

Time to Get a Job: Helping Image Repair Theory Begin a Career in Industry

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Image repair theory (IRT) has garnered an ever-widening following, as indicated by the range of scholarship over the years since William Benoit introduced it. The theory, however, still lives within the province of academia as a critical method that looks back on cases of image restoration/repair. This in and of itself is not problematic, except we believe image repair theory must move on and become fully useable, useful, and used by public relations practitioners. This can only be done by formulating a pragmatically prospective approach for applying the theory to future situations in terms of strategic planning. This paper analyzes the importance of IRT on the field, presents a plan template for planning image repair efforts, and asserts benefits of this approach to practice, theory, and pedagogy.

Introduction

Image repair theory (IRT) has grown well from its infancy from its parent, William Benoit (1995a, 1995b; Benoit & Brinson, 1996; Benoit & Hanczor, 1994), through its adolescence as a budding theory with Benoit and his coauthors (e.g., Benoit & McHale, 1999; Benoit & Nill, 1998a, 1998b; Blaney & Benoit, 2001). It entered puberty as it was used more often by other scholars beyond its original family (Anderson, 2000; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000; Cowden & Sellnow, 2002; Thomsen & Rawson, 2000), and others integrated Benoit's material with their own approach to crisis communication (Alvarez, 2000; Coombs, 2004; Ihlen, 2002; Jerome, Moffitt & Knudsen, 2007). Critiques of IRT have also been shared (e.g., Burns & Bruner, 2000). Now IRT must move on. That is, IRT must cease to depend on its nurturing family, graduate from academe, and begin a career of its own in the every-day world of public relations business.

Throughout its development IRT has been used exclusively as a retrospective framework. This contention means that those who've used the theory have applied it to understand particular cases of corporate communications by looking back on what happened and why. Sometimes, although not always, those same people make

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suggestions about what could have been done better or what generally can be done by others facing similar circumstances.

We believe for IRT to mature more and break into an active career on the job of public relations, the theory must be shown to work prospectively. That is, what could an image repair plan look like? This is the stuff of the day-to-day business of public relations practitioners that's been missing in the literature. More important, it's the stuff that practitioners need so they can truly use the theory in their work. Even with the cursory nod by Seeger, Ulmer, Novak, and Sellnow (2004), Seeger and Ulmer (2001), and Sellnow, Ulmer and Seeger (2006) that such a gap exists, no one has developed a specific idea or template or something of what a proper strategic plan could be based on IRT. This subject is the focus of our paper.

We develop our argument along the following lines. First, we summarize the importance and value of IRT to the field but not so much to the profession. Second, we spell out requirements for a "mature" IRT (i.e., looking forward more than backward) that would befit the demands of business, culminating in a fully prospective plan template using IRT. And third, we present concluding thoughts about the future of IRT on the field, the profession and pedagogy.

Importance and Value of IRT to the Field

Until the appearance of image restoration theory (IRT), the study of rhetoric generally had confined the analysis of apologia to Ware and Linkugel's (1973) four factors and their four combinations of paired strategies. Certainly rhetorical critics up to that time had outlined the nature of the charges against the apologist studied in their particular essays, but it was not until the early 1980s that Ryan (1982) made the point that *kategoriae* and their subsequent *apologiae* should be analyzed as a speech set. Still, with few exceptions (e.g., Dionosopoulos & Vibbert, 1988), such studies tended to focus on the speech set as a single interact—one *kategoria* followed by a single speech that constituted the *apologia*.

Image restoration theory had its beginnings in publication with Benoit and Lindsey's (1987) analysis of the famous Tylenol tampering scare and received further nurturing in Benoit's substantial research agenda in political communication, particularly in relation to his functional approach to presidential election discourse. Recognizing that apologists had more than just the four factors and Kenneth Burke's (1961/1970) three responses to guilt, Benoit turned to the accounts literature to synthesize a more complete typology. At this writing, IRT has produced case studies of *apologiae* by sitting politicians, other government figures, celebrities, and, most significant for the field of public relations, organizational rhetoric. The theory has been applied by Benoit in his 1995 book, at least five single-authored articles, and nearly 20 co-authored essays. As a natural result of studying apologia, IRT also has spawned a typology of strategies (see Figure 1) available to accusers when creating *kategoriae*.

