

Who is injured determines who gets the blame

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When crises such as the recent Toyota recalls occur, public relations practitioners develop strategies to minimize damage to company images. University of Missouri researchers have found that consumers blame an organization for crises more when customers are injured, as opposed to when members or employees of the organizations are injured. In the study, MU researchers also concluded that the identity of the injured in a crisis is more important to consumers when determining blame than the actual seriousness of the crisis.

"These results provide important practical insights to [public relations](#) practitioners who manage crises," said Sun-A Park, doctoral student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism. "Specifically, the results show that people hold an organization responsible in cases where customers are injured rather than when company employees are injured, regardless of the degree of crisis severity. Thus, organizations should perform appropriate crisis response strategies immediately when consumers have been injured from a crisis."

Park, along with Maria Len-Rios, assistant professor of strategic communications at the Missouri School of Journalism, gave 123 study participants various news stories about plane crashes that differed in severity, whether the injuries were to consumers, such as passengers, or members of the company, such as the pilots or [flight attendants](#). After reading the articles, participants overwhelmingly blamed on the airline for the crises when passengers were injured, regardless of the severity or the number of people injured.

Apart from the identity of the injured party and the severity of the crisis, the size of a company and its control of the market are also significant factors concerning how consumers place blame, Park said.

"The bigger the company, the more blame the public puts on it," Park said. "There was a case in which people blamed Apple because they thought the iPod caused hearing problems, even though research shows that iPod audio levels aren't any louder than other MP3 players. Apple is the number one company in the MP3 player market, and there is no evidence that the iPod actually caused a hearing loss problem, but since it is such a large [company](#), people chose to blame Apple instead of taking responsibility themselves to control the volume."

Park hopes to expand her research to look at the psychological factors involved in why people often blame corporations for causing problems they could have prevent themselves. Park wants to study how these factors affect negative impressions toward organizations.

More information: Park and Len-Rios' research was published in The Handbook of Crisis Communication.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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