

Polly Pocket's Problem, Dora's Dilemma, and Cookie Monster's Crisis:
A Rhetorical Analysis of Mattel's Response to the Toy Recalls

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A Senior Honors Thesis Submitted to the
Department of Communication
Of Boston College

May 2008

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Dedication

*To my parents,
who instilled in me a sense of commitment and
supported me in every commitment I made.*

Abstract

Selling its products in more than 150 countries, Mattel is the largest toy manufacturer in the world (Mattel.com). Over the past sixty years, the company has earned the respect of the toy industry and the trust of parents worldwide. During this time, Mattel also made many “firsts,” for the toy industry, one of which was its decision to begin outsourcing to China, where half of all Mattel toys are currently produced (Story, 2007e). This decision would come back to haunt the toy manufacturer in the summer of 2007, when Mattel announced three major sets of recalls concerning toys produced in China.

This thesis is a rhetorical analysis of the response strategies employed by Mattel during the recall crisis. It comprises three major parts. First, it identifies the response strategies that Mattel used in three distinct stages of the crisis. Second, it evaluates the appropriateness of the company’s response tactics, and third, it assesses the potential success of Mattel’s overall crisis communication. Based on these three points of analysis, this thesis concludes that Mattel made several missteps in its communication efforts, and that the company still has a great deal of work to do in order to maintain its position in the industry and earn back the trust and respect it once had.

Introduction

On August 14, 2007, a *USA Today* headline read, “Mattel’s Stellar Reputation Tainted” (Horovitz, Farrell, & Silke Carty, 2007). Less than a month later, a *Taipei Times* headline declared, “Mattel’s Reputation under Fire” (“Mattel’s reputation,” 2007). Between August and October of 2007, it was apparent across the globe that long-time toy industry giant, Mattel was facing a major crisis. Announcing three major sets of toy recalls between August 2 and September 4, and another minor recall on October 25, Mattel was continuously under fire from the press and its stakeholders (anyone having a direct or indirect stake in the company and its performance), who were demanding an adequate response from the company. The following thesis is a rhetorical analysis of the Mattel’s response to its audience throughout the crisis.

Within the past 30 years, we have seen major international corporations either sink or float as a result of their crisis response strategies. The cases of Exxon and Tylenol reveal how an appropriate and well-planned crisis response can make the difference. As an article in *Supervision* recalled, “Tylenol, faced with a potentially ruinous capsule tampering incident, responded quickly and effectively and emerged stronger than ever. Exxon, faced with a catastrophic oil spill, botched its response, took years to recover and is still branded as a corporate culprit” (Ramsey, 2004). Because crisis communication has such a significant effect on a company’s future, a detailed investigation of its crisis communication strategies has merit. While several communication and management scholars have examined Exxon and Tylenol’s crisis communication strategies (Benoit, 1997; Benson, 1988; Johnson & Sellnow, 1995; Tyler, 1997), Mattel’s recent response has yet to be thoroughly analyzed.

In the past, researchers have developed various typologies in order to investigate crisis response strategies. Some scholars, such as Benoit (1995a) and Hearit (1994), based their analyses on the rhetorical concept of apologia. Some, including Allen and Caillouet (1994) and Bradford and Garret (1995), developed typologies based on impression management theory. Others, namely Coombs (1995), drew from both rhetorical and impression management theories in order to evaluate crisis response strategies. Most similarly to Coombs, this thesis uses a combination of typologies to identify and evaluate the potential effects of Mattel's response to the toy recalls of 2007.

This thesis accomplishes three key objectives. First, based on statements from Mattel appearing in press releases, news coverage, and other various artifacts, it identifies the crisis response strategies employed by the company during three distinct phases of the crisis. This first section reveals that Mattel's major response strategies were to shift blame to Chinese subcontractors responsible for the lead paint, and to position Mattel in a favorable light by emphasizing its commitment to safety and corrective action.

Second, this analysis evaluates the appropriateness of Mattel's chosen strategies, based on Coombs' (1995) crisis classification system. This section concludes that while the company employed appropriate tactics during the early stages of the crisis, it failed to adapt to the situation as it changed and intensified.

Third, this thesis evaluates the potential success of Mattel's choices based on the three goals of crisis communication introduced by Hearit (1994) and the concept of coherence applied by Ihlen (2002). This section concludes that Mattel was not able to achieve all three of Hearit's (1994) objectives because of its failure to adapt its messages following the second and third recall announcements, and its late decision to admit full

responsibility for the recalls and apologize to Chinese officials. In terms of coherence, this section also reveals several inconsistencies in the material coherence (consistency with outside sources), structural coherence (internal logic), and characterological coherence (consistency of characters/narrators) of Mattel's overall crisis communication. (Ihlen). Based on these three facets of analysis, this study suggests that Mattel's work is far from done, and that it must effectively communicate with its publics in order to regain its former status in the toy industry and maintain its favorable image.

Reconstruction of the Context

Mattel's Toy Story

Mattel, Inc. is the largest toy manufacturer in the world. Headquartered in El Segundo, California, it sells its products in more than 150 countries and employs more than 30,000 people in 43 countries and territories (Mattel.com). The company's major manufacturing plants are located in China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico and Thailand, with roughly 35 vendors in China producing half of all Mattel toys (Story, 2007e). Mattel also uses independent contractors in the US, Europe, Mexico, the Far East and Australia (Datamonitor, 2007, p. 5). The company's vision is to be "the world's premier toy brands- -today and tomorrow" (Euromonitor International, 2008).

Despite its current international success, the toy giant had a modest beginning. In 1945, Harold "Matt" Matson and Elliot Handler launched a business out of Handler's converted garage in Southern California. They named it Mattel Creations (Mattel being a combination of their first names, Matt and El). It wasn't long before Matson sold his share of the business to Handler and his wife, Ruth. When the couple first started, they produced picture frames made from scrap plastic and wood, and Elliot used the leftover materials to build dollhouse furniture. After Ruth organized a sales strategy, the company sold \$100,000 in frames and furniture, netting \$30,000 in its first year (International Directory of Company Histories, 1990, para. 3).

Taking advantage of favorable baby boom demographics and an "almost toyless" post-World War II marketplace, the Handlers entered fully into the toy industry (Handler, 1968, p. 11). In 1948, they incorporated the business with headquarters in Hawthorne, California. Without experience or capital, the couple learned hard lessons about price

competition and imitation. By 1949, however, they were making a profit from a variety of musical toys that included a plastic piano, a music box and the Uke-a-Doodle (a toy ukulele). According to Elliot Handler, the key to their success was manufacturing products that offered “quality, workmanship, performance and appearance...at a reasonable price” (Handler, 1968, p.15) He had found that “the satisfied consumer [was] the best guarantee of future sales” (Handler, 1968, p. 15).

In 1955, Mattel’s sales totals reached \$5 million, and it introduced another big hit in the market, the Burp Gun (International Directory of Company Histories, 1990, para. 8). In a revolutionary business move, and a first for the toy industry, the Handlers signed an agreement with ABC to sponsor a 15-minute segment of the Mickey Mouse Club. The year-long contract cost Mattel \$500,000, which equaled the company’s net worth at that time. Previously, manufacturers had relied on retailers to promote their products and only advertised during the holidays. Mattel’s sponsorship, which introduced the slogan, “You can tell it’s Mattel, it’s swell,” demonstrated the benefit of a national marketing campaign directly targeting children. The risky maneuver not only increased Burp Gun sales, but also turned Mattel into a well-recognized brand name.

In 1959, Mattel entered the national spotlight with the introduction of the Barbie doll, which would become “the best selling toy in history” (Mattel.com). The company manufactured the Barbie doll in Japan, making a presence in Asia decades before the “global outsourcing wave” (Barboza & Story, 2007, para. 10). The teenage fashion model doll, whose name and design was inspired by the Handler’s daughter, Barbara, was marketed along with an extensive line of clothes and accessories. Mattel introduced Barbie’s male counterpart in 1961 and named him after their son, Ken.

The 1960s was a time of growth and expansion for Mattel. The company went public in 1960 and had its common stock listed on the New York Stock Exchange by 1963. Sales exceeded \$100 million in 1965, when Mattel became a Fortune 500 company (International Directory of Company Histories, 1990, para. 10). The decade saw several product launches from Mattel that included Barbie's friends' Midge, Skipper and Christie, the first African-American Barbie doll. The company also succeeded in the large doll market in 1960 with Chatty Cathy. Mattel entered the educational toy market in 1965 with See 'N Say and introduced Hot Wheels in 1968. These die-cast Hot Wheels vehicles quickly became consumer favorites and are currently the number one selling toy world-wide.

Aside from expanding its product line, Mattel also expanded geographically. In 1964, Mattel opened an office in Switzerland that would become the headquarters for its worldwide marketing initiative. In 1968, the company began its "World of the Young" acquisition strategy with model car and airplane maker, Monogram Models. The purpose of the strategy was to extend the diversity of Mattel's product lines.

In 1972, the company restructured and created Mattel, Inc., which consisted of one division and seven subsidiaries. It entered into a consent decree with the Securities and Exchange Commission in 1974. A year later, when the SEC found irregularities in Mattel's profit reports, Elliot and Ruth Handler were forced to leave the company. Mattel entered the electronic games market in 1977 and developed the Intellivision home video entertainment system two years later. The Mattel Children's Foundation, a partnership with nonprofit organizations that focus on outreach to children, was established in 1978. By the end of the decade, Mattel extended its "World of the Young" strategy into the

non-toy sector, with the acquisition of companies such as Metaframe (a pet product manufacturer), Western Publishing and Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Despite the high-demand of the He-Man and the Masters of the Universe action figures released in 1982, Mattel struggled with high development costs and overhead expenses. In 1983, the company reported \$394 million in losses (Gellene, 1987). Due to the disparity between the record profits of Mattel's toy lines and the failing revenues of its cross-industry ventures, the management decided to sell or close all non-toy-related subsidiaries in 1984. Mattel's acquisitions within the next ten years, which included Fisher-Price, Hong-Kong based ARCO industries, Corolle S.A. manufacturer in France, and British Toys Company, Kransco, were all toy-related.

Two other key initiatives during this time were the joint venture with Japan's largest toy company, Bandai in 1986 (which allowed Mattel to market and sell products in Japan), and the revival of Mattel's alliance with the Walt Disney Company in 1988. The agreement with Disney involved a new line of infant and preschool toys based on famous characters like Mickey Mouse. Later, the arrangement was expanded to include more contemporary Disney characters.

Along with these external business ventures, Mattel's management also made internal changes in order to combat financial issues. When Mattel lost \$93 million in 1987 (a year marked by impressive sales of more than \$1 billion), Chairman and CEO, John Amerman fired 22% of the company's corporate staff and decreased its manufacturing capacity by 40% (Hoover's Company Records, 2008).

In 1995, Mattel obtained the rights to manufacture and distribute Cabbage Patch kids. The following year, Fisher-Price introduced Tickle Me Elmo and sold more than

\$100 million in its first year (Mattel.com). Mattel acquired licensing rights for all Nickelodeon programming in 1997 and began to manufacture toys based on the network's television characters.

After his retirement in 1997, Amerman was replaced as chairman and CEO by Jill Barad, who successfully reestablished Barbie as an American icon. That year, the line introduced Share-a-Smile Becky, the first friend of Barbie in a wheel chair. Over the next three years, Barad initiated a merger with Tyco Toys, as well as the acquisition of Pleasant Company (currently American Girls) and Bluebird Toys PLC (current license holder of Polly Pocket brand). She also signed marketing and licensing deals with Bandai and Ferrari. In 1998, Mattel announced a multi-year, \$25 million gift to the UCLA Children's Hospital, which has now been renamed Mattel Children's Hospital at UCLA.

In 1999, Barad began to restructure the company, "closing several plants and laying off 3,000 employees" (Hoover's Company Records, 2008). That same year, in a move that would lead to her downfall, Barad paid \$3.6 billion to acquire The Learning Company. When this "leading educational software maker" unexpectedly experienced significant losses, it cost Mattel more than \$50 million dollars (Hoover's Company Records, 2008). Pressured by shareholders, Barad stepped down in 2000. Mattel soon sold the software business and named Bob Eckert, chairman and CEO of Kraft Foods.

Under Eckert, Mattel unveiled "a new vision with a clear focus on building brands, cutting costs, and developing people" (Mattel.com). Taking advantage of the brand, Fisher-Price began selling children's clothes online and through catalogs. In 2001, Eckert signed two worldwide multi-year licensing agreements with Vivendi Universal Publishing and THQ. These deals aided the development of software based on Mattel's

most popular brand names, including Barbie and Hot Wheels. That same year, Fisher-Price signed a licensing agreement with the television show, *Barney* and developed a line of products that included plush toys, electronic learning aids and puzzles.

In 2002, Mattel closed its last U.S. manufacturing facility in Murray, Kentucky and moved production to existing plants located in Mexico. The closure was part of the company's realignment program that involved closing U.S. plants in order to reduce costs by taking advantage of cheaper labor (Lauzon, 2001).

In December of 2002, Mattel and two of its former employees paid a \$477,000 fine (the third-largest ever imposed by the Federal Election Committee) for making political donations in other peoples' names (Hoover's Company Records, 2008). Mattel Senior Vice President, Fermin Cuza and consultant, Alan Schwartz were said to be behind the \$120,714 in donations that came out of Mattel funds between 1996 and 2000 (Yost, 2002). The money was apparently donated to five political action committees, two party committees and 23 Democrats and Republicans (Yost, 2002).

The next year saw much consolidation within the company. Mattel consolidated two of its Mexican manufacturing facilities and combined its Girls and Boys-Entertainment divisions to form Mattel Brands. This new division included both Barbie and Hot Wheels.

Throughout the next few years Mattel developed several partnerships and licensing deals that allowed it to expand "its product range and influence" (Euromonitor International, 2008). Fisher-Price made an agreement with ESPN in 2004 and created an indoor game center named ESPN Game Station. Later that year, Mattel obtained multi-year licensing rights for the board game, OUTBURST and acquired exclusive rights to

patents and property owned by PurpleEyes.

In 2005, Mattel collaborated with Scholastic Entertainment to create Read With Me DVD and Ready for School educational learning systems. Also in 2005, Mattel's Children's Foundation started a global partnership with Save the Children "to create educational opportunities for young children worldwide" (Datamonitor, 2008, p. 7). That same year, the company consolidated Mattel Girls & Boys Brands and Fisher-Price Brands toy divisions. Currently only American Girl Brand has its own division within Mattel, Inc.

In a venture to further its presence in the electronic toy industry, Mattel acquired Hong Kong-based Radica in 2006 for approximately \$230 million. That November, the company partnered with Disguise, "the world's leading Halloween costumes and accessories company," creating a new line of Barbie Halloween merchandise (Datamonitor, 2008, p. 7).

In 2007, Fisher-Price and leading infant/toddler clothing company, Mayfair created a new line of layette and playwear for toddlers, infants and newborns. That June, Mattel announced the partnership between Barbie and Bonne Bell, the most popular cosmetics brand for young girls.

The end of the summer of 2007 brought about a crisis for the company. In August and September, Mattel recalled a total of 21 million toys imported from China that contained either lead paint or small magnets that could easily be swallowed by children. Some of the recalled products included popular Mattel characters, such as Big Bird, Elmo and Dora the Explorer. It seemed that the enduring relationship with Chinese contractors that had given Mattel a competitive advantage for decades was now one of the company's

major threats. As Louise Story of *The New York Times* commented in her analysis of the recalls, "...the longer [Mattel] outsourced to a factory supplier with good results, the looser the leash became" (2007c).

Despite a few rough months, the company bounced back relatively fast. Although at the height of the recalls, Mattel's stock dropped 25% from its year-to-date high, by October the stock had risen nearly 10% above its 2007 low in September (Rooney, 2007). In January of 2008, Mattel announced that its fourth-quarter profit rose 15% and its net income grew to 89 cents per share, an increase from 75 cents per share in 2007. Tax benefits totaled \$47.3 million dollars in the latest period, while charges related to the recalls were only \$42 million ("Mattel Beats," 2008). Overall, it appears that Mattel was able to bounce back financially. The damage to the company's reputation; however, is still unknown.

A Tough Year for Toys

Mattel was not alone in its 2007 crisis. Many other toy manufacturers, large and small, announced product recalls throughout the year. Therefore, not only is Mattel's future uncertain, but the lasting effect of recalls on the entire industry remains to be seen. As *Playthings* reporter, Cliff Annicelli (2007) described the situation, "...for better or worse, a new era for the toy business began in 2007" (para. 1).

After the toy industry experienced an annual gain of 34% in 2006, the outlook was bright for the coming year. In fact, the National Retail Foundation predicted a 4.8% increase in retail sales for 2007. In February of that year; however, the industry took its first hard hit when Hasbro (the second largest toy manufacturer behind Mattel) recalled 985,000 Easy-Bake toy ovens ("Nearly 1 Million," 2007). The toys posed a risk of burns

to children whose fingers could fit in the oven's opening.