Additionally, other researchers have employed IRT; to date, two books written and published by Benoit advisees, 18 specific articles (half or which use IRT alone rather than in concert with other methods or perspectives), and even one article applied to a fictional apologia (Dlali, 2004).

Figure 1. IRT Typology (Benoit, 1997).

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Key Characteristic</i>
<i>Denial</i>	
Simple Denial	Did Not Perform Act
Shift the Blame	Act Performed by Another
<i>Evasion of Responsibility</i>	
Provocation	Responded to Act of Another
Defeasibility	Lack of Information or Ability
Accident	Act Was a Mishap
Good Intentions	Meant Well in Act
<i>Reducing Offensiveness of Event</i>	
Bolstering	Stress Good Traits
Minimization	Act Not Serious
Differentiation	Act Less Offensive
Transcendence	More Important Considerations
Attack Accuser	Reduce Credibility of Accuser
Compensation	Reimburse Victim
<i>Corrective Action</i>	Plan to Solve or Prevent Problem
<i>Mortification</i>	Apologize for Act

We studied this range of scholarship to find out how often IRT strategies were identified and explained. In our study we focused primarily on essays that directly applied IRT's concepts to apologetic discourse. Because we determined that presidential campaign rhetoric could be conflated with other genres of political discourse, we omitted articles and books that focused on the 1992 and 1996 elections. We counted the number of times each strategy was reported in each of the chapters in books—Benoit's (1995) original book, Blaney and Benoit's (2001) book on President Clinton's apologiae and B. A. Miller's (2002) book on religious apologiae—and essays equivalent to the many articles that have employed IRT. The results of our analysis are found in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Figure 2. Frequencies of individual image repair strategies in Benoitian research.

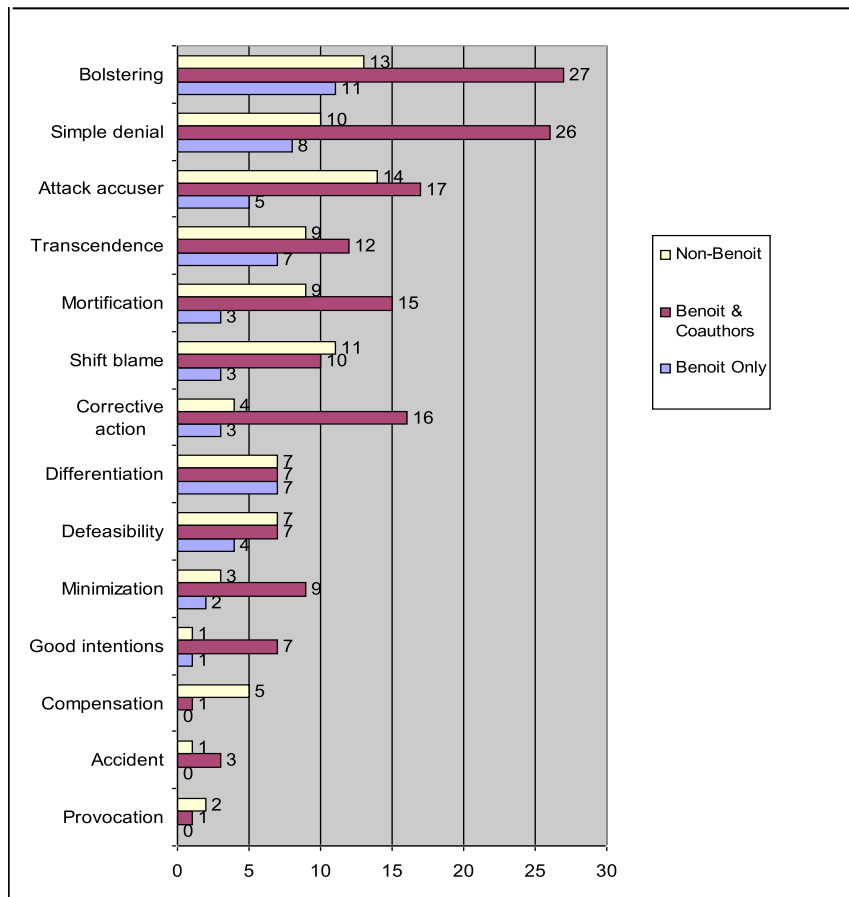
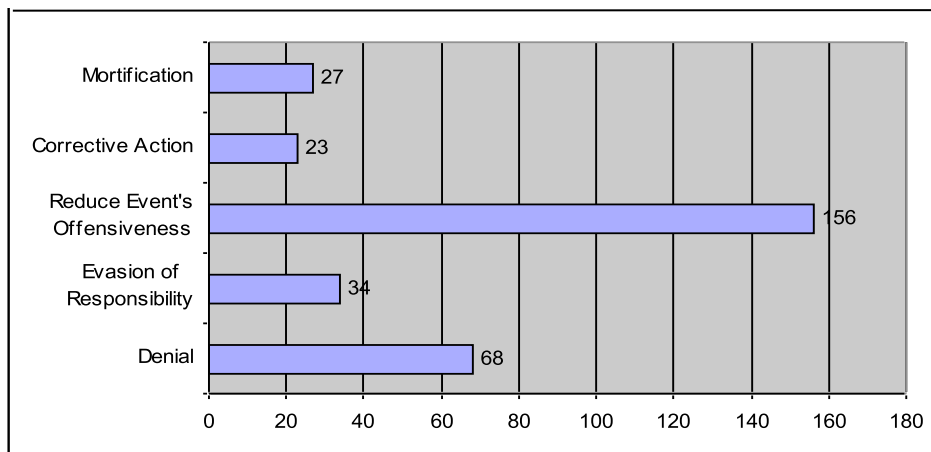


