical relationship cultivation strategies from publics to organisations as follows: access, where members of the public provide access to public relations people; positivity, involving anything that makes the public positive in their relationship with the organisation and could be used in the win-win relationship, openness or disclosure (engaging in direct communication in the relationship (Canary and Stafford, 1994), assurances of legitimacy, networking with the same groups as their publics, which is important in China (Hung, 2007), sharing of tasks (participating in mutual networks beneficial for one or both sides, some dual concern strategies of the public and organisation. Nowman (1995) identified another three symmetrical strategies: cooperative, being unconditionally constructive, and stipulating win-win or no deal. Hung (2002) identified promise-keeping strategies after researching multinational companies in Taiwan. Cooperative strategies, assurances of legitimacy, and access are used mostly in exchange relationships (Plowman, 2007). Being unconditionally constructive means the organisation should do whatever is necessary for the relationship (Hung, 2003), which could be used in the covenantal/win-win relationship. Stipulating win-win or no deal, cooperative, and unconditionally constructive are also negotiation tactics added to the conflict model for public relations by Plowman (1995). The author found that some parts the crisis

communication strategies overlap with relationship cultivation strategies.

Asymmetrical strategies (used mostly in exploitive, manipulative, and symbiotic relationships) include: (1) contending: the organisation tries to persuade the public; (2) avoiding; (3) accommodating, which also is a crisis communication approach when an apology is made (Lerbinger, 1997); (4) compromising: used when neither the organisation nor publics are totally satisfied; and (5) distributive (Hung, 2002; 2003; 2007). Some dual concern strategies are asymmetrical, as they pay much more attention of the organisation's interest than the other, but according to Plowman (2007), two-way symmetrical communication can also include elements of compromise and accommodation. This paper does not participate in the argument regarding symmetrical or asymmetrical, but focuses on the usage of the strategies. Hung (2004) also contributed family orientation, guan-xi, and relational orientation to the factors that could influence the multinational companies' relationship cultivation strategies in Chinese culture.

Figure 1. Relationship Cultivation Strategies

Symmetrical		Asymmetrical
access	Hon and Grunig (1999);	contending
positivity	Grunig and Huang (2000)	Avoiding
openness or disclosure		accommodating
assurances of legitimacy		compromising
networking		distributive
sharing of tasks		Some dual concern strategies are asymmetrical
some dual concern strategies		
cooperative	Nowman (1995)	
being unconditionally constructive		
stipulating win-win or no deal		
promise-keeping	Hung (2002)	

Crisis Communication Strategies of Corporation to Rebuild Reputation

Reputation is an overall evaluation towards the company by the people (Dowling, 2004). This definition is congruent with other scholars' definition of reputation as a cognitive representation (Yang and Grunig, 2005; Bromley, 1993; Fombrun and Rindova, 1996). According to the relationship principles of crisis communication (Grunig, 2001), a good and long-term relationship could help an organisation withstand a crisis. Therefore, it is necessary to explore crisis communication strategies. Based on previous studies of crisis response strategies (Benoit, 1995; 1997; Brad and Garrett, 1995; Coombs, 1995; Coombs and Schmidt, 2000; Ray, 1999; Sturges, 1995; Allen and Caillouet, 1994; Huang, Lin, and Su, 2005), ten crisis communication strategies are identified: (1) denial or nonexistence; (2) evasion of responsibility or excuse, and the sub-strategies include provocation, de-feasibility, and good intention; (3) justification: bolstering, minimisation, and reframing; ((2) and (3) are grouped as distance strategy in Coombs' (1995) study; (4) concession: correctional action and changing corporate public policy, and in Huang's (2006) study, concession also includes admission and apology; (5) information providing; (6) diversion: showing regards/sympathy (without apology), building a new agenda, and differentiating which states (Huang, 2008); (7) ingratiation: praising others (Coombs, 1995: 452); (8) suffering: act as a victim who aims to gain sympathy (Coombs, 1995: 453); (9) mortification: remediation, rectification, and repentance; (10) reducing the offensiveness of the act. Strategies (1), (2), (4), (9), and (10) reflect Benoit's (1995) image restoration strategy to rebuild the reputation of the organisation. These

strategies are summarised into three styles of response strategies, as reactive, dynamic, and adaptive styles in some literature (Martinelli and Briggs, 1998).