The year also saw some legal issues within the toy industry. In March, Fisher-Price was fined \$975,000 for the company's delay in reporting toy problems to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). That same month, magnetic toy manufacturer, PlastWood sued its competitor, Mega Brands for "poisoning" the market with its recall of Mega's Magnetix sets in March of 2006 (Annicelli, 2007, para. 4). The company had recalled 3.8 million Magnetix magnetic building sets after one child died and four other children suffered from serious intestinal damage after swallowing small magnets that had separated from the toy ("Mega Brands," 2007). In the weeks following the 2007 lawsuit, after more complaints had been filed, Mega Brands recalled another 4 million Magnetix building sets ("Mega Brands," 2007).

In June, RC2 Corporation recalled 1.5 million Thomas & Friends wooden trains due to possible lead paint contamination (Chandler & Possley, 2007). This recall was the onset of a rocky summer for the toy industry that was defined by a series of lead recalls for toys "Made in China." In reaction to the Thomas the Train recalls, the Toy Industry Association (TIA) encouraged U.S. toy companies to have their partners in China attend a safety summit in Guangzhou (Annicelli, 2007).

Hasbro recalled another round of Easy-Bake ovens in July, but public attention quickly shifted to Mattel when it announced its first major round of recalls that summer. On August 2, Fisher Price (a subsidiary of Mattel) recalled 1.5 million products that included Dora the Explorer and Sesame Street Brands ("Mattel's Fisher Price," 2007). The toys in this first round were manufactured in China and had been painted with a non-approved pigment that contained lead. Within a week, Mattel announced that the Chinese

vendor, Lee Der Industrial Co. Ltd, was responsible for the dangerous toys, and that it had ceased all shipments from the factory. On August 9, China temporarily banned exports from both Lee Der Industrial and Hansheng Wood Products Factory (the supplier involved in the earlier RC2 recall). Two days after the ban, Zhang Shuhong, head of Lee Der Industrial, hanged himself in one of the factory warehouses. Although it was shocking news for Mattel, it was more expected in China, where it is common for officials to commit suicide after their reputation has been harmed. The Southern Metropolis daily reported that it had been Shuhong's best friend who supplied that supplied the lead paint to Lee Der ("Head of Chinese Toy," 2007).

Unfortunately, even after this tragedy, troubles had only just begun for Mattel. On August 14, the company announced another 9 million recalls (Ellis, 2007). This second round of toys included Polly Pocket dolls and Batman action figures. Some of the products, such as die-cast vehicles, were recalled because of lead paint, while others were on the list due to loose magnets that posed a choking hazard. When more lead-related recalls by Toys "R" Us and Schylling were announced shortly after, Congress summoned leaders from 19 companies to "testify about the industry's safety efforts" (Annicelli, 2007, para. 9). Those who testified received "generally positive reviews" (Annicelli, 2007, para. 10).

Mattel recalled another 844,000 toys on September 4 (Kelley, 2007). This third round of recalled products, which were mostly Barbie accessories, were said to contain excessive levels of lead paint. The day following the announcement, the Toy Industry Association (TIA) introduced new safety efforts and expressed its support for stricter standards for toy testing. At a September 11 joint U.S.-China summit on consumer

product safety, the Chinese government agreed to “prohibit the use of lead paint on toys exported to the United States” and intensify its inspection procedures (Bridges, 2007, para. 1).

Weeks later, RC2 Corp. recalled another 200,000 Thomas the Train products, as well as the replacement toy given to customers during the previous recall (Annicelli, 2007). More lead paint-related recalls continued through October, from both Mattel and other companies, such as TRU, Kipp Brothers and KB.

Another scandal hit the toy industry in November, when Spin Master recalled 4.2 million Aqua Dots craft kits (“Toy contaminated”). It was reported that children had gone into non-responsive comas after swallowing the beads, which metabolized in a way similar to the “date rape” drug, GHB. Later that month Schylling recalled more products and Fisher-Price recalled 155,000 kitchen toys due to a design flaw (Annicelli, 2007).

As a result of the agreement made at the September US-China summit, 1,726 factories had been inspected by November, 85% of which were not up to standard (More4Kids.info, 2007). Following these inspections, “764 licenses were suspended or revoked and 690 factories were given warnings about the quality of their products they manufactured (More4Kids.info, 2007).

Although the last major recalls within the toy industry occurred in November of 2007, problems were far from over for toy manufacturers in the new year. Currently, toy companies are still dealing with lawsuits from various stakeholders regarding the lead recalls. RCG, for example, agreed to pay \$30 million in response to a class action suit regarding the Thomas the Train recalls (Schmit, 2007). Mattel, as the industry leader, is still under fire from the government. January 9, Chief Executive Robert Eckert received a

letter from Representative from Maryland, Elijah Cummings. The letter, which was signed by more than 50 other lawmakers, urged Eckert to “completely eliminate the use of lead in toys” manufactured by Mattel (“Lawmakers Urge Mattel,” 2007, para. 3).

Literature Review

In the midst of crisis, Mattel was faced with concerns from parents, the press, stakeholders, and industry experts. Thus, it was essential that the company communicate an appropriate and effective response to its audiences. For more than three decades, scholars in the fields of rhetoric and impression management have developed typologies for evaluating such responses. This body of research regarding crisis response strategies ranges from early studies of self-defense speeches to more recent studies that apply concepts such as coherence and metanarration to the analysis of crisis communication.

Apologia

Ware and Linkugel (1973) were two of the first communication scholars to discuss rhetorical responses to crises. In their classic study, the authors examined the rhetorical genre of apologia, which they defined as “the speech of self-defense” (p.273). They suggested four strategies or “sub-genres” within apologetic discourse: denial, bolstering, differentiation and transcendence (p.274).

Ware and Linkugel (1973) categorized denial (the disavowal of culpability or ill-intent in relationship with the negative act) and bolstering (the identification with something viewed positively by the audience) as reformatory. Reformatory strategies, according to the authors, “do not alter the audience’s meaning for the cognitive elements involved” (p. 278). In contrast, they classified differentiation (the separation of an idea from a larger context in which the audience places it) and transcendence (the connection of an idea to a larger context in which the audience did not previously place it) as transformative. Ware and Linkugel explained that a transformative strategy “affects the meaning which the audience attaches to the manipulated attribute” (p. 280).

Corporate Apologia v. Individual Defense Discourse

Much of the research regarding corporate apologia has drawn from Ware and Linkugel (1973). Early work focused on differentiating corporate apologia from discourse defending individuals (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Cheney, 1991; Dionisopoulos & Vibbert, 1988; Ice, 1991; Shultz & Seeger, 1991).

Dionisopoulos and Vibbert (1988) were the first scholars to adapt apologia in order to analyze a corporate crisis response. They expanded on the inherent difference between the two types of discourses; that is, that individual apologia defends an individual, while corporate apologia defends a company. The authors noted that discourse relating to organizations is attributed “not to individuals within a corporation, but to the corporation-as-actor” (p.248). Dionisopoulos and Vibbert went further to explain that the “social persona” of an organization should be treated by critics as a rhetorical agent (p.248-249).

Several subsequent studies mentioned multiple audiences as a distinguishing factor of corporate apologia (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Ice, 1991; Shultz & Seeger, 1991). Ice (1991) stressed that “when a corporation justifies its actions, the corporation is communicating its responsibility to particular publics” (p. 344). He explained that the rhetorical strategies that a corporation chooses to emphasize can repair the relationship with some publics, while alienating others. Therefore, Ice suggested that the key to crisis communication is the “managing of rhetorical strategies” (p. 360). Aside from evaluating the rhetorical strategies employed by an organization, Ice proposed that critics of corporate apologia must also consider which public the organization was targeting with each strategy. Consequently, he suggested combining the concept of multiple-publics

with rhetorical theory in order to analyze corporate discourse.

Shultz and Seeger (1991) said that apologia “may be extended” and applied to “rhetoric which is corporate rather than individual centered” (p.51). Similar to Ice (1991), however, they noted that corporate rhetoric is distinct in that an organization has multiple audiences to satisfy, such as customers, regulatory agencies and employees. Because the needs of these diverse audiences often differ (and possibly even contradict each other), the authors argued that the task of responding to a crisis is more complicated for a company than it is for individual speakers. Shultz and Seeger also mentioned that the hierarchical structure of certain organizations “creates the opportunity to deny or diffuse responsibility in ways which may be unique to corporate centered discourse” (p. 52). Taking into consideration that corporate responses involve “corporate sources, corporate purposes and corporate audiences,” the authors proposed that Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) typology might not be appropriate for the analysis of organizational discourse.

Although they did not draw directly from Ware and Linkugel (1973), Cheney (1991, 1992) and Allen and Caillouet (1994) also pointed out the differences between corporate and individual discourse of defense. Allen and Caillouet (1994) reiterated the opinions of other scholars, referencing corporate audiences as a distinguishing factor of corporate discourse. In fact, they described it as a weakness in prior research regarding impression management strategies. The authors explained that most research overlooked the complexity of corporate discourse; that is, the fact that there are multiple speakers creating multiple messages directed at multiple audiences. In addition, Allen and Caillouet mentioned how past research failed to acknowledge how “institutional norms” within an organization can limit a corporate actor’s discourse (p.44).

Cheney (1992) suggested yet another distinction between organizational and individual defense efforts. He said that actions are taken and statements are made by the organization as a whole instead of by one identifiable person, noting that “corporate messages tend to de-center the individual” (p. 176). Cheney (1991) also discussed how the “mask” of the organization functions so that “organizational messages take on a relatively placeless, nameless, omniscient quality” (p. 5). This mysteriousness, he claimed, can obscure the methods behind corporate discourse and its effects.

In addition to maintaining that corporate responses to crisis differ from those of individuals, the previously mentioned authors also laid the groundwork for several typologies of image restoration discourse. These typologies, which group types of discourse according to common characteristics, serve as classification systems for apologia analysis. While many of these authors developed their own strategies for analyzing crisis communication, only a few scholars have created comprehensive typologies of apologia that have been repeatedly referenced and utilized within the communication field. Some of these authors combined the rhetorical tradition of apologia with concepts of crisis management in order to develop a typology (Hearit; 1994 Benoit; 1995), while others applied impression management literature directly to their typologies of crisis communication (Allen & Caillouet, 1994, Bradford & Garret, 1995; Caillouet & Allen, 1996; Coombs, 1995).

Apologia-Based Typologies

Redefinition, Regret and Dissociation

Asserting that the majority of crisis management research had overlooked the major role that communication plays in the response process, Hearit (1994) developed his

own approach to analyzing public relations crises. His typology focused primarily on situations in which the organization is guilty of a negative act and chooses to apologize to its publics.

The concept of *kategoria* is an important concept within Hearit's (1994) method. Ryan (1982) defined *kategoria* as the opposite of *apologia* or "an accusation [or] charge" (p. 255). He argued that a critic of *apologia* should treat the statement of defense as a "speech set" with the statement of accusation (*kategoria*), designating the latter as either an accusation against policy or an accusation against character. Ryan held that because "apologies for policy or character are different in terms of their constraints," critics should be aware of these conditions and analyze the discourse accordingly (p.257).

Adapting Ryan's (1982) theory to corporate *apologia*, Hearit (1995b) maintained that the choices involved in crisis communication are largely related to the *kategoria* of the situation. He said that an organization can be charged with one of two "topoi." These topoi, he explained, "regard whether the harm has been caused by organized incompetence or by a strategically malevolent policy" (p. 4). A crisis can result when an organization fails to perform its "primary mission" (incompetence) or violates the "norms of public responsibility to the community in which it operates" (p.5). These types of accusations threaten an organization's social legitimacy. Hearit explained that in order for an organization to maintain its legitimacy, it must utilize both negative and positive communication. Negative communication includes dissociation strategies, which serve to distance the organization from ill-perceived behavior. Positive strategies, on the other hand, include corrective action (fixing the problem) and demonstrating a commitment to the values that the organization violated.

More specifically, Hearit (1994) identified three common objectives of corporate apologia. First, he said, an organization seeks to create a competing narrative that puts it in a more positive light than the “commonly” reported account (p. 115). Second, it wants to express regret without accepting full responsibility. Last, an organization aims to dissociate itself from the negative behavior of which it has been accused.

Hearit (1994) explained that organizations use “persuasive accounts” in order to develop a competing interpretation of the alleged act (p.115). As Hearit described, a common technique involved in persuasive accounts is “strategic naming” or “terminological redefinition” (p.115). Using this technique, an organization refers to elements of the narrative using words that either focus attention on or remove attention from certain aspects of crisis (p.115). Hearit explained this strategy through the example of Chrysler’s response when it was charged with odometer fraud. In the press, the incident was referred to as an “executive perk” made available to senior executives who were allowed to drive the vehicles. However, when Chrysler Chairman Iacocca responded to the accusation, he strategically defined it in a more favorable light as a “test program” (p.116).

The second major strategy in Hearit’s (1994) typology, the statement of regret, has two major purposes. It works to mitigate public hostility toward the organization, while also serving to minimize the organization’s responsibility for the offense. The dual function of the message is important for maintaining a favorable public opinion along with financial stability. (Stock value tends to plummet after a company apologizes, but denial of responsibility often helps keep stock value steady.¹) Hearit used Toshiba’s

¹ See Marcus & Goodman (1991) for a more detailed explanation of the relationship between crisis communication and stock value.

statement as an example of this strategy. After Toshiba was accused of selling secret computer equipment to the former Soviet Union, it chose to blame its subsidiary, the Toshiba Machine Company (TMC). The company's response, which read, "Toshiba Corporation, as a majority shareholder of TMC, profoundly apologizes for the past actions by a subsidiary of Toshiba," exemplified the dual functioning of a statement of regret (Hearit, 1994, p. 118). Toshiba managed to apologize, without actually admitting fault.

The final strategy involved in the typology is dissociation. Hearit (1995a) explained that dissociation can take one of three forms: denial of guilt (opinion/knowledge dissociation), differentiation of guilt (individual/group dissociation), and distancing from guilt (act/essence dissociation),² (p. 6). In opinion/knowledge dissociation, the organization challenges the validity of the accusation, defining it as a mere "opinion" as opposed to "actual knowledge" (Hearit, 1994, p. 119). When *Consumer Reports* labeled the Suzuki Samurai as unsafe, Suzuki responded with this type of dissociation. As Hearit (1995a) described, Suzuki claimed that the magazine's testing conditions were not similar to actual driving conditions (p. 123). Therefore, the company defined the allegation as groundless because it did not represent actual knowledge of the situation.

The second type of dissociation is individual/group. With this strategy, an organization attempts to scapegoat a specific member or division within the company, distinguishing them from the company as a whole. Hearit (1995a) discussed how American Airlines used the Allied Pilots Association (the pilots' union) as a scapegoat. Because a substantial amount of pilots called in sick during the holiday season, the airline

² For further information on the three forms of dissociation and more examples of each, see Hearit (1995b).

cancelled over 10% of its flights. In the company response, entitled “AApology,” the airline called the cancellations the result of “an illegal sickout” orchestrated by the pilots’ union (as cited in Hearit 205a, p. 125). This statement demonstrated that the disruption was out of American Airline’s control.

Lastly, Hearit (1995a) presented the act/essence form of dissociation. This strategy occurs when an organization admits fault, but claims that the act does not “represent the true nature of the organization” (p. 127). Volvo utilized this strategy when the company was accused of deceptive advertising. Volvo justified its production tactics (which involved the reinforcement of a Volvo so that it remained intact after being crushed by a monster truck) as necessary requirements for filming multiple shots. According to Hearit, this is an example of act/essence dissociation because Volvo claimed it was never their intent to deceive consumers and that the company would never encourage deceptive practices.

While Hearit (1995a) argued that the response strategies within his typology are more appropriate in certain situations than others, he did not deny that organizations may choose to apply them individually or in combination with one another³. In his analysis of Chrysler’s response to accusations of odometer fraud, for example, Hearit (1994) concluded that the company utilized a combination of persuasive accounts, statements of regret, and opinion/knowledge dissociation. As Hearit explained, Chairman Iacocca created a competing narrative, naming the act a “test program” as opposed to an “executive perk.” He also showed concern in a statement that promised to replace any vehicle damaged in the test program. Lastly, Iacocca made it clear that road testing was a

³ For more cases studies that employ this typology, see Hearit (1999), Hearit & Courtright (2004), and Hearit & Brown (2004).

common industry practice. By doing this, he framed the accusations of “fraud” as not representing actual knowledge of what had occurred. Despite these addresses to the public, Chrysler still faced \$7.6 million in criminal fines for mail fraud (Hearit, 1994, p. 122).

With the Chrysler case study, Hearit (1994) demonstrated how apologia can help companies, even when they are guilty of a wrongdoing, by minimizing the harm done to their corporate image.

Image Restoration

Benoit’s (1995a) theory of image restoration is another widely referenced typology in crisis communication. He based his theory on the assumptions that communication is goal-directed and that one major goal of discourse is “maintaining a favorable reputation” (p. 67). His typology, which can be applied to organizational and individual discourse, identifies five major image restoration strategies: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification⁴ (p. 74).