Figure 3 Frequencies of categories of image repair strategies in Benoitian research.



The results in the figures show how IRT has gained in applicability as more people have applied it. Figure 2 shows the frequencies of individual strategies developed in IRT work published by Benoit alone, Benoit and his coauthors, and others without Benoit as an author. In work authored by Benoit, only a handful of the strategies in the typology in Figure 1 are developed. As Benoit worked with others, new analyses of cases that included more strategies were published. It's at this stage that each strategy in the typology finally has at least one case analysis associated with it.

As others working alone or in collaboration with another author applied the theory, more coverage of the IRT strategies were published. Across all strategies and all combinations of authorship about them, there is a clear predominance of strategies that have been identified and explained, and the top five are bolstering (51), simple denial (44), attack accuser (36), transcendence (28), and mortification (27). This suggests that organizations may be more likely to build themselves up, say they're not responsible for anything, and engage in ad hominem arguments about accusers than admit any wrongdoing. Add to this the composite results shown in Figure 3, which brings together the individual strategies into their typological categories. Here, too, we see that organizations may be very likely to proclaim an event is of little significance or consequence and they had nothing to do with it well before considering corrective action. There are many more patterns in the results that we could analyze in the results, and it would be interesting. But doing so would take us away from the point and scope of this paper. With this understanding about the importance and value of IRT to the field, we can look at what it would take for the theory to be made more applicable for industry use.

Breaking into the Prospective World of Business

Scholarship about image repair efforts tends to be *retrospective*. Retrospective scholarship looks back on past activities that have affected relationships with publics and stakeholders. The reactive realm of stakeholder management, then, concerns lessons learned about (at least) what went right and wrong, how strengths were capitalized upon, what weaknesses were avoided or minimized, and what might be done differently next time. Almost no scholarship develops *prospective* approaches to stakeholder relationships (Smudde & Courtright, in press). Prospective scholarship provides guidance for looking forward to future activities (in light of present and past activities) to produce opportunities to effect cooperation between any publics/ stakeholders and an organization. Prospective approaches are all about creating opportunities and concern ethical communication strategies and tactics designed to make any strengths stronger, minimize or mitigate any weaknesses, indicate opportunities for probable success, and screen any threats to achieving success.