The literature shows that bolstering (58.8%) and denial (56.9%) are the two most frequently employed crisis communication strategies, full apology (71.4%) is the most effective one, while denial (13.8%) is the least effective strategy (Kim, Avery and Lariscy, 2009). Coombs (2007) suggested using corrective action and apology in the preventable crisis (2007), and matched those crisis communication strategies to the organisation's responsibility (Coombs, 1999). Coombs also used a relationship approach to study crisis (Coombs, 2001).

Inspired by the literature, this study explores the OPR cultivation strategies and crisis communication strategies of dairy companies to build reputation, which I will conceptualise next. The literature review suggests the following research question:

Research Question

After the Sanlu crisis, what communication strategies are used to rebuild the reputation and maintain a good relationship with their publics?

Research Method

Because little information is known about the research question and, in the future, more and rich descriptions are needed, this study interviewed the dairy industry and its key publics using an in-depth interview method. This study also used

document research by examining the publications, TV programs, and a number of online documents (e.g. videos and blogs which are related to the crisis online). The study interviewed the employees and other publics of dairy companies by asking them to examine the existing eight OPR types, whether any new types of OPR existed in their daily operation, and what cultivation strategies they used. This study examined the crisis strategies they used to rebuild the reputation of the dairy industry, to measure their effectiveness.

The contact procedure and access were conducted as follows: The researcher first sent emails to request an interview with the large-scale dairy companies in China; however, they did not respond. Consequently the researcher used the convenience sampling method for this study. Besides the face-to-face and telephone interviews, this research used QQ and MSN messengers as well, for the convenience of the interviewees. The eighteen interviewees' information are:

	Interviewees	Information	Gender
1	employee1	quality inspector	F
2	employee2	marketing manager	F
3	employee3	quality and reserach	M
4	community member	of former Sanlu company	F
5	customer1	Beijing	F
6	customer2	Shenzhen	F
7	customer3	Guangzhou	F
8	customer4	Fujian	F
9	customer5	Gansu	M
10	customer6	Shijiazhuang	F
11	customer7	Jilin	F
12	customer8	Nanjing	F
13	customer9	Shanghai	F
14	customer10		M
15	financial analyst		M
16	public relations officer		M
17	advertising officer	used to serve for dairy company	M

The semi-structured interviews lasted from 10 minutes to three hours, depending on whether the interviewees were familiar with the interview questions and could give extensive details. For the data analysis, this study follows the three stages of Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative data analysis: data reduction, data display, and data drawing and verification. The data was firstly reduced by *conceptual reduction* to sort and categorise data into the different conceptual themes (Frey, Botan and Kreps, 2000). Specifically, the data was categorised by two research questions, and then was divided by the relation of the different public representatives of the dairy companies. Secondly, the author displayed the data on a draft. As data display is much more appropriate in drawing a cross-case analysis table, this paper did not show the details in this process; after considering the patterns and drawing tables on the draft sheet, only the representative quotations are provided in this paper. Thirdly, the drawing of conclusions and verification were made after examining the differences and similarities of the data while also considering the literature and secondary data.

Results

RQ: After the Sanlu crisis, what communication strategies were used to rebuild the reputation and maintain good relationships with their publics?

According to the participants, differentiation strategies, media campaigns, social media, other new media, point-of-purchase communication, as well as invitations to visit the company and sponsor the activities involving social responsibility, were

major ways employed by these companies to establish a good image.