Benoit (1995a), like Hearit (1995b) agreed that apologia and kategoria should be considered as a speech set (Ryan, 1982). Benoit argued that “understanding the nature of specific persuasive attacks helps [a critic] understand specific defensive strategies” (p. 86). Consistent with this viewpoint, Benoit (1997) outlined the conditions of an attack when he applied his theory to corporate image repair. According to his theory, “perceptions are more important than reality” during a crisis (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). Benoit argued that an attack against an organization occurs when a “salient audience” *believes* that the company is responsible for an act, which that audience *believes* to be offensive (p. 178). Because audience perception is so important, and organizations often

⁴ Benoit drew from and extended Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) original strategies for apologia.

deal with multiple audiences, he also suggested that crisis communicators identify the most important audience before choosing their strategies.

According to Benoit's (1995a) typology, one possible strategy for organizations facing a crisis is denial. This denial can take two different forms: simple denial and shifting the blame. With simple denial, a company claims that it did not perform the act of which it has been accused. Pepsi-Cola engaged in denial when it accused Coca-Cola of charging McDonald's less than its other accounts. In response, Coca-Cola called the accusation false and insisted that the company charged all accounts the same prices (Benoit, 1997).

Benoit (1995a) believed that shifting the blame was likely to be more effective than simple denial. This second form of denial not only claims that accusations against the company are false, but also answers the question, "Well if you didn't do it, who did?" (p. 75). Thus, this strategy forms a dual function; it shifts ill feelings away from the accused, while also giving the audience a new target for its anger. As Benoit (1997) explained, Exxon used this approach during the *Valdez* crisis when they blamed Alaskan officials and the Coast Guard for the delayed response.

A second general strategy in Benoit's (1995a) typology is evading responsibility. He divided this strategy into four subcategories: provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. Provocation occurs when an organization claims that its actions were a response to another party's offensive act. A firm who has moved one of its plants, for example, might blame its actions on the fact that a recent law reduced that plant's profit margin (Benoit, 1997). Benoit (1995a) stressed that if the audience accepts that the action was provoked, blame may shift to the other party.

An organization that uses defeasibility argues that it lacked control or sufficient information necessary to avoid the wrongdoing. An example, according to Benoit (1997), would be an executive who missed a meeting and blamed it on the fact that he was never told about it.

Another method of evading responsibility is to claim that a wrongdoing happened by accident. According to Benoit (1995a), this strategy, when effective, can “reduce the perceived responsibility of the accused” (p.76). Brennan, the chairman of Sears, used this strategy when the company was accused of auto-repair fraud. He claimed that all repair mistakes were unintentional so that stakeholders would hold the company less accountable for its actions (Benoit, 1997).

Benoit’s (1995a) last version of evading responsibility is good intentions. This occurs when an organization suggests that there was a good motive behind its actions. According to Benoit (1997), Chairman Brennan of Sears utilized this method when he stressed how the company would have never purposely violated the trust it had earned from customers (p. 180). By saying this, he was implying that Sears had good intentions with all of its customer relations.

The third major strategy in the typology is reducing offensiveness. Benoit (1995a) divided this approach into six subcategories: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation.

Bolstering is an attempt to offset the negative affects of a crisis by strengthening the positive feelings that the audience has for the accused organization. According to Benoit (1995a), bolstering is most effective when the positive associations are relevant to the charges brought against the company. Exxon tried to bolster its image during the

Valdez crisis by emphasizing its efforts to minimize environmental damage from the oil (Benoit, 1997).

Minimization is a second way that an organization can reduce the offensiveness of its actions. It is an attempt to convince the audience that the wrongdoing is not as bad as it seems. Exxon also used this approach during *Valdez* when it downplayed the extent of the damage the oil had on the environment (Benoit, 1997).

Benoit (1995a) named differentiation as a third method of reducing offensiveness. Differentiation occurs when an organization “distinguishes the act performed from other similar but less desirable actions” (p. 77). In his case study on Sears and its auto-repair crisis, Benoit (1995b) noted how the company repeatedly differentiated its repair “mistakes” from the significantly worse offense of “fraud” (p.96).

The fourth tactic used to reduce offensiveness is transcendence or “placing the act in a different context” (Benoit, 1995a, p. 77). Typically, organizations that utilize transcendence justify their actions by appealing to a higher good. Dow Corning (a global silicone supplier) used this approach when it was accused of possessing information about the dangers of breast implants. In its response, the company attempted to transcend the issue, focusing its discourse on women’s right and desire to receive breast implants (Brinson & Benoit, 1996).

Attacking the accuser is a fifth strategy Benoit (1995a) suggested as a way to reduce the offensiveness of a wrongdoing. Benoit (1995b) explained that shortly after being accused of auto-repair fraud, Sears attacked the validity of the investigation performed by the Department of Consumer Affairs. The company also claimed that the director of the department had political motivations.

Benoit's (1995a) final form of reducing offensiveness is compensation. With this strategy, the organization offers remuneration to the victim in order to offset negative effects. Benoit stressed that the compensation must be perceived as sufficient and accepted by the victim in order for an organization to benefit. He provided the example of a movie theater that was criticized after denying a group of disabled people admittance. In order to restore the theater's reputation, an official apologized and offered the group free movie passes (Benoit, 1997).

The fourth major strategy in Benoit's (1995a) image restoration typology is corrective action. Correction action is when the accused promises to correct the problem or situation. This strategy can take two forms. It can either be a plan to solve the problem, "restoring the situation to the state of affairs before the objectionable action" or a promise to prevent the act from occurring in the future (p.79). According to Benoit and Brinson (1994), AT&T used both forms of corrective action after an interruption occurred with its long-distance service in New York City. Chairman Allen assured stakeholders that the affected facility had been repaired and that the company planned to spend billions of dollars to make all of AT&T's facilities more reliable.

Mortification is the final strategy within Benoit's (1995a) typology. When a company engages in mortification, it admits responsibility for the wrongdoing and asks for forgiveness (p. 79). If the relevant audience accepts the apology as sincere, it is possible that they will pardon the wrongful act and the organization's image will be restored. AT&T also used mortification in its response to the long-distance breakdown, apologizing to all affected parties. Benoit (1997) noted that a drawback to the mortification strategy is that a company has to admit guilt. Once it confesses, it opens

itself to potential lawsuits.

Benoit (1995a) held that the strategies within his typology (used independently or combined) “can be operationalized in discourse in a multitude of ways” (p. 81). He demonstrated these ways with several organizational case studies in which he applied his theory of image restoration (Benoit, 1995a; Benoit, 1995b; Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Brinson & Benoit, 1996, 1999).

In their analysis of USAir’s image repair after the crash of one of its planes, for example, Benoit and Czerwinski (1997) concluded that the airline used a combination of bolstering, denial and corrective action. USAir employed bolstering by making repeated references to USAir’s commitment to safety and professionalism. Then, it denied that its aircrafts were unsafe. Last, the company announced two corrective strategies; USAir planned to assign a former pilot to oversee safety operations and hire an external company that would audit all safety procedures (p.50).

The authors argued, however, that the bolstering was ineffective because statements regarding safety were made by flight attendants, as opposed to the more relevant source, aircraft mechanics. Benoit and Czerwinski (1997) also suggested that USAir’s uses of denial and corrective action (neither of which addressed specific charges) did not work effectively in tandem. When he denied that the planes were unsafe and then introduced plans to make them safer, USAir Chairman Schofield failed to address two distinct threats (p. 50). Although the authors maintained that denial and corrective action can successfully work together, they stressed that they must not contradict one another. This case study demonstrated how Benoit’s (1995a) typology can reveal what went wrong in a company’s crisis communication.

Impression Management Typologies

While Hearit (1994) and Benoit (1995a) drew significantly from the rhetorical theory of apologia with their typologies, other scholars relied primarily on impression management theory (Allen & Caillouet, 1994, Bradford & Garret, 1995; Caillouet & Allen, 1996; Coombs, 1995).

A Quantitative Approach

Allen & Caillouet (1994) developed a typology of impression management strategies consisting of seven major categories: excuse, justification, ingratiation, intimidation, apology, denouncement and factual distortion. A company employs the excuse strategy when it denies responsibility for a wrongdoing. According to the authors, organizations may use three types of excuses; it can deny intention, deny volition (control), or deny agency. In contrast to excuse, an organization may engage in justification; that is, it may accept responsibility, but attempt to justify the wrongdoing. Allen and Caillouet specified that companies can justify their actions by denying injury (saying that nobody was hurt), denying a victim (claiming the victim deserved the injury), condemning the condemner (arguing that others commit worse acts), or claiming that the negative event was misrepresented (p.59).

Another crisis-response method in Allen and Caillouet's (1994) typology is ingratiation, or an organization's "attempt to gain audience approval" (p. 60). The authors explained that ingratiation may occur in the form of self-enhancement (persuading the audience of the company's positive traits), role model (framing the organization as a good example), social responsibility (stressing the organization's responsible practices), other-enhancement (flattering the audience), or opinion conformity (agreeing with the

beliefs held by the audience) (p. 60).

Unlike they did with the first three strategies, Allen and Caillouet (1994) did not divide the final four into subcategories. Essentially, the authors described that intimidation is when an organization “conveys an...identity of danger of potency,” and apology is when an organization confesses and asks to be punished. Denouncement occurs when a company blames an external individual or group, and factual distortion is employed when it claims that the accusation is somehow false.

While Benoit (1995b) and Hearit (1994) qualitatively applied their theories to particular cases, such as Sears and USAir, Allen and Caillouet⁵ (1994) used a more quantitative approach. One study, for example, analyzed 799 statements made by a reuse-recycle facility, identifying which stakeholders were targeted and which impression management strategies were utilized in each statement. They found that ingratiation was the “primary” strategy used, appearing in over 50% of the material (Allen and Caillouet, 1994, p. 51). Finding that different strategies were used depending on the audience targeted, the authors also substantiated theories about the “constraints upon and the complexity of corporate discourse” (p. 56).

Combination, Condensation and Extension

Allen and Caillouet’s (1994) theory, while not widely applied in specific case studies, strongly influenced Coombs (1995), who created the third major typology in the crisis communication field. Integrating impression management literature and rhetorical theory, he defined five main crisis-response strategies: nonexistence, distance, ingratiation, mortification, and suffering. As Coombs explained, he developed these divisions by combining overlapping strategies between Allen and Caillouet (1994) and

⁵ See Caillouet & Allen (1996) for another quantitative study using this typology.

Benoit's (1995a) typologies, and then grouping similar strategies into larger categories (p. 449).

According to Coombs (1995), "nonexistence strategies seek to eliminate the crisis" (p. 450). These strategies include denial, clarification, attack, and intimidation. An organization that uses denial merely states that there is no crisis. If it goes a step further, and explains why there is no cause for concern, the organization is engaging in clarification. The final two strategies are more aggressive. As Coombs explained, an attack "confronts those who wrongly report that the non-existent crisis exists" (p. 451). He said that an even more intense approach is intimidation, or threatening to use the organization's power against someone.

The second group of strategies in Coombs' (1995) typology is distance strategies. An organization employs these methods after it has acknowledged a crisis, in an effort to weaken its association with the wrongdoing. The two major distance strategies are excuse, which attempts to "minimize the organization's responsibility", and justification, which tries to "minimize the damage associated with the crisis" (p. 451). Drawing directly from Allen and Caillouet's (1994) tactics, Coombs explained that excuse may involve denial of intention or denial of volition, while justification may take the form of minimizing injury, "victim deserving" or "misrepresentation of the crisis event" (p. 450).

Ingratiation strategies, the third group of the series, include those strategies aimed at gaining public approval for a company. Coombs (1995) named bolstering (reminding the audience about the organization's positive traits), transcendence (framing the crisis in a more favorable context), and praising others (attempting to gain favor with flattery) as possible ingratiation strategies.

The fourth group of strategies within this typology, mortification strategies, includes those methods that “attempt to win forgiveness of the publics and to create acceptance for the crisis” (p. 452). Coombs (1995) said that in these cases, organizations might employ remediation, which is the offering compensation to the victims, or repentance, which involves asking the audience for forgiveness. A final mortification strategy is rectification. This method occurs when an organization makes plans to prevent the crisis from happening again.

The suffering strategy, the final strategy in Coombs’ (1995) typology, is “unique among crisis-response strategies” (p. 453). The motive behind this approach, according to Coombs, is to gain sympathy from the audience. When an organization uses suffering, it positions itself as an “unfair victim” of the crisis, targeted by some “malicious, outside entity” (p. 453).

Apart from consolidating work by Allen and Caillouet (1994) and Benoit (1995a), Coombs (1995) also added many of his own ideas to the crisis communication field. One of his major contributions related to which strategies were best utilized in which crisis situations (which apologia fit which kategoria). Several theorists had related the importance of kategoria in crisis discourse (Benoit, 1995; Hearit, 1995b; Ryan, 1982). Ryan argued that kategoria of a crisis could include “accusations against policy or character” (p. 258). Similarly, Hearit explained that the cause of crisis could either be “a strategically malevolent policy” or “incompetence” (p. 4). Coombs went further with his theory of kategoria, identifying four major types of crises: faux pas, accidents, transgression and terrorism. These divisions are based on two factors: whether a crisis is caused internally or externally and whether it is intentional or unintentional.

A faux pas, according to Coombs (1995) is an “unintentional action that an external agent tries to transform into a crisis” (p.455). The organization considers its behavior appropriate, but the external agent redefines it as inappropriate (p. 455). In response, an organization must persuade its audience to accept its interpretation of the situation. Coombs maintained that nonexistence strategies and distance strategies are most appropriate in these cases. Nonexistence strategies are plausible because the vagueness of the situation leaves open the option of denial. Distance strategies, on the other hand, are also appropriate because the link between a company and the crisis is initially weak in these situations.

Accidents are the second type of crises outlined by Coombs (1995). Accidents are unintentional acts that occur “during the course of normal organizational operations” (p. 456). Unlike a faux pas, an accident is recognized internally as a crisis. Examples include product defects and natural disasters. Coombs held that a distance strategy, particularly excuse, is likely the best response in these situations, as it helps to reinforce a company’s “lack of responsibility” (p. 456).

The third type of crisis mentioned in Coombs’ (1995) typology is transgression, or an action done intentionally by an organization that “knowingly place publics at risk or harm” (p.457). Coombs explained that violating laws and withholding safety information are both examples of this type. Because there is no doubt that the organization is responsible, Coombs suggested that mortification strategies are the most appropriate responses to transgressions.

Coombs (1995) explained that a fourth possible type of crisis is terrorism. Terrorism, according to Coombs, “refers to intentional actions taken by external actors”

that harm an organization (p. 457). Examples of terrorism include product tampering and workplace violence. Coombs argued that suffering strategy is an obvious response for acts of terrorism, as the organization is unarguably a victim.

While other theorists confirmed their theories through case studies (Benoit, 1995a; Benoit, 1995b; Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Brinson & Benoit, 1996, 1999; Hearit, 1999; Hearit & Courtright, 2004; Hearit & Brown, 2004), Coombs (1996) supported his approach through experimentation. He presented 116 undergraduate students with two crisis scenarios (which he categorized as either accidents or transgressions), varying which scenarios (out of four) students received, and which response strategies were utilized in each scenario. After measuring respondents' perceptions of the companies after reviewing the cases, Coombs concluded that situations in which a company used recommended response strategies for accidents and transgressions (according to his theory) related to more positive perceptions of a company than situations in which it used other strategies.

After further experimentation, Coombs (1998) added another element to his theory of crisis response strategies. Drawing from the work of Marcus and Goodman (1991), he applied the concept of a continuum to his previous typology. The continuum created by Marcus and Goodman labeled strategies as either accommodative (accepting responsibility or taking remedial action) or defensive (claiming there is no crisis or denying responsibility for it). Coombs created a second continuum, based on crisis responsibility that matched up with the accommodative-defensive continuum. His system had more defensive strategies (e.g. attacking the accuser and denial) matching up as responses to crises in which an organization held less responsibility (e.g. natural

disasters). It matched more accommodative strategies (e.g. correction action and apology) with crises in which the organization has more control/responsibility (e.g. transgressions). An experiment performed by Coombs (1998), set up similarly to his 1996 study (comparing respondents' perceptions of companies that utilized different response strategies in various situations) supported the validity of the two-continuum system.

Other Crisis-Response Methods

Hearit (1994), Benoit (1995a), Allen and Caillouet (1994), and Coombs (1995) contributed to the most referenced and applied typologies within the crisis communication genre. More recently other scholars extended on their theories and introduced other methodologies useful for the analysis of crisis-response strategies (Hearit & Courtright, 2003; Ihlen, 2002; Sellnow & Brand, 2001; Venette, Sellnow & Lang, 2003).

Coherence

Ihlen (2002) criticized previous studies related to crisis communication strategies, noting several gaps in the existing literature. He found that most studies failed to acknowledge the dynamic nature of crisis responses. He also pointed out that few theorists had focused on “response over time,” or “combining, and especially changing, strategies” (p. 186).