Our work here extends Benoit and others' methods by moving from retrospective critique (which looks back upon extant discourse) to prospective counsel (which looks forward to planned discourse). In this way lessons from past discourse can be bridged with plans for future discursive action (cf. Smudde, 2004, 2007).

Although critique is traditionally anchored in retrospective analysis, there is no reason why critical methods such as IRT can't be used prospectively to the benefit of future discourse. Criticism, then, becomes something more potent—a tool for more effective discourse rather than an exercise attaining 20/20 hindsight. This perspective is especially relevant to business, because spending too much time looking in the rearview mirror means the advantage from looking down and preparing for the road ahead has been lost and the opportunities that go with it.

Strategic planning is something that public relations practitioners and scholars know well. What's also known is that the attitudes about and any processes for strategic planning vary (Grunig & Grunig, 2000). Indeed, there is evidence that strategic planning is an organizing effort that can range from one that integrates all organizational functions to one that is used when a manager of some level feels it's important to do. Sadly that means there's little consistency in the process from organization to organization. The silver lining, though, is that any organization whose business operates soundly also has a sound strategic planning process (cf. Coveney, Hartlen, Ganster, & King, 2003). Literature about strategic plans is available to public relations professionals as well (e.g., Austin & Pinkleton, 2006; Ferguson, 1999; Oliver, 2007; Smith, 2003; Smudde, 2000). More specifically, there is literature about strategic planning for image repair efforts involving, for example, crises (e.g., Birch, 1994; Fink, 1986; Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995; Lauterborn, 1996; Mitroff, Harrington, & Gai, 1996) and public perceptions of litigation (e.g., Lukaszewski, 1995, 1996). In the following section, we provide the rationale behind strategic planning and then suggest how IRT might be used within that process in its application to crisis planning, communication, and evaluation.

The Basic Strategic Planning Process and IRT's Potential Utility

Strategic planning is a necessary and detailed process for any organization (cf. Axson, 2003). It's interesting that the starting point to strategic planning is really the end point—think about the vision of what an organization wants to be, then figure out how to get there. The strategic planning process works “top-down,” not “bottom-up.” The strategic plan begins at the top, with the CEO or president articulating a vision for the organization and working with organizational leaders to flesh-out the way to realize that vision in accordance with the organization's mission and values. A corporate strategic plan is the marching orders, the hymnal, the guidebook, the whatever you want to call it for the organization—it is the thing to which an organization's parts conform their work. What an organization is set to achieve in its broad strategic plan must be transferable to what each operating unit can contribute to making corporate objectives reality. The plans for operational functions like public relations must support the larger organization's overall strategic plan. In this way an organization's strategic planning process includes and integrates all operating units, and the corporate strategic plan itself is literally a template on which the operating units model their plans.

There are 11 components to the strategic planning process as it applies to public relations, and IRT may be applied directly to seven of them. Additionally, audience analysis has implications early in the process for the strategic choices IRT offers, and the final step of evaluation is easily tied back to those choices once the crisis is over. In fact, with an understanding of a timetable as an enactment of rhetorical timing, IRT has even further utility. By applying these components to image repair efforts (opportunity analysis, audiences, key messages, objectives, strategies, tactics, critical success factors [CSFs], leading indicators, timing, budget, and evaluation), we can devise a prospective plan practitioners could actually employ on short-term or long-term bases. As we turn now to apply IRT to the first step in the process, we should note that this process assumes practitioners' thorough knowledge of the organization involved and its corporate identity—be they in-house employees or external consultants.