Being open and ethical was the leading principle after the crisis; just as the journalist I interviewed said, ‘The Sanlu crisis made people not trust each other. The whole nation’s morality level should be increased.’ A manager of a dairy company said the government departments, schools, and institutions’ customers had been invited to visit the company’s factory. It even built a ‘Disneyland’ of dairy at the factory, and many children and mothers came, with the TV station reporting this news. However, in the Sanlu crisis, the company did not confess at first. This deception was led by the managers’ short-term values, instead of broader social values. The result was that the whole company was bankrupted. From the results of the research question, the participants said that although one media had an exchange relationship with Sanlu, when the crisis broadened that was not enough to protect Sanlu. We could conclude that the quality of the product is most important, even more important than media relations.

In addition, the participant said her company does not have a spokesperson. A manager from another dairy company stated that they have a public relations (PR) department, but did not think they have a long-term crisis communication prevention system, and honestly, he felt that the PR department failed. Not all participants know crisis strategies and tend to use image-building strategies on purpose. Two dairy companies in the interview only responded passively to what happened after the crisis. Fortunately, these two companies were not found to have melamine in their products. However, according to the public relations manager and advertising officers in the

agencies, their customers from the dairy industry might be affected by the crisis.

The communication strategies were also focused on proving the social responsibility of the corporation. Yili donated RMB 3,000,000 Yuan to the drought-affected areas in early 2010. Yili makes itself more credible by being one of the partners of the 2010 World Exposition, and the logo of the partner of the 2010 World Expo has been posted on many printing materials. Other activities include sponsoring a popular TV episode called 'Fei-cheng Wu-rao,' a Chinese reality show version of 'take me out'.

Dairy companies, such as Beinmate, have also sponsored the activities with the TV station of 'mother's love'. They shoot many TV programs of touching stories of mothers and their children. Many celebrities were invited to tell their stories and their mothers' as well. They also open the forum, letting the cyber citizens talk about their own stories of their mother, and upload their pictures on their activities' website. They also put their activities online, for example, on the portal website, like Youku. The activities include planting virtual carnations online, and prizes would be awarded for 'achieving dream fund' to the winners of these activities.

Differentiation strategy.

The marketing manager of a dairy company said that besides letting the public know about their good quality, stable resource of milk, and the whole production chain, the company uses the differentiation strategy to enlarge its market: to make their product special to communicate, which means 'what you have, I have; what you do not have, I

still have’; as he remarked, ‘for example, “solid set style yogurt” or “high-temperature instantaneous steriliser” with which the consumers are not familiar.’ Some experts would be invited to say that ‘high-temperature instantaneous sterilised milk’ would be better than ‘pasteurised milk’, but this actually is not true, and he said another dairy company also uses this strategy and even used the new terminology to promote old products. One dairy company has produced a new type of milk product, ‘water buffalo’s milk’, which could inspire customers’ curiosity to buy something different.

New media and social media

Dairy companies rebuild their reputation by using communication strategies through traditional media, new media, and social media. An officer from an advertising company said, ‘After Sanlu’s crisis, we do not use directly the word “milk” in our advertisement of Mengniu ice cream’. The company used the website of Kaixin.com, by including games called ‘happy farms’ online. From these strategies, we found that it is important to communicate through the portals. Nowadays, the Internet makes information communication very fast, and becomes the essential channel of public relations. For the usage of new media, especially social media, Yili Dairy Company used the renren.com website to promote its products, to ask the registered customers of renren.com to play the online games of drinking Yili milk to make them healthy. Mengniu accepted the consulting company’s idea of initiating a composition competition of one product of milk (‘Telunsu’). One winner essay was titled “Mother’s love: Telunsu.” This dairy company also posted games online to promote

their product and their brand. For example, it asked people to write a traditional Chinese antithetical couplet starting with *Niu*, one character of Mengniu. They believed that there are many lonely netizens who are more likely to participate in the game. Immediately after the crisis, the advertisings were cancelled.

Point of purchase communication is another effective device. According to a quality inspector of a dairy company in Heilongjiang, ‘at the counter of the shops or supermarket, authorities put inspection reports next to the commodity to make use of the inspection authority recognised by consumers to re-establish the image...’ The participants mentioned that these strategies and tags of ‘not contaminated with melamine’ are effective for them. A customer from Jiangsu said, ‘When you buy milk at the supermarket, the milk products would put a banner up saying that their quality has been supervised by many people. For example, “33 citizens came to our factory to supervise us today”.’