In order to help fill these gaps, Ihlen (2002) added the concept of coherence⁶ to his methodology. According to Ihlen, there are three types of coherence. Argumentative/structural coherence relates to the “internal logic” of a story (p.191). Material coherence exists if a story makes sense in relation to “events previously learned

⁶ Fisher (1987) introduced the concept of coherence in his narrative

from other sources” (p.192). The last type, characterological coherence, pertains to whether or not the actors are believable and consistent in their tendencies.

Ihlen applied these concepts of coherence to his analysis of Mercedes-Benz A-Class crisis. (The company was under attack after its newly launched model overturned during a test drive conducted by Swedish journalists.) He found that there were several contradictions within the response strategies employed by Mercedes Benz. First, in a press conference, the company denied that there was a problem, but also introduced actions to fix a problem. Second, when the company commented about the failed test drive while also presenting new tests that the model passed, Mercedes denied and excused at the same time. Third, when Mercedes halted production and explained a new plan of action, they used an excuse at the same time as an apology.

Ihlen (2002) concluded that these contradictions were argumentatively incoherent. He also suggested that they were materially incoherent in that they ignored several outside “facts and issues” (p.202). The author noted that in an effort to maintain characterological coherence, the company was hesitant to change its strategy when its initial response wasn’t well-accepted. Ihlen explained how this approach backfired. He suggested that Mercedes should have simply admitted its wrongdoing and apologized at that point, instead of “clinging to strategies that [did] not stand the test of the other two principles of coherence” (p. 204).

With his analysis of the Mercedes Benz crisis, Ihlen (2002) added some valuable insights to the already established theories of crisis communication. His study revealed that aside from paying attention to the type of crisis and the appropriate strategies for that situation, crisis communicators must also make sure that their responses are internally

and externally coherent. In addition, Ihlen found that in situations where chosen strategies are materially or argumentatively incoherent, characterological coherence might best be achieved by abandoning previous strategies and admitting fault.

Metanarration

Like Ihlen (2002), Venette, Sellnow, and Lang (2003) argued that crises are dynamic processes that must be analyzed throughout their various stages. Instead of focusing on the traditional crisis response strategies; however, they analyzed organizational discourse through the perspective of metanarration. Metanarration refers to a second narrative that “arises after or extends the understanding of the initial primary narrative” (the narrative portrayed by the media) (p.220). According the Venette et al., this perspective provides “a deeper understanding of how narrative functions in organizational practice and how stories are reconstructed to fit organizational plans and purposes” (p.220).

Venette et al.’s (2002) analysis of the multiple responses from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) during the Firestone tire crisis illustrated both the dynamic nature of crisis responses and the effectiveness of metanarration. When Firestone tires on a number of Ford Explorers were failing, NHTSA was accused of being “sluggish” in its detection and resolution of the problem (Venette et al., 2003, p. 220). At the onset of the crisis, the primary narrative portrayed the agency as negligent, continually failing to respond to a “pattern of accidents that cost hundreds of lives” (p.227).

When NHSTA first responded to Congress, it admitted that the agency would respond differently if faced with a similar situation in the future. As Venette et al. (2002)

explained, this admission “reflected an awareness within NHSTA that further explanation and inquiry were warranted” (p. 227). When this first strategy failed to resolve the situation, the agency took its next step and created a second narrative.

The second narrative, first presented to a Joint Committee Meeting, blamed ineffective policies for NHSTA’s failure. The agency’s administrator, Dr. Bailey repeatedly explained that these policies were under review and that changes would be submitted for approval. According to Venette et al. (2002), this competing narrative shifted Congress’s “stance of accusation to a position of anticipating future correction” (p.230). The agency did not face any charges. In fact, Dr. Bailey’s explanation sparked a discussion of how Congress could help NHTSA prevent similar events from occurring in the future. The clear success of NHTSA’s second narrative illustrated the effectiveness of metanarration as a crisis response strategy.

Hearit and Courtright (2003) also argued the importance of a competing narrative when they introduced a social constructionist approach to crisis management.⁷ This approach was based on the idea that crisis communication, like all perspectives of reality, is “socially constructed through communication” (p. 79). In line with this, the authors argued that the resolution of a crisis must too be “fundamentally communicative” (p.80).

To support their theory, Hearit and Courtright (2003) analyzed Audi’s response to allegations of “sudden acceleration” on its 5000 model. They concluded that Audi’s failure to resolve the issue was a result of the company “allowing the story to be defined by others” (e.g. the media and advocacy groups) instead of quickly developing an effective second narrative that positioned it in a more favorable light (p.90).

⁷ See Hearit (1994) for further explanation of the social construction theory.

Methodology

This analysis, which employs a combination of the previously discussed typologies, comprises three main foci: the identification of Mattel's response strategies, an assessment of the appropriateness of these choices for the situation, and an evaluation of the potential success of the company's overall crisis communication approach.

Response Strategies: Categories and Subcategories

In the first part of the analysis, Mattel's responses are classified based on five major categories suggested by Coombs (1995). These strategies, which include nonexistence, distance, ingratiation, mortification, and suffering, are a combination of categories (strategies) and subcategories (tactics) outlined by Allen and Caillouet (1994) and Benoit (1995a). Although Coombs established his own terminology for the tactics within each category, this study uses the terms originally developed by Allen and Caillouet and Benoit, as they are generally more descriptive and more revealing in this particular case.

Nonexistence strategies, according to Coombs (1995), are those tactics that "seek to eliminate" a crisis (p. 450). For the purpose of this analysis, the subcategories for this group include Benoit's (1995a) tactics of denial and attacking the accuser⁸, as well as Allen and Caillouet's (1994) strategies of intimidation and factual distortion.

Distance strategies are tactics employed by an organization in order to weaken its associations with negative behavior (Coombs, 1995). This analysis considers as part of this category all of Benoit's (1995a) "evading responsibility" tactics: provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions, as well as his shifting the blame tactic and

⁸ Allen and Caillouet (1994) named this tactic, "condemning the condemner." However, when referring to this subcategory, this study uses Benoit's (1995a) terminology.

Allen and Caillouet's denouncement strategy. It also draws from subcategories within Allen and Caillouet's (1994) "excuse" and "justification" categories. Excuse strategy subcategories are denial of intention, denial of volition, and denial of agency. Justification strategy subcategories include denial of injury, denial of victim, and claiming misrepresentation.

The third category, ingratiation strategies, refers to crisis response tactics used to regain public approval of an organization. Coombs (1995) borrowed this category name from a similar method defined by Allen and Caillouet (1994). The subcategories within Allen and Caillouet's "ingratiation" strategy are self enhancement, role model, social responsibility, other-enhancement, and opinion conformity. All of these subcategories, along with some tactics within Benoit's (1995a) "reducing offensiveness" strategy are incorporated into the ingratiation category for this analysis. Benoit's tactics include bolstering⁹, transcendence, minimization and differentiation.

Mortification strategies, as defined by Coombs (1995), are methods that "attempt to win forgiveness of the publics and to create acceptance for the crisis" (p.452). The name of this group of strategies is borrowed from Benoit (1995a). His mortification strategy, corrective action strategy, and compensation tactic fall into this category, along with Allen and Caillouet's (1994) apology¹⁰ category.

The final category, called the suffering strategy, is the method organizations utilize when they want to gain sympathy from the audience and position themselves as a victim. Because this strategy is unique to Coombs' (1995) typology, there are no

⁹ Benoit's (1995a) "bolstering" tactic is similar to Allen and Caillouet's "self-enhancement" subcategory. This analysis uses Benoit's terminology to describe this type of response.

¹⁰ Benoit's (1995a) "mortification" strategy is similar to Allen and Caillouet's "apology" category. This analysis uses Benoit's terminology to describe this type of response.

subcategories borrowed from Benoit or Allen and Caillouet.

Apologia and Kategoria

The second part of this analysis assesses Mattel's crisis response strategies in relation to its particular crisis situation. In Ryan's (1982) terms, it answers the question of whether or not the apologia is appropriate for the kategoria. The major framework for this section is the crisis classification system developed by Coombs' (1995). The four major crisis types identified in Coombs' impression management theory are based on two factors: whether the incident was intentional or unintentional, and whether an internal or external source caused (or defined) the crisis. In addition to this system, Coombs suggested appropriate response strategies for each situation. For a faux pas (unintentional/external), he explained that nonexistence and distance strategies are most appropriate. For accidents (unintentional/internal), he deemed distance strategies, particularly the excuse tactic, as the most suitable response. For the third type of crisis, transgression (intentional/internal), Coombs said that mortification strategies should be employed. Lastly, he explained that for terrorism crises (intentional/external), the most obvious response is the suffering strategy.

Borrowing from Marcus and Goodman's (1991) existing defensive-accommodative continuum, Coombs (1998) applied a continuum system to his crisis classification system. This system¹¹, based on the "degree to which stakeholders blame the organization," (p.180) matches crisis situations with their appropriate crisis response strategies. More defensive strategies line up with crises in which an organization is thought to be less responsible, while more accommodative strategies line up with crises in which an organization is perceived as having more control.

¹¹ This continuum is shown in Appendix A.

This study employs Coombs' (1995) theory in order to classify Mattel's crisis situation and accordingly evaluate the appropriateness of its response strategies.

Potential Effectiveness

The third part of this analysis evaluates the potential success of Mattel's response to the recall crisis, as it is currently too soon to know the actual long-term outcome. This evaluation is primarily based on frameworks provided by Hearit (1994) and Ihlen (2002).

Hearit (1994) identified three major objectives of corporate apologia: to create a competing narrative that puts the organization in a more positive light than the "commonly" reported account, to express regret without accepting full responsibility, and to dissociate the organization from the negative behavior of which it has been accused (p.115). This study assesses to what degree Mattel was able to accomplish these goals. Consistent with Hearit's suppositions, the more completely Mattel achieved these objectives, the more likely its crisis communication will be effective in the long run.

Ihlen (2002), arguing that few theorists had focused on crisis response "over time" or the "combining" of response strategies, added the concept of coherence to his theory of crisis communication. In agreement with Ihlen's argument, this study evaluates the coherence of Mattel's crisis communication throughout all of its stages. It then determines whether Mattel's overall approach was structurally coherent (had internal logic), materially coherent (made sense in relation to information provided by outside sources), and characterologically coherent (depicted believable and consistent characters/narrators). Ihlen explained that "all communication succeeds or fails depending on its coherence..." (p. 191). According to this reasoning, the more coherent Mattel was with its crisis communication, the more likely it is to resonate with the

audience and be successful.

Overall, the three major sections of the analysis serve to identify the strategies employed by Mattel, evaluate their individual appropriateness, and speculate on their combined potential for success.

Artifacts

For the purposes of this analysis, Mattel's toy recall crisis was divided into three distinct phases: post recall one, post recall two, and post recall three. The first phase spans from August 2, 2007 (when first recall was announced) through August 13th, the second phase from August 14th (when the second recall was announced) through September 3rd, and the third phase from September 4th (when the third recall was announced) through the present. Although Mattel announced a minor recall on October 25, 2007, there was not enough media coverage of the incident to warrant its own phase. In order to study Mattel's response to each phase of the crisis, this analysis draws from three major artifact categories: press releases, news articles, and television news broadcasts.

Press Releases

Throughout the crisis, the statements most directly attributed to Mattel were press releases. Four releases were considered relevant for this study: three that announced the major recalls (one from each phase), and one that introduced Mattel's Corporate Responsibility Group (from phase two). A letter from Mattel, published in *Action Figure Digest* and an advertisement published in several major United States newspapers (during phase two), were also chosen as artifacts. A letter from Mattel, published during phase two, was also an artifact. In addition, a video of CEO Bob Eckert addressing the public (posted on Mattel.com during phase two) served as an artifact. Similar to information within the press releases, the content of the letter, advertisement and video was completely controlled by Mattel.

Print Coverage

Print coverage of the recalls was plentiful. For that reason, it was necessary to focus on articles relevant to the research question. Because this study aims to analyze Mattel's response choices, only coverage containing direct or indirect quotes from Mattel was included. Articles from United States and world publications were filtered on LexisNexis Academic Database using keywords, such as "Mattel said," "according to Mattel," and "Mattel and spokesperson." This process resulted in a sufficient number of relevant artifacts from each phase. To supplement the LexisNexis search, a similar search was performed on Google News. Combined, these searches yielded between 20 and 25 articles from each phase.

Television Coverage

Television coverage of the toy recalls was not as available as print coverage. Searches (using keywords, such as "Mattel and recall") on Vanderbilt News Archive, YouTube, and everyzing.com generated nine results containing direct or indirect quotes from Mattel. These results (two to four news broadcasts from each phase) constituted the third major group of artifacts.

Analyzing the Artifacts

The following analysis contains two major sections. The first section focuses on the three phases individually, identifying the response strategies and tactics¹² employed by Mattel during each phase. This identification is based on the categories and subcategories set forth by Benoit (1995a), Allen and Caillouet (1994), and Coombs (1995, 1998). The second section focuses on Mattel's crisis communication as a whole. Coombs' (1998) classification system and continuum are employed in order to evaluate

¹² "Strategy" and "tactics" are used interchangeably throughout the analysis.

the appropriateness of Mattel's response in relation to the crisis situation. In addition, this section predicts the potential success of Mattel's overall response, based on Hearit's (1994) objectives and Ihlen's (2002) coherence criteria.

Analysis: Phase One

On August 2nd, Mattel announced the recall of 1.5 million toys due to lead paint contamination. The toys had been produced in China by a contract manufacturer that used a non-approved paint pigment containing lead. Marketed by Mattel's Fisher-Price division, the recalled products included Cookie Monster, Elmo, and Dora the Explorer toys. Statements from Mattel, in the form of press releases and responses to media inquiries demonstrated that the company used various response strategies during phase one. The most dominant tactics demonstrated within phase one artifacts were corrective action, shifting the blame, and bolstering. To a lesser degree, Mattel also used denial of injury, minimization, social responsibility, mortification, and compensation.

Corrective Action

One press release and twelve news articles demonstrated that Mattel employed the corrective action tactic during phase one of the recall crisis ("100K," 2007; Addley, 2007; Churchill, 2007; Domingo, 2007; "Fisher-Price recalls," 2007; Healy, 2007; Mattel, 2007a; "Mattel's Fisher Price," 2007; Merle, 2007a; Stansfield, 2007; Story, 2007a; Williams, 2007; Ying Sun, 2007a). Within these artifacts, statements from Mattel stressed that the company was investigating the situation, working to remove recalled products from store shelves, and adjusting procedures in order to prevent similar incidents.

Corrective action was the major strategy emphasized in the press release announcing the first recall. The second paragraph of the release made it clear that Mattel was focused on correcting the situation. It read:

To address this issue as quickly and effectively as possible, the company launched

a fast-track recall in cooperation with the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission and other regulatory agencies worldwide. Mattel is also working with retailers worldwide to identify affected products, have them removed from retail shelves and intercept incoming shipments and stop them from being sold. (Mattel, 2007a).

The next paragraph stated that Mattel's goal was to "correct [the] problem" and "improve [its] systems" (Mattel, 2007a).

The release also announced the investigation that Mattel had begun. It quoted Mattel's Senior Vice President of Worldwide Quality Assurance, Jim Walter as saying, "We are investigating the cause to ensure such events do not reoccur" (Mattel, 2007a). In addition, it discussed plans for possible corrective action in the future. The release said that Mattel was reviewing its procedures and that "if any similar problem" was found, Mattel would "continue to take prompt, responsible remedial actions" (Mattel). Mattel's mention of a "thorough investigation" within this press release was referenced in seven print news artifacts ("100K," 2007; Addley, 2007; Churchill, 2007; Domingo, 2007; "Fisher-Price recalls," 2007; Healy, 2007; Williams, 2007)

News articles also referenced other segments of the press release.

CNNMoney.com and the *Mirror* (Scotland) mentioned Mattel's plan to identify products, remove them from shelves, and intercept shipments ("Mattel's Fisher Price," 2007; Stansfield, 2007). The *Guardian* (London) talked about the company's goal to "correct the problem" and "improve [its] systems" (Addley, 2007).

Additionally, news articles mentioned other statements from Mattel (not from the release) that emphasized its corrective action strategy. The *Washington Post* reported,

“Mattel is investigating the incident and stopped using the Chinese plant in early July” (Merle, 2007a). An article in *Plastic News* read, “Mattel said ...it is reviewing procedures with all its products manufactured by vendors in China” (Ying Sun, 2007a). Also, a *New York Times* article stated, “Mr. Eckert said Mattel was considering various ways to overcome the problem, including reducing the amount of toys it makes through contract factories” (Story, 2007a).

Through references to the company’s prevention efforts, ongoing investigation and future goals, the press release and news artifacts showed that corrective action was a major strategy for Mattel during this phase.

Shifting the Blame

One press release and eight news articles revealed that Mattel attempted to distance itself from the crisis by shifting the blame to the Chinese manufacturer (Barboza, 2007; Cook, 2007; Fetterman, Farrell, & Petrecca, 2007; Mattel, 2007a; “Mattel’s Fisher-Price,” 2007; Merle, 2007a; Story, 2007a; “Thousands,” 2007; Ying Sun, 2007a). Statements framed the situation as a “serious mistake,” committed by the contract company, that Mattel had taken every measure to prevent (Mattel, 2007a).