1. Opportunity and Its Context

The context of an image repair opportunity includes the specific matter that needs attention and the surrounding environment that an organization faces. The statement about the opportunity defines it in sufficient detail. The opportunity itself affects the organization in a negative way. Practitioners must apply sufficient research about the opportunity and its effects on the organization and its environment to define the rhetorical context. In particular, the strategies of accusation identified by Benoit and others would be helpful in recognizing the constraints that any *kategoria* might pose. The applications of IRT in the literature attest to the many times when immediate mortification (accompanied by corrective action and perhaps compensation) might be the best strategy (rather than denial, bolstering, etc.). The statement about the opportunity should also summarize anyone involved in the plan's success and draw attention to any special considerations (e.g. resources, bureaucracy, or politics) for the public relations team's organizing processes. Media coverage prior to and during the beginnings of a crisis should be taken into account as well.

2. Audiences

Because image repair opportunities may be of interest to a number of different publics and stakeholders, you must identify the key groups of people inside and outside your organization that must receive the messages and determine what they need. What do your audiences want to know, and how can the messages be tailored to address their self-interests? How can any audience help the organization achieve its objectives and be induced to cooperate? You may have different levels of audiences (i.e. primary, secondary and tertiary) that suggest degrees of importance that any audience may play in the communication plan. If so, what are your target audiences' characteristics, and how can demographic information be used to craft messages that demonstrate common ground between them and your organization? The answer to this question can especially guide you in addressing each audience level appropriately,

which in turn might suggest which IRT strategies might be appropriate and which ones might meet with resistance.

3. Key Message Platform

As a result of analyses of opportunity, context, and audiences, a key message platform necessarily follows. It is a concise outline of specific ideas about the public relations opportunity's rhetorical context that you want target audiences to understand, embrace, and act upon. The messages should be tailored for each audience to help inspire their cooperation with the organization. A key message platform consists of two parts: (1) a thesis, theme or slogan that states the big-picture idea, and (2) a series of specific message points that backup the thesis. The idea is that such a platform helps corporate officials "stay on message" and helps audiences remember the key "take aways" even if they forget everything else.

Applying image repair theory at this point requires deciding what strategies you want to use to manage the opportunity effectively. Depending on the category of strategies you choose (see Figure 1), your thesis and message points must be suited to the opportunity, audiences, and IRT strategies you have chosen. From a Burkean standpoint, they should ethically and sufficiently enact the drama about the scene, act, actors involved, means for doing the acts, and reasons for doing them. A successful key message platform is one that inspires the publics to cooperate with the organization because they identify with the drama the organization enacts in its image repair discourse (cf. Smudde, 2004). The apologia must embody the organization's drama.

4. Objectives

Objectives for communications plans are statements about the plan's value within the rhetorical and business contexts. Specific objectives are more meaningful than general ones that merely try to "increase awareness" about something, for example. Each objective addresses four things: (1) the effect sought, (2) the goal or measurable amount of the effect sought, (3) the target public, and (4) the deadline or timeframe (Hendrix & Hayes, 2007). For example, an effective objective statement would be: "Improve consumers' current attitudes of 70% disapproval of how the organization has addressed the effects of the chemical spill to 65% approval by campaign's end on December 31, 2007." Note that the objective requires a benchmark so you know the context of the percentage of improvement. To achieve your objectives, the target audiences must receive, understand, believe, and act upon the messages. In this way your communication focuses on knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors—and IRT can help shape those objectives with attention to which image repair strategies may be used to address the immediate opportunity and which ones are focused more on potential reputation damage (see Rowland & Jerome, 2004).

5. Strategy Statements

Strategy statements, or “strategies,” outline conceptually how the plan’s objectives will be achieved through certain categories of activities. This outline addresses the rhetorical features of the opportunity and provides guidelines for the overall effort. Strategies may be broad or narrow in scope, and they must be associated with one or more objective. The most efficient strategies are those that help you achieve more than one objective. For an image repair effort, you could, for example, write a strategy statement like this: “Use simple denial to change attitudes about a company’s dedication to safety.” Strategy statements like this one indicate what you will do generally and give you room to articulate what you will do specifically and tactically for each strategy statement. Based on our earlier analysis, the literature would suggest that some strategy statements would focus on effective combinations of IRT strategies; e.g., the use of bolstering and transcendence to support simple denial in the case of religious institutions.