Another customer from Jilin said the sales in the supermarket would provide useful information when she bought the milk. She remarked, ‘They would say which products do not have melamine, and I would buy after considering the price.’ In a similar tone, a customer also told me that after Sanlu she would still drink the samples of yogurt at the supermarket, and bought the yogurt or milk tea.

International authorisation

A public relations agency’s manager said that the agency asked their consumers of

dairy products to get the international proof *ISO 26000*. The international proof is considered more credible than the local authorisation since the Sanlu melamine milk powder crisis in China. The media reported that other dairy companies used similar strategies to build their trust, such as Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) as a systematic preventive approach to food safety. However, a customer who is also a netizen said she would not care whether or not the product has international authorisation, as she only believed in what the Chinese supervision department said, especially their safety reports of the dairy products.

Because Sanlu's crisis was caused by the sources of the milk, the dairy companies put more staff working on the process dealing with the sources of the milk. The third-party authentication, especially experts' endorsement, is important and effective. At a listed dairy company's press conference, experts of food or dairy were invited to talk on their side to make the customers confident of the products, which might be a useful strategy according to the participants.

Conclusions

This study analyses the relationships between selected dairy companies and their publics. The dairy companies have used cultivation strategies to maintain the relationship with publics, which is hard to be separated from the communication strategy after the crisis. Access, openness, and disclosure cultivation strategies are used in the communication strategy of the dairy company: it is more open than before the crisis happened; it invited customers and media to visit the factory and gave more

information to the public. Good practices of corporate social responsibility have been taken up and recommended for the dairy companies to rebuild a positive image.

Appropriate rewards and imposing of penalties to employees, networking, sharing of tasks and some dual concern strategies between the publics and the organisation are used in a communal relationship of community issues and other social issues (e.g. earthquakes). Besides the traditional media, the companies built their reputation and communicate with the public through new media and social media. Dairy companies used contending strategy; they intend to use many media to persuade the public and make them feel confident of their products. 'Assurances of legitimacy' is considered as a part of the legal relationship which was not mentioned by the participants as a frequent communication strategy.

For crisis communication strategies after the Sanlu incident, the company used 'denial strategy', which is one of the two most frequently employed crisis communication strategies, but the result was not good. The dairy company used the justification strategy to minimise the crisis, saying that melamine would not affect adults. The dairy companies must change corporate public policy to pay more attention to milk as a resource, to provide more information of their production process. Differentiation strategy is similar to the building of a new agenda in the literature to rebuild the reputation of the organisation. International authorisation is another way to make the consumers confident of their product.

Consumers believed what the experts and government stated on mass media. A good relationship with the government is suggested by the participants. The dairy companies used the differentiation strategy to make their sales volume increase. The advertising of the dairy companies should focus on the content and authorisation of the products' quality, and the dairy entrepreneurs should behave ethically to produce high-quality products and communicate with the public. Interpersonal communication and point-of-purchase communication are very influential for changing people's attitudes. This point corroborated the risk principle of interpersonal media (briefings, community interviews, hotlines, open houses, and public meetings) (Lerbinger, 1997: 280).

From this study, we suggest that the dairy companies should take up an integrated communication strategy to communicate with their publics. Most dairy companies use their websites for symmetrical communication to communicate with their customers and publicly. The researcher suggests that a designated spokesperson should be a long-term part of the in-house Public Relations department of dairy companies.

The limitations of this research include the fact that participants from the dairy companies were not the highest-level managers, so they could not answer some strategies of the companies. More leaders of the dairy company need to be interviewed in future research. The author tried to contact Mengniu and Yili, but got no response. Another limitation is that only one method was used, therefore the accuracy still needs to be tested. The participants also might not tell the truth and their

nervousness during the interview might affect the results. This research extended the knowledge of relationship management and provided some suggestions for other companies to implement when they meet an industry crisis.

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