By August 2nd, the date of the press release, Mattel had not yet disclosed the name of the manufacturer responsible for the lead paint. However, the release affirmed that Mattel had required all its “manufacturing partners to use paint from approved and certified suppliers,” and that there had been “procedures in place to test and verify” that they adhered to this requirement (Mattel, 2007a). It stressed that it was only this one time when the procedures “were not followed” by the manufacturer (Mattel, 2007a). Mattel also made it clear that it had no reason to expect this behavior from the contract

company, due to the fact that it had a “good track record.” Mattel said it was investigating, and if it was found that safety procedures “were knowingly ignored,” the company would “take appropriate action” (Mattel, 2007a).

Statements from Mattel highlighted in news publications reiterated information announced in the press release. Like the release, these messages served to shift the blame to Lee Der Industrial, the contract manufacturer disclosed by Mattel on August 8th. Some articles used strong language to describe how Lee Der Industrial “breached,” “violated,” or “flouted” Mattel’s high safety standards. These verbs emphasized the contract company’s responsibility for the wrongdoing (Cook, 2007; “Mattel’s Fisher-Price,” 2007; Merle, 2007a; “Thousands,” 2007).

Several articles mentioned the fact that Mattel had no reason to expect this behavior from Lee Der Industrial (Barboza, 2007; Merle, 2007a; Story, 2007a; Ying Sun, 2007a). Citing the press release, *Plastics News* reported, “Mattel said...the Chinese contract manufacturer has had a good track record on product safety in the past” (Ying Sun). The *Washington Post* quoted David Allmark, general manager and senior vice president of marketing of Fisher-Price, as saying that Lee Der Industrial, which had worked for Mattel for 15 years, “had not had problems in the past” (Merle, 2007a). *USA Today* also referenced this comment by Allmark (Fetterman, Farrell, & Petrecca, 2007). In addition, *The New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune* quoted Mattel CEO, Robert Eckert, who said of the manufacturer, “They understand our regulations; they understand our program, and something went wrong. That hurts” (Barboza; Story).

One news artifact highlighted Mattel’s point that it had taken measures to prevent such an incident from occurring. An article from the *International Herald Tribune* read,

“Mattel officials also say they had helped the contract manufacturer blamed for the recall to set up its own testing lab, which should have guarded against such a problem” (Barboza, 2007).

The press releases and news artifacts revealed references to the company’s prevention methods and its inability to predict the incident. They also showed that Mattel used strong, negative language to describe Lee Der Industrials “serious mistake.” These statements demonstrated that shifting the blame was a second major tactic employed by Mattel during phase one.

Bolstering

One press release, six print news articles and two news broadcasts from phase one demonstrated Mattel’s third major crisis response tactic during this period, bolstering (Barboza, 2007; Cook, 2007; Fetterman et al., 2007; Hartman, 2007; Mattel, 2007a; Merle, 2007a; “Thousands,” 2007; Wallace, 2007a). These bolstering efforts stressed Mattel’s earned trust with parents, commendable safety record and reputation for responsibility.

The August 2nd press release emphasized the trust that Mattel had gained from parents, as well as the company’s tendency to respond well to customers. The third paragraph read:

We realize that parents trust us with what is most precious to them—their children. And we also recognize that trust is earned. Our goal is to...maintain the trust of the families that have allowed us to be part of their lives by acting responsibly and quickly to address their concerns. (Mattel, 2007a).

In its coverage of the recall, the *Daily Record* referenced the first sentence of this

statement (Cook, 2007).

The press release also framed the incident as the manufacturer's violation of Mattel's "own self-imposed standards" (Mattel, 2007a). The expression, "self-imposed standards" served to remind the audience of Mattel's dedication to safety. The same phrase was used in an *Irish Independent* article ("Thousands," 2007).

Several news articles highlighted Mattel's reputation for rigorous safety procedures. The *Washington Post* mentioned that Mattel is "known for having strict safety standards" (Merle, 2007a). It cited Allmark as saying, "It is just unfortunate—having those standards, yet one was breached" (Merle, 2007a). *USA Today* also quoted Allmark, who said, "Our safety record is exemplary. All of us at Fisher-Price are devastated" (Fetterman et al., 2007). In addition, the *International Herald Tribune* reported that Mattel "requires contract manufacturers to follow stringent quality and safety guidelines" (Barboza, 2007). According to the article, "Mattel officials said they had carefully tested all new products and even tested incoming supplies at company factories to guard against faulty supplies" (Barboza, 2007).

The two video news artifacts also revealed bolstering as a major tactic for Mattel. An *NBC Nightly News* report quoted Robert Eckert as saying that Mattel was "doing the right thing" (Wallace, 2007a). This statement emphasized Mattel's good nature and sense of responsibility. Another report, from *BBC World*, recalled how Mattel allowed an *International Herald Tribune* reporter to access one of its testing facilities in China. When discussing the facilities, the correspondent said, "It seems like Mattel goes to great lengths to test some of these toys before they're sold abroad" (Hartman, 2007). The move by Mattel to grant facility access to the media made the company appear more transparent

and provided an example of its thorough testing procedures.

The press release, news articles and news broadcasts from phase one made multiple references to Mattel's positive reputation among parents/consumers, as well as its commitment to safety. These statements showed that bolstering was a third major tactic utilized by Mattel in response to the recall.

Other Tactics

Aside from Mattel's three dominant tactics of corrective action, shifting the blame and bolstering, the artifacts revealed that during phase one, the company also employed denial of injury, minimization, social responsibility, compensation, and mortification as more minor strategies.

Mattel employed denial of injury in many phase one communications. Nine articles cited the company's assertion that no injuries regarding recalled toys had been reported ("100k," 2007; Addley, 2007; Cook, 2007; "Fisher-Price recalls," 2007; Healy, 2007; Stansfield, 2007; "Thousands," 2007; "Toys recalled," 2007; Williams, 2007). The *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Times*, the *Belfast Telegraph* and the *Mirror* (Scotland) published a statement from Mattel that said, "There have been no injuries regarding these products, but the surface paint on the toys could contain excessive levels of lead" (Healy; Stansfield; "Thousands"; Williams). The *Daily Record* announced, "Mattel said no injuries had been reported but urged parents to stop kids using the problem toys" (Cook). Several other publications, including the *Sun* (England) and the *Mirror* (Scotland) mentioned similar statements from Mattel ("100k"; "Fisher-Price recalls"; Stansfield; "Toys Recalled").

One press release and four news articles revealed that Mattel utilized

minimization in an attempt to make the recalls seem less severe to the audience (Addley, 2007; Fetterman et al., 2007; Mattel, 2007a; Story, 2007a; “Thousands,” 2007). The first sentence of the release labeled the incident a “voluntary recall” (Mattel, 2007a). This term, which was repeated in an article in the *Irish Independent*, framed the recall as more of a cautionary measure than a necessity (“Thousands”). Similarly, an article in the *Guardian* (London) quoted a Mattel spokeswoman, who said:

We are taking no chances. It is very unlikely that a child will suffer any harm from licking or touching the product, but if they have been chewing the toy or the paint is cracked or chipped we are recommending they consult a GP.” (Addley).

This statement also served to lessen the health risk associated with the recall.

In addition to downplaying the severity of the lead paint issue, statements from Mattel also minimized the situation by emphasizing that it prevented the majority of the toys from reaching store shelves. According to a *USA Today* article, “Mattel said it yanked the products before barely 30% showed up on retailers’ shelves” (Fetterman et al., 2007). Similarly, an article in *The New York Times* read, “Mattel says it prevented more than two-thirds of the 967,000 affected toys from reaching consumers by stopping the products in its distribution centers and contacting retailers, like Wal-Mart, Target and Toys ‘R’ Us, late last week” (Story, 2007a).

Mattel’s framing of the recall as “voluntary” also functioned to demonstrate the company’s dedication to social responsibility. This focus on social responsibility was another minor tactic utilized by Mattel in phase one. The press release mentioned Mattel’s sense of responsibility, saying that families had allowed the company “to be part of their lives by acting responsibly...to address their concerns” (Mattel, 2007a). In

addition, several news articles contained indirect references to Mattel's social responsibility. The *Washington Post* quoted officials at Mattel, who said the company "lived up to their reporting obligation" (Merle, 2007a). In addition, an article in the *Guardian* (London) quoted a Mattel spokeswoman, who said, "We are taking no chances" (Addley, 2007). With these statements, Mattel stressed its dedication to customers by claiming to be proactive with regards to safety issues.

Mattel also used compensation as a minor tactic during phase one, possibly only as a way to alert consumers about the company's return policy for recalled items. At the bottom of the press release, Mattel placed a supplemental section outlining "details of the recall" (Mattel, 2007a). This paragraph explained which products were recalled and provided instructions on how and where to return the affected toys. It read, "Consumers should ...contact Fisher-Price to arrange return and to receive a voucher for a replacement toy of the consumer's choice, up to the value of the returned product" (Mattel, 2007a). This brief mention, as well as references within three news articles, was the only evidence of Mattel employing compensation as a response tactic ("100k," 2007; "Mattel's Fisher-Price," 2007; Williams, 2007).

The only artifact that suggested mortification as one of Mattel's strategy was the press release, which quoted Robert Eckert as saying, "We apologize to everyone affected by this recall, especially those who bought the toys in question" (Mattel, 2007a).

During phase one, Mattel used strategies from three out of five categories outlined by Coombs (1995): ingratiation, mortification and distance. The majority of Mattel's strategies, including bolstering, social responsibility and minimization, fall into the ingratiation category. Mattel used these strategies to gain approval from its various

publics. Other phase one strategies, such as corrective action, mortification, and compensation, belong to Coombs' mortification category. Mattel used these response strategies to win forgiveness from stakeholders and parents. The two distance strategies used by Mattel in this phase were shifting the blame and denial of injury. The company utilized these tactics in an attempt to lower its perceived responsibility for the recall crisis.

Analysis: Phase Two

On August 14th, Mattel announced a second major recall, consisting of two parts. The first part of the recall included 436,000 toy vehicles from the company's "CARS" line. These products, which were produced by Early Light Industrial Co., Ltd, were recalled due to "impermissible levels of lead" (Mattel, 2007b). Early Light, a contract manufacturing company located in China, had subcontracted the painting to another Chinese company, Hong Li Da.

The second part of the recall (an expansion of a November 2006 recall) included 19.2 million dolls and play sets that had the potential to "release small, powerful magnets" (Mattel, 2007b). Statements from Mattel, in the form of press releases, responses to media inquiries, a letter, a video, and an advertisement, revealed a variety of strategies used by the company in its response to this second round of recalls. Similar to phase one, corrective action and bolstering appeared to be major tactics for Mattel. In phase two, mortification, shifting the blame, social responsibility, and denial of injury tactics played a more secondary role. Mattel also employed minimization and compensation as minor tactics, as they did in the first phase. In addition, there were four minor techniques introduced in phase two that were not utilized in phase one. These were differentiation, opinion conformity, suffering, and what this study refers to as warning.¹³

Corrective Action

The press release, video, letter, and advertisement, along with thirteen news articles and three news broadcasts revealed that Mattel utilized corrective action as a major strategy in phase two of the crisis. (Alford, 2007; Cooper, 2007; Edelman &

¹³ The warning strategy is not part of a previously defined typology. It was created specifically to describe a strategy employed by Mattel.

Nichols; Gelles, 2007; Hirsch, 2007; Malvern & Macartney, 2007; Mattel, 2007b; Mattel: Dear, 2007; MediaCurves.com, 2007; Reuters, 2007; Story, 2007d; Story & Barboza, 2007). Within the artifacts, statements from Mattel introduced the three-point check system and other improvements, discussed previous actions taken in response to November 2006 recalls, and stressed the company's commitment to correcting the problem.

Corrective action was a major strategy employed by Mattel during phase two. It was the main focus of the August 14th press release, which announced the second round of recalls. This release emphasized Mattel's commitment to correcting the problems, saying, "we don't hesitate to take quick and effective action to correct issues as soon as we've identified them" (Mattel, 2007b). It also introduced the implementation of a three-point check system, saying:

First, we're requiring that only paint from certified suppliers be used and requiring every single batch of paint at every single vendor to be tested...Second, we are tightening controls throughout the production process at vendor facilities and increasing unannounced random inspections. Third, we're testing every production run of finished toys to ensure compliance before they reach our customers. (Mattel, 2007b)

In the following paragraphs, the release explained how Mattel had told all of its vendors that the new procedures were to be strictly followed. The press release also discussed corrective measures previously executed by the company, in response to the earlier magnet recall. It stated that because Mattel had "implemented enhanced magnet retention systems in toys across all brands," beginning in January, most of the toys were "no longer

at retail” (Mattel).

In his video statement posted to Mattel’s website, Robert Eckert echoed the major points of the press release. He described in detail the “immediately implemented” three-point check system and discussed how Mattel officials had “personally met” with vendors to make sure they understood the new requirements (MediaCurves.com, 2007). Eckert assured that Mattel’s actions would help to prevent similar problems in the future. He said, “We’ve developed better magnet retention systems as well as more stringent testing” (MediaCurves.com). Eckert also called attention to the fact that Mattel had “already taken significant actions to further ensure the safety” of its toys (MediaCurves.com). In addition to these major points, he stressed the importance of corrective action, saying, “I can’t change what has happened in the past, but I can change how we work in the future” (MediaCurves.com).

A letter from Mattel published by *Action Figure Digest* also demonstrated the company’s emphasis on corrective action. Similar to the press release, it explained the three-point check system and stated that Mattel was prepared to “take action to correct issues” (“Letter,” 2007). It also mentioned its “new standards” and “latest retention system requirements” implemented in response to the November 2006 magnet recall (“Letter”).

The same day that it announced the second major set of recalls, Mattel launched an advertising campaign stressing the company’s commitment to product safety. A full-page ad, which ran in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, referenced Mattel’s corrective measures. The advertisement included a letter from Robert Eckert to “fellow parents” that read, “I want to be sure that every parent...knows that we

have already taken steps to further ensure the safety of our toys” (Mattel: Dear, 2007).

The majority of print news artifacts also referred to Mattel’s corrective action strategy. A few articles mentioned the fact that Mattel recognized the importance of taking corrective measures. *The New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune* quoted Mattel’s Senior Vice President of Worldwide Quality Assurance, Jim Walters, as saying “We do realize the need for increased vigilance [and] increased surveillance” (Story, 2007d; Story & Barboza, 2007).

Additionally, several print artifacts discussed the three-point check system. Some articles summarized the specifics of the new system (Barboza & Story, 2007; Gelles, 2007; Story 2007b). *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, for example, reported:

Under its new system, Mattel said it was requiring that every batch of paint be tested before use, tightening production controls, and increasing unannounced inspections. In addition, the company said it was now ‘testing every production run of finished toys to ensure compliance.’ (Gelles, 2007)

Other stories simply mentioned the three-point system or new upgrades without much detail (Alford, 2007; Edelman & Nichols, 2007; Hirsch, 2007; Malvern & Macartney, 2007; Merle, 2007b). *The Washington Post*, for example, quoted Eckert as saying, “Mattel can assure parents that the company is working to improve the system” (Merle, 2007b). *The Times* (London) quoted Mattel’s Executive Vice President, Brian Stockton, who stated that Mattel would “enforce new rules” and “increase random inspections” (Malvern & Macartney). Similarly, the *Daily News* quoted a Mattel spokeswoman as saying, “We are working around the clock to improve our system and have already taken significant actions and launched an improved three-point check system” (Edelman &

Nichols).

Some news artifacts specifically referenced corrective action concerning the magnets, explaining that Mattel had started using “enhanced magnet retention systems” in January 2007 (Hirsch, 2007; Malvern & Macartney, 2007).

In addition to the print media artifacts, two television news broadcasts also revealed Mattel’s corrective action strategy. A *Reuters* news report quoted Eckert as saying that “new testing standards had already been put in place (Reuters, 2007). *CNN Evening News* also quoted Eckert, who said, “We are doing everything we can about the situation. Every production batch of toys is being tested...” (Cooper, 2007). In addition, *CBS Evening News* reported that Mattel would be testing every batch and using a smaller group of paint suppliers (Kaplan, 2007).

Across the various sources, statements from Mattel demonstrated that corrective action was a major response strategy for Mattel during phase two. Within these artifacts, Mattel stressed its recent improvements and upgrades, previous corrections made to magnetic retention systems, as well as the company’s commitment to resolving problems associated with the recall.

Bolstering

The press release, letter, video and advertisement, along with seven news articles and a television news broadcast demonstrated that Mattel employed bolstering as a second major response strategy in phase two (Alford, 2007; Barboza & Story, 2007; Edelman & Nichols, 2007; Ellis, 2007; Malvern & Macartney, 2007; Mattel, 2007b; Mattel:Dear, 2007; MediaCurves.com, 2007; “Letter,” 2007; Reuters, 2007; Stapleton & Callick, 2007; Wallop, 2007). Mattel’s statements within these artifacts mentioned the

company's reputation with parents, highlighted its commitment to the safety of children, and stressed that it had always taken cautious measures.

