

# Chinese government is learning from past mistakes, researcher says

April 27 2010

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What constitutes effective public relations strategies is an ongoing discussion among professionals in the field, as well as the general public. MU researchers recently studied the effectiveness of public relations strategies employed during the SARS crises of 2002.

Ernest Zhang, the China program coordinator at the University of Missouri School of Journalism and an expert in international communications, studied the public relations strategies employed by Zhang Wenkang, the former Chinese Health Minister, during the SARS crisis. The researcher wanted to analyze the strategies used and also trace the historical use of public relations in China.

"In China, as with many countries that were previously pure Communist societies, there was no PR, just propaganda," Zhang said. "Propaganda doesn't work sometimes. PR is much more effective, but it has taken the [Chinese government](#) a long time to realize this. The SARS crisis was a learning process for the government."

In his study, Zhang applies William Benoit's comprehensive theory of image restoration to analyze Minister Zhang's public relations methods. Benoit a professor at Ohio University and is a former MU professor who is widely regarded as a communications expert. This theory involves five strategies: denial, evading responsibility, reduction of offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. When applying this theory to Minister Zhang's strategies, Zhang found the attempt of image repair to be unsuccessful.

"There was too much self-contradiction in his discourse," Zhang said. "Minister Zhang's arguments were based on lies or inaccurate information. Public opinion surveys indicated Minister Zhang's discourse actually hurt the Chinese government's image, rather than helping it."

Zhang believes that the former Chinese Health Minister's public relations failure was a primary reason for the Chinese government terminating the minister's position. Zhang suggests that a more open and honest approach would have led to a more positive response from both the media and the public as a whole. Zhang says that while the Chinese government has learned much from the SARS crisis, they still have a way to go in terms of communicating adequately to the public.

"The Chinese government is doing much better now, but they need to do more. There are still some cases and issues where they are still falling short," Zhang said.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Chinese government is learning from past mistakes, researcher says (2010, April 27) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-04-chinese.html>

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