6. Tools, Tactics and Methods

Together, tools, tactics and methods describe how you will fulfill each of your strategies. These three dimensions make up how you will do the work required in the plan. You’ll have to describe them either individually or in combination. At this point individual image repair strategies that are in line with the opportunity definition, key message platform and objectives are important. For example, if you believe and have evidence to show your organization is innocent and blameless for a problem, you must choose specific tools, tactics and methods to make that case—to apply the key message platform in strategically appropriate and potent image repair discourse. Figure 4 shows the range of public relations discourse types available for this part of the plan, and a few those genres could be broken down into subgenres.

Figure 4. Public relations discourse genres (Smudde, 2004).

Prepared statements	Biographical statements	Newsletters
Press releases	Press conferences	Video news programs
Media advisories	Press kits	Corporate reports
Video news releases	Interviews	Corporate image pieces
Photo news releases	Articles	Pitch letters
Audio news releases	White papers	Pitch calls
Fact sheets	Case studies	Written correspondence
Backgrounders	Speeches	Conversations
FAQs	Public service messages	RSS feeds (Blogs, Podcasts, V-casts)
Tip Sheets	Advertorials	

Tools are the people, discourse types, or technology you'll use—e.g. reporters, face-to-face meetings, or wire service. Tools may be written, spoken, or visual means to facilitate communication between an organization and its audiences. *Tactics* are the activities for which you want to use the tools—e.g., get reporters to run a finance story about a new corporate bond; issue a news release about an appropriate “newsworthy” subject for the image repair effort; hold “briefings” between senior management and frontline supervisors to inform and “mobilize” employees in the image repair effort. *Methods* are the ways you'll use the tools tactically—e.g., make a pitch to reporters that they may interview the CFO for a finance story on a new corporate bond; upload an electronic file via the Internet for mass distribution; have small-group, face-to-face meetings between senior managers and supervisors as part of an employee communications program.

Channels, IRT strategies, message tactics, and key audiences must fit together in complementary ways to increase likelihood of success. Use a hierarchy of communication channels to select the most appropriate discourse genres for the situation and your audiences; whereas, the more personal the communication is the better. A useful hierarchy of channels begins with one-to-one, personal communication and builds to broad-based, mass communication channels.

7. Critical Success Factors

To make sure you've considered as many ways your strategic communication will be successful, you must anticipate what things could affect it (positively and negatively) when trying to meet your objectives. Those factors can be barriers or enablers, both of which can be physical, attitudinal, legal, institutional, or something else. Critical success factors can also derive from the environment (internal or external) or organizational resources that can be applied to make thing happen. The analysis of the image repair opportunity provides some grounds for anticipating the kinds of things that could help or hurt the image repair effort. In this way CSFs are synthetic lessons about what we learned about the opportunity and the organization's larger context. Such lessons include risks and benefits of important aspects and actions that originate with the organization or its publics, stakeholders, or attackers.

8. Leading Indicators

Along the way, you must regularly make sure your plan is on track. You do this by measuring how well things are going in your quest to achieve your objectives. Leading indicators must be measurable and specific ways you can regularly monitor your progress toward each objective—all in comparison to predetermined milestones toward each objective. You should check your leading indicators at predetermined intervals (e.g. weekly, monthly, quarterly) so you can make any adjustments. The IRT literature early on in its applications to organizational rhetoric have illustrated the importance of looking at actions, reactions, and subsequent reactions—at double interacts—rather than a single message responding to a single accusation.

9. *Timeline*

A timetable, either outlined in text or presented in a chart, that shows the start and finish of all events within the context of the communications plan. The calendar helps to ensure that all events, leading indicators, and milestones are met when planned. Various studies in the application of IRT suggest that we might look at timetables, however, in a more sophisticated way. Bitzer (1968) argued that rhetoric is used to provide a fitting response to situations. Related to this idea is the ancient concept of *kairos*. Again, the IRT literature provides numerous examples of the importance of timing in the use of various strategies in relationship to earlier use of others.