The press release emphasized Mattel's reputation for thorough safety measures and its plans to continue with them. It quoted Robert Eckert as saying, "Mattel has rigorous procedures, and we will continue to be vigilant and unforgiving in enforcing quality and safety" (Mattel, 2007b). The letter from Mattel in *Action Figure Digest* made a similar statement. In addition, it said that "the safety of children is and always has been Mattel's number one priority" and that "the safety of children" was the company's "main concern" ("Letter," 2007).

The advertisement in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Wall Street Journal* also highlighted this priority. The letter from Eckert within the ad began, "Nothing is more important than the safety of our children" (Mattel:Dear, 2007). It also emphasized the trust that Mattel had built with parents, as well as the company's reputation for safety, saying "Our long record of safety at Mattel is why we're one of the most trusted names with parents. And I am confident that the actions we are taking now will maintain that trust" (Mattel: Dear, 2007). Similar to the press release, the advertisement framed Mattel's efforts as a continuation of what it had always been doing. It said, "We are working extremely hard to...continue creating safe, entertaining toys for you and your children" (Mattel: Dear).

The video of Eckert was another artifact that revealed Mattel's bolstering strategy. Like the advertisement, it highlighted Mattel's reputation for safety and trustworthiness. In the video, Eckert said, "Absolutely nothing is more important than the safety and well-being of children....Our long record of safety at Mattel is why we're one of the most

trusted names with parents” (Mediacurves.com, 2007). He also stressed that Mattel’s responsible actions were a continuation of its already high standards, saying “I promise you that we’ll continue to work hard to enforce the highest levels of quality and safety to uphold your trust in us” (MediaCurves.com, 2007).

News articles also demonstrated that Mattel utilized bolstering as a major strategy in its phase two response effort. Several publications mentioned the company’s commitment to safety, particularly the safety of children (Alford, 2007; Barboza & Story, 2007; Edelman & Nichols, 2007; Stapleton & Callick, 2007; Wallop, 2007). A *South Wales Echo* article, for example, quoted a Mattel spokesman, who said, “The safety of children is, and has been, Mattel’s number one priority” (Alford). A *Daily News* article contained a similar quote (Edelman & Nichols). Similarly, the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Australian* referenced Robert Eckert’s statements about safety (Barboza & Story; Stapleton & Callick; Wallop). The *Tribune* quoted him as saying, “We will have costs...but what’s important here is we do not put a price on safety” (Barboza & Story).

Like the release, advertisement and video, several news articles stressed how Mattel’s safety concerns and preventative actions were nothing new (Ellis, 2007; Malvern & Macartney, 2007; Wallop, 2007). Instead, they framed them as continuations of past efforts by Mattel. An article in the *Daily Telegraph*, for example, quoted Eckert as saying, “We will continue to be vigilant in enforcing safety” (Wallop).

One of the television news artifacts also pointed to bolstering as a major strategy used by Mattel. A *Reuters* broadcast showed a clip of Eckert in which he said, “The safety of children is the utmost important thing here” (Reuters, 2007).

The majority of artifacts showed that Mattel used bolstering as a major strategy in phase two. Statements from the company highlighted Mattel's reputation and dedication to the safety of children. They also stressed that Mattel had always exercised caution and used strict procedures.

Mortification

The press release, video, letter, four news articles and a news broadcast showed how Mattel used mortification as a secondary response strategy in phase two (Alford, 2007; Ellis, 2007; Gelles, 2007; Kaplan, 2007; "Letter," 2007; Mattel, 2007b; MediaCurves.com, 2007; Merle, 2007b; Wallop, 2007). The artifacts either referenced specific apologies from Mattel officials or described Mattel's behavior as apologetic

The press release demonstrated the mortification tactic when it quoted Eckert, who said, "...we are deeply apologetic to everyone affected" (Mattel, 2007b). The *Action Figure Digest* letter contained the same statement ("Letter," 2007). Eckert also expressed regret during in the online video, saying, "I sincerely apologize for this situation" (Mediacurvs.com, 2007).

In addition, several news sources revealed Mattel's mortification strategy (Alford, 2007; Ellis, 2007; Gelles, 2007; Wallop, 2007). Articles in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *South Wales Echo* and the *Daily Telegraph* all cited Robert Eckert's apology (Alford; Gelles; Wallop). The *Washington Post* quoted Eckert as saying, "I am publicly apologizing to parents" (Merle, 2007b). According to CNNMoney.com, Eckert told CNN, "I apologize for the situation we are all facing" (Ellis, 2007). Consistent with these print news artifacts, a television report on *CBS Evening News* described Mattel as "very apologetic" about the situation (Kaplan, 2007).

Although Mattel did not apologize in all of its phase two statements, mortification appeared in enough artifacts to be considered a secondary strategy.

Shifting the Blame

The press release, six news articles and a news broadcast revealed that shifting the blame was another secondary strategy used by Mattel during phase two (Dhugana, Nipand & Ho, 2007; Edelman & Nichols, 2007; Hirsch, 2007; Hiscott, 2007; Mattel, 2007b; Merle, 2007b; Trumball, 2007; Wallace, 2007) While sources, such as *CBS Evening News* reported that Mattel was taking “full responsibility” for the recall (Kaplan, 2007), other artifacts revealed that the company consistently shifted the blame to subcontractor, Hong Li Da (HLD). Within these artifacts, statements from Mattel highlighted the fact that it had been taking preventative measures, and that HLD did not follow the company’s rules.

The press release stressed that it was the subcontractor, and not Mattel, that was responsible for the lead paint. It stated:

The toy was produced by Early Light Industrial Co., Ltd (Early Light), one of Mattel’s contract manufacturing facilities in China, which subcontracted the painting of parts of the toy to another vendor, Hong Li Da (HLD), also in China. While the painting subcontractor, HLD, was required to utilize paint supplied directly from Early Light, it instead violated Mattel’s standards and utilized paint from a non-authorized third-party supplier. (Mattel, 2007b)

Similar to the press release, a *Washington Times* article cited a statement from Mattel, which stressed that HLD was “supposed to use paint from Early Light” (Hirsch, 2007). An *Express* article also drew from the release, reporting that Hong Li Da, “had

used a paint from a non-authorized third party supplier” (Hiscott, 2007).

Other print articles used negative language to speak about the subcontractors actions. This emphasized that the root of the problem was the subcontractor’s choice not to follow regulations. Articles in the *Washington Post*, the *Standard* and the *Christian Science Monitor* quoted Mattel as saying that Hong Li Da “subverted” or “violated” standards set by Mattel (Dhugana, Nipand & Ho, 2007; Merle, 2007b; Trumball, 2007). The *Washington Post* article referenced a statement from Eckert, who said, “If people had followed the rules in place, we wouldn’t have this problem today” (Merle).

Mattel also claimed innocence by emphasizing that it had measures in place to prevent such an event from happening. The *Daily News* quoted a Mattel spokeswoman, who said, “regular visits were happening” at Chinese factories (Edelman & Nichols, 2007). An *NBC Nightly News* broadcast provided a similar reference. It explained that Mattel “blamed” the subcontractor for the lead paint problem and claimed to have had a spot-check system in place to avert these type of issues (Wallace, 2007b).

Within the artifacts, statements from Mattel revealed that the company shifted the blame to Chinese subcontractor, Hong Li Da as a secondary response strategy during phase two. The company shifted the blame by claiming to have had preventative measures in place and by negatively referring to HLD’s “violation” of standards.

Social Responsibility

The press release, letter, advertisement, two articles and one news broadcast revealed that Mattel also employed social responsibility as a secondary response strategy during phase two (Cooper, 2007; Gelles, 2007; “Letter,” 2007; Mattel, 2007b; Mattel: Dear, 2007; Story & Barboza, 2007). Mattel’s statements within these artifacts framed

the recall as a voluntary action by Mattel and highlighted the company's cooperation with government agencies and retailers.

The press release, as well as the letter and advertisement, referred to the recall as "voluntary" ("Letter," 2007; Mattel, 2007b; Mattel: Dear, 2007). This terminology emphasized that the announcement was a responsible decision on Mattel's part (Mattel). The letter also blatantly referred to the company's responsibility, saying, "...in acting responsibly, we won't hesitate to take action..." ("Letter"). In addition, the release ended with two paragraphs explaining that Mattel was working in "cooperation with the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission and other regulatory agencies," as well as with retailers in order to remove the products from shelves (Mattel, 2007b). This focus on cooperation suggested that Mattel was upholding its obligations and being proactive about the situation.

A *New York Times* article reiterated the point that Mattel was being responsible and proactive in efforts surrounding the recall. It reported, "Mattel said it was working with the safety commission and other regulatory agencies worldwide, as well as with retailers to remove the affected products from stores" (Story & Barboza, 2007). Similarly, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* article read, "Mattel said...that it was taking...steps urged by product-safety advocates" (Gelles, 2007). A *CNN Evening News* broadcast also pointed out the company's responsible actions. It reported, "Mattel said it caught the problem and brought it to government regulators" (Cooper, 2007).

Overall, the release, letter, advertisement and news artifacts demonstrated Mattel's social responsibility strategy. The company's statements within these sources stressed that Mattel was being cooperative and that the recall was a voluntary act.

Denial of Injury

Five print articles showed that Mattel used denial of injury as a secondary phase two tactic (Gelles, 2007; Hiscott, 2007; Merle, 2007b; Stapleton & Callick, 2007; Wallop, 2007). The *Express* and the *Daily Telegraph* quoted Mattel spokespeople, who stated that no injuries or incidents had been reported “as a result of the...problems” (Hiscott; Wallop).

Some articles did mention injuries associated with the products, but not within statements attributed to Mattel. The *Washington Post*, for example, reported that three children “required surgery after ingesting magnets from one of the products included in [the] recall, Polly Pocket dolls” (Merle, 2007b).

Possibly in response to these claims, Mattel adjusted its statements to specify that there were no injuries reported “in addition” to the three surgeries. An article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* noted the contradiction. It read, “Although Mattel said no new injuries had been reported involving the toys recalled yesterday, at least three children have needed surgery because of injuries caused by one of the products” (Gelles, 2007). A reference in an article in the *Australian* offered a distinction between the November 2006 and August 2007 recalls. It said, “Mattel’s corporate division claimed the recall was an extension of last November’s worldwide recall, issued after three injury reports were submitted involving children requiring intestinal surgery after digesting the magnets. No additional injuries have been reported” (Stapleton & Callick, 2007). Even when the three injuries were mentioned, sources revealed that Mattel still attempted to deny injury as a response strategy in phase two.

Other Tactics

In addition to the major strategies of corrective action and bolstering, and the secondary strategies of mortification, shifting the blame, social responsibility, and denial of injury, the artifacts showed that Mattel employed several minor tactics. These included minimization, compensation, differentiation, opinion conformity, suffering, and warning.

One minor tactic employed by Mattel was minimization. The press release minimized the severity of the recalls by saying that it was merely Mattel “exercising caution” (Mattel, 2007b). In addition, the press release and a news article stressed that the majority of the products had already been removed from shelves (Hirsch, 2007; Mattel, 2007a). The release said that “the majority of the toys” were “no longer at retail” and the *Washington Times* reported that “Mattel said...most of the toys covered by the recall are no longer in stores” (Hirsch, 2007; Mattel, 2007b). These statements were attempts to make the situation seem less serious. However, a *Times* (London) article, published less than a week later, had the opposite effect. It heightened the intensity of the recall, stating, “Mattel has recovered only a tiny proportion of the two million dangerous items it called last week, it admitted yesterday, as new safety concerns emerged over children’s products” (Leroux, 2007).

Another minor tactic used by the company was compensation. Similar to the first press release, the August 14th release had a “Details” section that explained how consumers could receive a “voucher for a replacement toy” (Mattel, 2007b). The *Action Figure Digest* letter and a CNNMoney.com article also referenced the replacement policy (Ellis, 2007; “Letter,” 2007).

In addition to the minor tactics of minimization and compensation, Mattel

employed four other tactics in phase two that were not used in phase one. These tactics include differentiation, opinion conformity, suffering, as well as what this study refers to as the warning strategy.

Mattel differentiated the recall by emphasizing that the situation was a result of stringent testing procedures initiated by the company. In other words, if the company had not been so cautious and responsible, the recall would not have happened. An article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* demonstrated this differentiation strategy. It reported Mattel saying that the second recall was “part of a stepped-up effort to make... products safer” (Gelles, 2007). The press release, letter, and articles in the *Express* and *Philadelphia Inquirer* said that the recall was based “on a thorough internal review” (Gelles, 2007; Hiscott, 2007; “Letter,” 2007; Mattel, 2007b). The *Washington Post* reported, “Mattel said the hazards were found during a review of its toy-manufacturing processes” and the *International Herald Tribune* made a similar reference (Barboza & Story, 2007; Merle, 2007b).

Mattel even differentiated the second recall from the first recall, which it had framed as a one-time mistake. According to *CBS Evening News*, the August 14th recall occurred because the company “looked into” products after the first recall (Kaplan, 2007). Similarly, an article in the *International Herald Tribune* quoted Robert Eckert as saying “the second recall was different. It was going to receive a different level of scrutiny” (Story, 2007d).

Opinion conformity was another minor tactic employed by Mattel during phase two. In his online video statement and letter to “fellow parents” (the advertisement), Robert Eckert expressed how important the safety of children was to him (Mattel: Dear,

2007; Mediacurves.com, 2007). In this way, he showed that he had a shared belief with parents around the world. The advertisement read, “As a father of four, I share your focus on providing only what’s best for [our children]” (Mattel: Dear). Mentioning that he was a parent served to give his beliefs more credibility.

To a very slight degree, Mattel also used the suffering strategy. In subtle ways, the company positioned itself as a victim of the recalls. As an *International Herald Tribune* article reported, “Eckert said Mattel considered Early Light Industrial as much of a ‘victim’ of the subcontractor as Mattel was” (Barboza & Story, 2007). In addition, Eckert made himself appear as a victim in his online video statement and within a statement shown on *CNN Evening News*, saying that he was “as upset and disappointed” as anyone about the situation (Cooper, 2007; Mediacurves.com, 2007).

A final technique utilized by Mattel was a warning strategy, which for the purposes of this study means an effort to soften the effects of future bad news. Mattel did this by admitting that there might be more recalls in the future. According to the *Washington Post*, company officials said, “The review is ongoing and could lead to more recalls” (Merle, 2007b). Several other publications, such as *The New York Times* and the *Daily News* quoted Eckert as saying, “There’s no guarantee we will not be here again” (Edelman & Nichols, 2007; Story & Barboza, 2007). Similarly, the *Washington Times* reported that Eckert said “there could be additional recalls” (Hirsch, 2007). These recalls, however, would be no fault of Mattel’s own, because as Eckert explained, “No system is perfect” (Story & Barboza, 2007; Trumball, 2007).

Overall, Mattel used strategies from four out of five categories outlined by Coombs (1995): ingratiation, mortification, distance and suffering. The majority of the

company's tactics were ingratiation strategies, which included bolstering, social responsibility, minimization, opinion conformity and differentiation. Mattel employed these strategies in an attempt to gain back the audience's approval and trust. The corrective action, mortification, and compensation tactics used by Mattel fall into Coombs' mortification category. These tactics attempted to win forgiveness from consumers and stakeholders. Two distance strategies, shifting the blame and denial of injury, were also employed by Mattel. The company shifted the blame to Hong Li Da and denied any injuries resulting from the recall in order to weaken its association with dangerous toys. Additionally, Mattel used Coombs' suffering strategy as a way of gaining sympathy from its audiences and the warning strategy as a way to soften the effects of future recalls.

Analysis: Phase Three

Four major events occurred during the third phase of Mattel's recall crisis. First, on September 4, the company announced a third major recall. This round of lead recalls included 530,000 toys within the U.S., and 318,000 outside of the U.S. The Barbie playsets were produced by Holder Plastic Company, which subcontracted the painting to Dong Lian Fa (DLF) and Yup Sing (YS). These Chinese subcontractors used uncertified paint that contained lead. Three Fisher-Price toys (two GEOTRAX railroad sets and one "It's a Big Big World 6-in-1 Bongo Band) were also recalled. The GEOTRAX toys were manufactured by Apex Manufacturing Company, which outsourced to Chinese painting subcontractor, Boy Plastic Products Factory. Similarly, the Bongo Band playset was manufactured by Shun On Factory, which outsourced the painting to Jingying Tampo Printing Processing Factory. Both subcontractors used uncertified paint containing lead.

A second major event occurred on September 21st, when Mattel apologized to China at a meeting with China's product safety chief. The apology created controversy, as press accounts of the meeting framed Mattel's actions as an apology to Chinese manufacturers, while Mattel claimed it was an apology to Chinese customers affected by the recall.

A third event that made the news was Mattel CEO, Robert Eckert's testimony in front of a Senate Subcommittee. A fourth event was the recall of a single product on October 25. The toy, Fisher-Price's Go Diego Go Animal Rescue Boat, was recalled due to lead contamination. There were 38,000 affected toys in the U.S. and 17,500 in the U.K., Ireland and Canada. The toy was produced by Man Shing, which subcontracted painting to Hua Yi. The Chinese subcontractor used uncertified paint that contained lead.

Statements from Mattel regarding these four events, in the form of three press releases (two announcing recalls and one announcing the creation of a corporate responsibility group) and responses to media inquiries, demonstrated the strategies employed by the company during phase three of the crisis. Similar to during the first two phases, Mattel employed corrective action as a major response strategy, with shifting the blame, mortification and social responsibility as secondary tactics. Differently from phases one and two, bolstering was only a secondary strategy in phase three, along with minimization, which was only minor in phase two. In addition Mattel used warning, differentiation, suffering, compensation, and role model as minor tactics.

Corrective Action

All three press releases, twelve news articles and two news broadcasts showed that Mattel used corrective action its primary strategy in phase three of the crisis (Bevin, 2007; Garrahan, 2007; Jamieson, 2007; Kavilanz, 2007; Lipton, 2007; Marshall & Kelley, 2007; Mattel, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e; Merle, 2007c; O'Donnell, 2007; Story, 2007e, 2007f; Ursborne, 2007; Wallace, 2007d, 2007e; Ying Sun, 2007b). Within these sources, statements from Mattel emphasized that the company had upgraded testing procedures, dedicated long hours to testing, made important changes, and fired the subcontractors who violated its policies.

The first press release, which announced the September 4th recall, stressed several corrective measures taken by Mattel. It talked about “extensive testing of finished products,” and a “thorough investigation of [its] vendors” (Mattel, 2007c). It also highlighted the three-point check system put in place in response to the first recall, saying, “Mattel has...globally implemented a strengthened, three-point check system to

test toys throughout the manufacturing process” (Mattel, 2007c). The October 25th release, which announced the fourth recall, also mentioned the check system. In addition, it quoted Geoff Massingberd, senior vice president of Mattel’s Corporate Responsibility Group, as saying:

Mattel has now tested samples of the vast majority of products expected to ship for the holiday season....This testing program continues and all toys manufactured since the adoption of the new system have been, and continue to be, sampled and tested prior to leaving the manufacturing facility. (Mattel, 2007d)

The September 10th release, which announced the creation of Mattel’s Corporate Responsibility Group, highlighted corrective measures taken by Mattel. Aside from introducing the organization as a type of corrective/preventative action, it also read, “During our recent product recalls, we have taken a variety of prompt, corrective actions” (Mattel, 2007d).

In addition to discussing preventative measures implemented by Mattel, the September 4th release also explained how the company was dealing with the responsible contractors, Dong Lian Fa (DLF) and Yip Sing (YS). It said that the two Chinese companies mentioned were “no longer manufacturing Mattel toys” (Mattel, 2007c).

Many of the print news artifacts also pointed out that Mattel had cut ties with the guilty subcontractors (Bevin, 2007; Jamieson, 2007; Merle, 2007c; Story, 2007e, 2007f; Usborne, 2007). A *Washington Post* article, for example, reported, “The contractors that used the uncertified paint no longer work for Mattel” (Merle, 2007c). Similarly, *Plastics News* quoted a Mattel spokeswoman who said that the company “immediately terminated all relationships” with the subcontractors (Ying Sun, 2007b).

Several news articles mentioned the fact that Mattel had dedicated time and effort into testing toys. *The New York Times* quoted Eckert as saying, “We’ve worked very hard on this issue. We’ve got teams working around the clock. We’ve literally spent tens of thousands of man-hours testing toys” (Story, 2007e). The *International Herald Tribune* and *Belfast Telegraph* specifically mentioned that Mattel had spent more than 50,000 hours since the first recall testing the safety of toys (Story, 2007f; Usborne, 2007). One article quoted a full-page ad that Mattel had placed in the *Washington Post*, saying “As promised, in recent weeks, we have been busy testing and retesting toys before they leave factories” (Merle, 2007c). Other articles in *Plastics News*, CNNMoney.com, and *USA Today* also mentioned the improved testing procedures and the fact that Mattel had already checked the majority of its toy lines (Kavilanz, 2007; O’Donnell, 2007; Ying Sun, 2007b).

Change was another focus of the print articles that suggested Mattel’s use of corrective action. A *Plastic News* article quoted Mattel spokeswoman, Michele Sturdivant as saying, “We have instituted changes to our required procedures to catch cases of our policies not being adhered to, and to improve accountability” (Yin Sun, 2007b). The *International Herald Tribune* and CNNMoney.com also mentioned change. They quoted Eckert, who told the Senate subcommittee, “I can’t change the past, but I am changing how we do things” (Kavilanz, 2007; Lipton, 2007).

An *NBC Nightly News* broadcast referenced the same “change” quote from Eckert (Wallace, 2007d). A week later, the program reported another quote from Eckert, in which he discussed the corrective action of firing subcontractors responsible for the uncertified paint. According to the report, Eckert told the Senate, “There were clear cases

of people circumventing the system and those are the people we no longer do business with” (Wallace, 2007e).

Statements from Mattel cited in press releases, news articles and news broadcasts all demonstrated that the company utilized corrective action as its primary strategy during phase three of the recall crisis. In these statements, Mattel emphasized the hard work that went into testing the majority of its toy lines, as well as the company’s decision to fire all subcontractors responsible for the lead paint.

Shifting the Blame

Two press releases, ten news articles and a news broadcast revealed that Mattel shifted the blame to Chinese subcontractors during phase three (Casey, Zamiska & Pasztor, 2007; Jamieson, 2007; Kavilanz, 2007; Mattel, 2007c, 2007d; Merle, 2007c; O’Donnell, 2007; 2007e, 2007f; Usborne, 2007; Wallace, 2007e; Ying Sun, 2007b).

Although statements pointing to the strategy were prevalent, this analysis considers the shifting the blame strategy as secondary during phase three. This is due to the fact that despite its efforts to blame outside sources, Mattel also employed mortification as a secondary strategy, taking full responsibility for the recalls in a public apology to Chinese officials.

The first press release, as well as most of the print articles that mentioned Mattel’s firing of responsible contractors (cited above), demonstrated that the company used shifting the blame during phase three (Jamieson, 2007; Merle, 2007c; Story, 2007e, 2007f; Usborne, 2007; Mattel, 2007c). The third release also served to shift the blame, specifically naming the subcontractor that was responsible for the single product recall.

Within three news articles and one news broadcast, statements from Mattel used

negative language, such as “violated” and “circumvented” to emphasize that the actions of the subcontractors were the cause of the recalls (Kavilanz, 2007; O’Donnell, 2007; Wallace, 2007e; Ying Sun, 2007b). Other articles stressed that Mattel had set up preventative rules and procedures, but that these measures weren’t followed (Casey et al., 2007; Ying Sun, 2007b). The *Wall Street Journal* reported, “Mattel Chief Executive Robert Eckert told Congress that the company’s ‘standards were ignored, and our rules were broken’ at Chinese plants” (Casey et al.). Similarly, a *Plastics News* article quoted a Mattel spokeswoman, who said, “If these vendors and their subcontractors had adhered to our procedures, we wouldn’t have this issue” (Ying Sun, 2007b).

Statements within these artifacts showed that Mattel utilized shifting the blame as a secondary response strategy by stressing that the company had cut ties with responsible parties, by using negative language to describe those parties’ actions, and by mentioning preventative measures that Mattel had in place.

Mortification

As stated above, mortification was another secondary strategy used by Mattel during phase three. Eleven news articles referenced Mattel’s apologies to consumers, and in some cases to China, showing that the company admitted full responsibility for the recalls (Bevin, 2007; Casey et al., 2007; Goldman, 2007; Jagger, 2007; Jamieson, 2007; Kaur, 2007; Kavilanz, 2007; Marshall & Kelley, 2007; Merle, 2007c; Story, 2007g; Usborne, 2007).

Several articles quoted a statement from CEO Robert Eckert, in which he said, “We apologize again to everyone affected and promise that we will continue to focus on ensuring the safety and quality of our toys” (Bevin, 2007; Jamieson, 2007; Merle, 2007c;

Usborne, 2007). An article posted on CNNMoney.com also referenced Eckert's apology, saying, "In a statement issued by Mattel, the company apologized to consumers..." (Marshall & Kelley, 2007). Another CNNMoney article quoted Eckert as saying, "On behalf of Mattel and its nearly 30,000 employees, I apologize sincerely," (Kavilanz, 2007).

Five of the artifacts discussed Mattel's apology to China (Casey et al., 2007; Jagger, 2007; Goldman, 2007; Kaur, 2007; Story, 2007g). Some publications, such as the *Wall Street Journal*, quoted Thomas Debrowski, Mattel's executive vice president for world-wide operations. They reported that in Beijing, Debrowski said to Chinese Product Safety Chief, Li Changjiang, "Mattel takes full responsibility for these recalls and apologizes personally to you, the Chinese people and all of our customers who received the toys" (Casey et al; Kaur; Jagger). Articles also reported that Debrowski said, "But it is important for everyone to understand that the vast majority of those products that we recalled were the result of flaws in Mattel's design, not through a manufacturing flaw by Chinese manufacturers" (Casey et al.; Jagger; Kaur; Story, 2007g). While many analysts accused Mattel of sending "mixed messages" about its responsibility for the recalls and "kowtowing to China" in order to save face, the company affirmed that "Mattel apologized to the Chinese... just as it has wherever its toys are sold" (Story, 2007g).

Overall, the news articles showed that Mattel employed mortification as a secondary response strategy, alongside shifting the blame. While apologies to consumers were expected (as they appeared in other phases), the apology to China was controversial, as it seemingly contradicted Mattel's shifting the blame strategy.

Bolstering

One press release and seven news articles demonstrated that Mattel employed bolstering as a third secondary strategy during phase three of the crisis (Bevin, 2007; Garrahan, 2007; Jagger, 2007; Jamieson, 2007; Kaur, 2007; Mattel, 2007d; Merle, 2007c; Usborne, 2007). Statements from Mattel within these artifacts emphasized the company's role as an industry leader, as well as its continual commitment to safety and fulfillment of promises.

The entire September 10th press release, which announced the creation of Mattel's Corporate Responsibility Group, was an example of Mattel's bolstering efforts. The release repeatedly referred to Mattel as an "industry leader" that had "long held" a place "at the forefront of responsible corporate citizenship" (Mattel, 2007d). Additionally, the release pointed out that Mattel was "the first toy company to invite independent and public monitoring of [its] manufacturing facilities" and "publish a corporate social responsibility report" (Mattel, 2007d). It also mentioned Mattel's "commitment to conducting business with the utmost integrity" (Mattel, 2007d).

News articles published during phase three also revealed Mattel's bolstering tactic (Bevin, 2007; Garrahan, 2007; Jagger, 2007; Jamieson, 2007; Kaur, 2007; Merle, 2007c; Usborne, 2007). The *Washington Post*, for example, quoted an advertisement in which the company said it was following its "ongoing promise to ensure the safety of your children" (Merle, 2007c). Several articles also referred to a quote from Eckert, who said, "We...promise that we will continue to focus on ensuring the safety and quality of our toys" (Bevin; Jamieson; Merle, 2007c; Usborne). With this statement, Eckert stressed that Mattel had always focused on safety and that recent actions were only a continuation of that focus.

Similarly, other news artifacts referred to statements from Mattel in which the company stressed its dedication to safety. The *New Straits Times* (Malaysia) and the *Times* (London) reported that the company said, “Mattel is committed to applying the highest standards of safety to its products” (Jagger, 2007; Kaur, 2007). An article in the *Financial Times* (London) contained multiple quotes from Mattel regarding safety. It reported that Eckert said to members of Congress “I, like you, care deeply about the safety of children” (Garrahan, 2007). The article also contained a quote from Bryan Stockton, executive vice-president international with Mattel, who said, “We have actually manufactured fun and safe toys in China for more than 20 years” (Garrahan).

By reporting Mattel’s statements regarding its commitment to safety and position as an industry leader, the release and news articles revealed that Mattel used bolstering as a secondary strategy during phase three.

Social Responsibility

All three press releases, along with five news articles, demonstrated that social responsibility was another secondary tactic used by Mattel during phase three (Garrahan, 2007; Kavilanz, 2007; Marshall & Kelley, 2007; Mattel, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e; Merle, 2007c; Ying Sun, 2007b). Statements from Mattel cited within these artifacts focused on the company’s cooperative and responsible actions following the recalls, Mattel’s leadership role in the area of corporate social responsibility, and its efforts to keep consumers informed.

The two releases that announced recalls stressed that Mattel’s social responsibility by mentioning that Mattel was working “in cooperation with the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission and other regulatory agencies worldwide” and “with retailers

worldwide to identify and remove affected products from retail shelves” (Mattel, 2007c, 2007e). The releases also said that the products were recalled “voluntarily,” framing them as responsible acts by the company (Mattel, 2007c, 2007e).

The release announcing the corporate responsibility group was a major example of how Mattel used the social responsibility tactic. The release announced that the group “was designed to continue and enhance the company’s leadership role in the area of global citizenship by adding a new level of accountability to the company’s safety and compliance protocols” (Mattel, 2007d). As stated in the preceding section, the release also mentioned that Mattel was the “first toy company to publish a corporate social responsibility report” and emphasized the company’s position as an industry leader at the “forefront of responsible corporate citizenship” (Mattel, 2007d). The creation of Mattel’s Corporate Responsibility Group was also referenced in an article in the *Financial Times* (Garrahan, 2007).

Other news articles and a news broadcast demonstrated Mattel’s social responsibility strategy with statements from Mattel that mentioned its dedication to keeping consumers informed (Kavilanz, 2007; Marshall & Kelley, 2007; Wallace, 2007c; Ying Sun, 2007b). An article in *Plastic News*, for example, quoted a Mattel spokeswoman, who said that if the company recalled more products, it would “address the matter promptly and inform the public quickly” (Ying Sun, 2007b). A CNNMoney.com article reported that Eckert named letting “consumers know about recalls at the earliest” as one of Mattel’s two major jobs (Kavilanz). Another CNNMoney article referenced a statement from the company, which said, “We’ve promised consumers that we’d tell them efficiently and openly if we found any additional affected

toys, and that is what we are doing today” (Marshall & Kelley). An *NBC Nightly News* broadcast referenced the same quote (Wallace, 2007c).

The press releases, news articles and news broadcast showed that Mattel used social responsibility as a secondary response tactic. Within its statements, the company highlighted its dedication to informing the public, its position as a leader in the industry regarding corporate responsibility, and its creation of a corporate responsibility group.

Minimization

Two press releases and eight news articles revealed that Mattel employed minimization as a final secondary response strategy during phase three (Goldman, 2007; Jagger, 2007; Jamieson, 2007; Kaur, 2007; Mattel, 2007c, 2007e; Merle, 2007c; Story, 2007g; Usborne, 2007; Ying Sun, 2007b). Within these artifacts, statements from Mattel made the situation seem less severe by framing the recalls as overly inclusive, cautious measures.

The first press release of phase three, as well as five news articles, showed that Mattel minimized the situation by claiming that the recalls were a “cautious” measure (Goldman, 2007; Jagger, 2007; Kaur, 2007; Mattel, 2007c; Story, 2007g; Ying Sun, 2007b). The press release mentioned that Mattel was “being cautious” twice, once regarding each part of the September 4th recall (Mattel, 2007c). An article in *Plastics News* referenced the quote (Ying Sun, 2007b).

In addition, *The New York Times*, the *Times* (London) and the *New Straits Times* (Malaysia) reported that Mattel described the recalls as “overly inclusive” (Jagger, 2007; Kaur, 2007; Story, 2007g). The *Los Angeles Times* also reported, “The company also has said...that out of an abundance of caution, it was recalling all products with even the

slightest chance of cross-contamination from lead paint” (Goldman, 2007).

As shown by the statements within the cited artifacts, Mattel utilized minimization in phase three of the crisis. The company made the situation appear less serious by saying that the recalls were only a result of Mattel being extremely cautious.

Other Tactics

Aside from the major strategy of corrective action and several secondary strategies, artifacts revealed that Mattel also used several minor response tactics, including warning, differentiation, suffering, compensation and role model.

One minor tactic that Mattel used during phase three was the warning strategy. Multiple news articles referred to statement from Mattel that stressed the possibility of future recalls (Jamieson, 2007; Merle 2007c; O’Donnell, 2007; Story, 2007e, 2007f). The *International Herald Tribune* and *The New York Times* reported that Mattel said it “could not promise that there would not be more recalls” (Story, 2007e, 2007f). The *Washington Post* reported, “Mattel...said consumers should expect more recalls as the company strengthens its safety system” (Merle, 2007c). In addition, an article in *USA Today* said, “Asked if there will be anymore recalls soon, [Eckert replied,] ‘Never say never’” (O’Donnell, 2007).