10. *Budget*

Budgets outline resource allocations—especially expenses and income, if applicable—needed for each aspect of the plan. Budgets also summarize total costs and, if appropriate, makes any comparisons to similar or related programs. Include items like postage, mileage, labor, overhead, and 10 percent for unforeseen expenses. Identify major supporters and financial resources. Bottom line: the benefits and outgrowths of the plan justify the costs for doing the work.

11. *Evaluation*

Now you must measure how effective the plan was toward inducing cooperation with target publics. This step typically requires quantitative research methods, like written or phone surveys and content analyses of media coverage, and qualitative research methods, like focus groups and one-on-one interviews. The IRT literature is highly instructive for this step, because, as we noted earlier, this is what criticism has done best—it has provided retrospective analysis of rhetorical efforts. Of particular importance here would be an analysis of how specific strategies worked or failed. There are four key dimensions for effective evaluations (Lindenman, 2006): outputs, outtakes, outcomes and outgrowths.

Outputs focus on short-term or immediate results of an image repair plan. Output measures check how well an organization presents itself to its publics in any medium and focus on discourse genres used, including their distribution. *Outtakes* focus on audiences' participation in the communications about the image repair effort. Examples of evaluation methods are pre- and post-event opinion surveys that would reveal levels of awareness, understanding, retention and recall about an issue. *Outcomes* measures evaluate an image repair effort's effectiveness by focusing on the degree of change in the audience's opinions, attitudes and/or behavior patterns as a result of having been exposed to and become aware of messages directed at them. *Outgrowths* measures concern the longest-term, cumulative effect of an entire image repair effort on audiences. You may, for example, repeat selected outcomes measures to determine how well opinions, attitudes, and behaviors have become normalized

since well after the end of a campaign. After compiling the data, analyzing the results, and reporting the findings in each of these four dimensions, you have powerful and useful information for managing the present image repair effort effectively and making future image repair efforts successful.

IRT Plan Template's Usability

Image repair is doubtless a vital strategic component of any organization's communications program. We scholars who've worked with image repair theory stand ready to help organizations make the best use of it. But we, too, must make the theory useable, useful and used by practitioners. This has been the focus of our paper.

We have to remember that image repair opportunities don't come along often, but when they do, they can rock an organization to its core. If image repair efforts are done "seat of the pants," the effort may likely not be as effective as it could be if it were more methodically planned and executed. It's possible that well-experienced public relations professionals who've handled many emergency situations before will have a stronger, "natural" grasp of what to do, why and how than others with less experience. That's fine, but even then, seasoned professionals know that having something already in place is better than nothing at all. Because image repair situations are unforeseen and complex doesn't mean you can't have a contingency plan that is flexible enough to apply to an image repair situation and allocate proper resources and effort in the right ways at the right times for the right audiences. The image repair plan template that we have presented in this section offers this kind of usability to public relations practitioners, who need it the most to make IRT a viable tool for successful public relations.

Conclusions about IRT's Future in Business

On-the-job experience is needed for IRT. It's been working hard in academia, and the time has come for it to move on to the day-to-day business of public relations in industry. We've shown many benefits of the insights drawn from all those who've critiqued image repair strategies for many organizations and individuals in different contexts. All this work has created a strong record of accomplishment—a kind of resume—that makes it ready for "real world" application of the theory on industry's terms, not academe's. Indeed that's the next challenge: IRT must get a job now that it's ready to graduate.

Think of the implications on practice, theory and pedagogy. In terms of practice, IRT should emerge as a proven approach in industry for successfully managing emergency situations. That includes organizational crises, issues management, and disasters (cf. Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998; Smudde, 2001). For theory, the industry applications of IRT should provide scholars with ample new data about how emergency situations—especially those where image repair is central—can be handled effectively. For pedagogy, students and teachers would learn along with those in

industry how newly potent image repair is to any organization's emergency communication and on-going public relations efforts. We foresee a bright future for image repair theory, and this paper serves as our letter of recommendation to any organization who chooses to employ it.

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