A second minor tactic employed by Mattel was differentiation. Similar to during phase two, statements from Mattel during phase three emphasized that more recalls were announced because testing procedures had become more rigorous. The first release said that the September 4th recall was a “result of the company’s ongoing investigation of its toys manufactured by vendors in China” (Mattel, 2007c). Articles in the *Washington Post* and the *Daily Telegraph* referenced that release and mentioned that the recall resulted

from an “ongoing investigation” (Bevin, 2007; Merle, 2007c). Framing the situation in a similar manner, the second release called the October recall “a result of the company’s extensive investigation of toys manufactured prior to the implementation of the three-point check system” (Mattel, 2007e).

To a very limited extent, Mattel also used the suffering strategy, subtly positioning itself as a victim of the recalls. An article in the *Times* (London), for example, quoted Debrowski as saying that the situation had been “very very devastating” to Mattel (Jagger, 2007).

As in the other two phases, compensation was an extremely minor tactic in phase three. The third release was the only artifact that demonstrated this strategy. The release, which announced the Go Diego Go Animal Rescue Boat, had a “How to Return Affected Toys/Parts” section at the bottom of the page, which stated that the company would “send consumers full replacement product for each affected boat” (Mattel, 2007e).

One minor tactic, unique to phase three, was the role model strategy. Mattel used this strategy to position itself as a good example within the toy industry. The second paragraph of the release announcing the creation of the corporate responsibility group exemplified Mattel’s use of this strategy. It read:

‘We’ve strengthened our organization to maintain the place we have long held at the forefront of responsible corporate citizenship,’ Eckert said. ‘We were the first toy company to invite independent and public monitoring of our manufacturing facilities. We were the first toy company to publish a corporate social responsibility report. In 2007, we’ve published our second report, and we are still the only toy company to do so. Our recent challenges have presented an

opportunity to again be an industry leader. (Mattel, 2007d)

In addition to the release, a *Wall Street Journal* article also pointed out Mattel's use of the role model strategy. It quoted Eckert as saying that Mattel had been "at the forefront of establishing standards" to reduce hazards associated with magnets (Casey et al., 2007).

During phase three, Mattel used strategies from four out of five categories outlined by Coombs (1995): ingratiation, mortification, distance and suffering. The majority of Mattel's strategies, including bolstering, social responsibility, minimization, differentiation and role model, fall into the ingratiation category. Mattel employed these strategies in order to win back approval from its stakeholders and trust from parents worldwide. Other strategies used by the company in phase three, such as corrective action, mortification, and compensation, belong to Coombs' mortification category. Mattel used these strategies to win forgiveness from those affected by the recalls. The only distance strategy used by Mattel in this phase was company shifted the blame, as it blamed subcontractors for the lead paint contamination. In addition, Mattel used Coombs' suffering strategy as a means of gaining sympathy from its publics and the warning strategy as a way to protect itself in the event of a future recall.

Implications

Having identified the various response strategies utilized by Mattel during each phase, the next step of this analysis is to assess the appropriateness of the response strategies and evaluate their potential success.

Appropriateness

Based on Coombs' (1995) crisis classification system, Mattel's string of product recalls would be considered an accident, or an unintentional act that occurred "during the course of normal organizational operations" (p. 456). According to Coombs, "The unintentional and general random nature of accidents lead to attributions of minimal organizational responsibility" (p. 456). However, he clarified that publics are more likely to "attribute blame and react negatively" to "human-induced errors (e.g., workplace injuries, product defects, industrial accidents, etc.)" than with acts of nature (p. 456). He suggested that distance strategies are likely the best choice in response to accidents, as they help reinforce a company's "lack of responsibility" (p. 456).

Coombs (1995) held that when choosing response strategies, crisis communicators should consider the stakeholders' view of the veracity of evidence, the company's performance history, and the severity of the damage associated with the crisis.¹⁴ In Mattel's case, the stakeholders' view of the veracity of the evidence (whether the crisis occurred) was clear: they believed that the recalls happened. Mattel admitted the validity of the crisis to its stakeholders when it publicly announced all three recalls.

Concerning performance history, Mattel was highly regarded for its commitment to safety until the first set of recalls occurred. Therefore, Coombs (1995) would likely

¹⁴ Appendix B provides a chart outlining appropriate strategies suggested by Coombs (1995) for different stakeholder viewpoints.

consider the company to have had positive performance history at that point. However, by the time of the third set of recalls, Mattel's reputation had been damaged. According to Coombs, "A history of similar crises makes the cause of the crisis appear to be stable. The more stable the crisis, the more likely an organization is to be seen as the cause of the crisis" (p. 460-461).

With regards to the severity of the damage involved, Mattel reported that there was no major damage directly caused by the recalled products. Thus, actual damage would be considered minor. However, due to the global reach and popularity of Mattel's products, the risk of damage/injury was extensive. For this reason, Coombs (1995) would likely suggest that Mattel address both victims (parents who had children playing with the recalled toys) and non-victims (the general public and parents who did not own any of the recalled toys) of the crisis. When there is a severe risk of damage (in Mattel's case the risk of other dangerous toys reaching children), Coombs proposed that both victims and non-victims of the crisis "seek reassurances that actions have been taken to prevent a reoccurrence" (p. 460).

With all of these factors considered, Coombs' (1995) theory suggests that Mattel should have employed distance and ingratiation strategies during the first phase of the crisis, when risk of damage was still considered relatively minor, and performance history was positive. According to Coombs, "Victims and nonvictims are more likely to accept excuses and justifications when there is very little damage" (p.464). In addition, he said that "A positive performance history lends credibility to efforts designed to create positive perceptions of the organization (ingratiation)" (p. 464). His theory would also suggest that after the second and third recalls (when the risk of damage was perceived as

more severe, and the company had a more negative performance history), Mattel should have utilized more mortification strategies and less ingratiation strategies. Coombs said that a negative performance history makes mortification relevant for both victims and nonvictims. Additionally, he argued that a negative performance history “undermines the effectiveness” of ingratiation strategies (p.464).

As previously stated, Coombs (1998) also applied multiple continuums to his crisis classification system. According to his personal control continuum, with accidents, companies are closer to having “strong personal control” than they are to having “weak personal control.”¹⁵ Because of this, Coombs (1998) suggested slightly accommodative measures (as opposed to defensive measures), such as justification and ingratiation as response strategies for accidents. However, he also pointed out that “a history of crises (negative performance history) intensifies the perception of crisis responsibility” and thus, “an organization with a history of accidents will need to treat a new accident like a transgression” (Coombs, 1998, p. 187). Considering each round of recalls as a new accident, this means that during phase two and phase three, Mattel should have utilized strategies that Coombs suggested for transgressions. These strategies are further toward the accommodative side of the continuum and include corrective action and apology (mortification strategies).

Based on Coombs’ (1995, 1998) classification system, it seems that only some of Mattel’s response choices were appropriate. During phase one, the company did employ both distance strategies (denial of injury and shifting the blame) as well as ingratiation strategies (bolstering, social responsibility and minimization). In fact, shifting the blame (distance) and bolstering (ingratiation) were two of the company’s most dominant

¹⁵ This continuum is provided in Appendix A.

strategies. These choices are in line with Coomb's classification system.

On the other hand, while Coombs' (1995) theory suggests that Mattel should have lessened its ingratiation efforts after the second and third sets of recalls, this analysis revealed that Mattel continued to rely on ingratiation strategies. In both phase two and phase three, the majority of the company's response tactics were ingratiation strategies.

Consistent with Coomb's (1995) theory, Mattel did rely heavily on mortification strategies (corrective action and mortification) during the last two phases. However, apologies were coupled with attempts to shift the blame to Chinese subcontractors (distance). Coomb's classification system did not suggest combining distance and mortification strategies for any type of accident. Overall, according to Coombs, Mattel's response choices throughout the toy recall crisis were only moderately appropriate for the situation; the apologia did not completely match the kategoria.

Probability of Success: Hearit's Three Objectives

Although it is too soon to know for sure the effects of Mattel's crisis communication, frameworks provided by Hearit (1994) and Ihlen (2002) are useful in assessing the potential success of Mattel's response to the recalls.

Hearit (1994) said that corporate apologia has three key objectives. First, it aims to create a competing narrative that frames the situation in a more positive way than "commonly" reported accounts (p. 115). Second, it aims to express regret without accepting full responsibility, and third, it attempts to distance the company from the negative behavior associated with the crisis. According to Hearit's theory, the more completely Mattel achieved these objectives with its chosen response strategies, the more probable its crisis communication efforts would be effective in the long run.

The artifacts revealed that Mattel attempted to create a second narrative regarding the toy recalls. This narrative created an opposing viewpoint to the most obvious perspective—that Mattel had been irresponsible in allowing the product defects to occur under its watch. Conversely, the competing narrative offered by Mattel framed the company as an industry leader in social responsibility that had voluntarily announced recalls as a cautious measure, out of concern for children’s safety. Mattel did this through what Hearit (1994) referred to as “terminological redefinition,” which is the use of words that focus attention toward or remove attention from certain aspects of a crisis situation (p.115).

The company described each of the recalls as “voluntary” in order to emphasize that Mattel was being responsible (“Letter,” 2007; Mattel, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007e). By phase three (when the perceived risk of damage from toys was at its highest), Mattel was using words, such as “caution” and “overly inclusive” to describe the recalls (Goldman, 2007; Jagger, 2007; Kaur, 2007; Mattel, 2007c; Story, 2007g; Ying Sun, 2007b). These terms functioned to minimize the perceived danger associated with the recalls. Mattel also framed its improved safety measures as a “continuation” of the rigorous standards that the company had always had (Bevin, 2007; Mattel: Dear, 2007; Jamieson, 2007; Mattel, 2007a; Merle, 2007c; Usbourne, 2007). This terminology emphasized Mattel’s long history of commitment to children’s safety.

With regards to the reasoning behind the lead recalls, Mattel used terms such as “breached,” “violated,” “floated,” “subverted” and “circumvented” in order to frame the actions of Chinese subcontractors as negative (Cook, 2007; Kavilanz, 2007; “Mattel’s Fisher-Price,” 2007; Merle, 2007a, 2007b; Nipand & Ho, 2007; O’Donnell, 2007;

“Thousands,” 2007; Trumball, 2007; Wallace, 2007e; Ying Sun, 2007b). The company described the reasons for the recalls as “serious mistakes” committed by the subcontractors, that Mattel had taken every measure to avoid (Mattel, 2007a). After claiming that it had done everything it could to prevent such occurrences, Mattel portrayed itself as a “victim” of the recalls and said that the event was “very very devastating” to the company (Barboza & Story, 2007; Jagger, 2007).

By redefining the crisis in this way, Mattel created a competing narrative that depicted the subcontractors as the guilty parties that knowingly violated Mattel’s strict safety standards, and Mattel as the responsible party and a victim of the crisis.

Although Mattel was able to create a competing narrative, the company did not have much success in completing Hearit’s (1994) second objective of expressing regret without accepting full responsibility. During all three phases, Mattel consistently apologized while simultaneously shifting the blame to Chinese subcontractors. Therefore, the company had a high probability of completing the goal. However, during phase three, Mattel seemingly apologized to the scapegoat it had been blaming all along (China) and admitted “full responsibility” for the recalls (Casey et al, 2007; Kaur, 2007; Jagger, 2007). Although the company expressed regret, it also admitted full responsibility in the end, and thus, did not complete Hearit’s second objective.

Concerning Hearit’s (1994) third objective, dissociating the company from the crisis, it seems that Mattel was somewhat successful. As Hearit (1995a) described, dissociation can take one of three forms: denial of guilt (opinion/knowledge dissociation), differentiation of guilt (individual/group dissociation), and distancing from guilt (act/essence dissociation) (p. 6). Mattel distanced itself from the recalls primarily through

act/essence dissociation; that is, it claimed that the recalls did not “represent the true nature of the organization” (Hearit, 1995a, p.127). Mattel’s use of act dissociation was demonstrated by its strong reliance on bolstering as a major strategy in phases one and two, and a secondary strategy in phase three. With these bolstering efforts, Mattel stressed that “the safety of children is and always has been Mattel’s number one priority” and that the company had always taken strong measures to keep children safe (“Letter, 2007). These bolstering tactics served to frame the recalls as uncharacteristic of a responsible company such as Mattel. However, this type of dissociation strategy likely became less and less effective as the crisis continued and the number of affected toys grew.

According to Hearit’s (1994) three crisis communication objectives, Mattel’s chosen strategies have potential to succeed in the long run, depending on the perceptions of their stakeholders. The company created a strong competing narrative that positioned Mattel in a positive light. In addition, for the majority of the crisis, it also expressed regret without accepting full responsibility. However, these successes might be overshadowed if its audiences perceive the company’s apology to China as an admission of complete responsibility for all recalls. Mattel also consistently employed act dissociation in order to distance Mattel from the negative behavior associated with the recall. However, after four recall announcements, stakeholders may no longer believe that lead contamination and magnet retention issues are “out of character” for Mattel.

Probability of Success: Ihlen’s Concept of Coherence

Ihlen (2002) introduced the concept of coherence to his theory of crisis communication strategies. He maintained that crisis responses should be evaluated

according to material coherence (consistency with information provided by outside sources), structural coherence (internal logic), and characterological coherence (believability and consistency of characters/ narrators). As Ihlen believed that “all communication succeeds or fails depending on its coherence,” this study supposes that the more coherent Mattel’s crisis communication is, the more likely it was that it resonated with parents and company stakeholders (p.191)

In terms of material coherence, there were two inconsistencies within the artifacts analyzed in this study. First, while several publications, such as the *Washington Post*, reported that three children had been injured by the magnets on products involved in the recall, many statements from Mattel maintained that there had been no injuries reported (Hiscott, 2007; Wallop, 2007). As previously mentioned, Mattel tried to correct this inconsistency by saying there were no “additional injuries” from the affected products (Gelles, 2007; Stapleton & Callick, 2007). Second, while statements from Mattel in phase two stressed that the majority of the products had already been removed from shelves (Hirsch, 2007; Mattel, 2007a), an article in the *Times* (London) offered a different story. It reported, “Mattel has recovered only a tiny proportion of the two million dangerous items it called last week, it admitted yesterday, as new safety concerns emerged over children’s products” (Leroux, 2007).

There was also a degree of inconsistency with regards to the characterological coherence of Mattel’s crisis response. First, with the apology to Chinese officials, Mattel altered its depiction as “victim” of the crisis by taking “full responsibility” for the recalls (Casey et al, 2007; Kaur, 2007; Jagger, 2007). Second, although Mattel consistently used ingratiation strategies to position the company as a responsible industry leader committed

to the safety of children, this characterization was contradicted by the continuous string of recalls.

There was also some structural incoherence within Mattel's crisis communication. Although the company utilized similar response strategies across the three phases, the internal logic of its communication was disrupted at two major points. The first contradiction occurred during phase two when Mattel began to use the term "additional injuries" instead of stating that no injuries had been reported. The second contradiction happened during phase three when Mattel admitted full responsibility in an apology to Chinese officials after consistently blaming Chinese subcontractors for the recalls. Mattel's communication as a whole, during phases two and three, was structurally incoherent because of its inability to consistently deny injury and its ineffective combination of mortification and shifting the blame strategies.

Overall, Mattel's crisis response messages had material, characterological and structural inconsistencies. Because of this, it is unlikely that attentive members of its audience had trust in all of Mattel's claims.

Conclusion

From a financial standpoint, it appears that Mattel's crisis communication was moderately successful. While Mattel reported a 3% drop in domestic toy sales in 2007 compared to a 15% increase in 2006, the company also experienced a 15% rise in fourth-quarter earnings from 2006 (Duprey, 2008). From an image standpoint, the long-term effect of Mattel's response strategies remains unknown. Opinions from industry analysts differ. A *Marketing* reporter commented, "It is said that a crisis, well handled, can be turned into a positive advantage, but Mattel's crisis management looks more like shutting the door after the horse has bolted" ("Toy story," 2007). Conversely, PR week reporter, Tanya Lewis referred to Mattel's responses as "solid" communications (Lewis, 2007).

Similar to the industry's viewpoint, the results of this analysis are indefinite, suggesting that the results of Mattel's crisis communication may or may not be positive in the long run. Although statements within the artifacts showed that Mattel used similar strategies in a relatively consistent manner throughout the three strategies, an evaluation of the company's choices (based on Coombs (1995, 1998), Hearit (1995) and Ihlen (2002)) uncovered several issues and inconsistencies.

Based on Coombs' classification system, only some of Mattel's response strategies were appropriate for the particular situation. Its phase one strategies of shifting the blame (distance) and bolstering (ingratiation) were appropriate, but Coombs' theory suggests that the company should not have continued to rely on ingratiation strategies after announcing multiple recalls. It also suggests that Mattel should not have used mortification and distance strategies simultaneously.

In addition, Mattel was not completely successful in achieving the three objectives of crisis communication outlined by Hearit (1994). Although, for a time, Mattel expressed regret without admitting full responsibility, it changed its position when it apologized to Chinese officials. In addition, the company's second narrative efforts and act dissociation strategy (which depicted Mattel as a responsible company, committed to children's safety) were challenged by the recurring recalls.

Ihlen's (2002) categories of coherence also revealed flaws in Mattel's overall crisis communication. Structural and characterological inconsistencies existed for two reasons. First, Mattel's claims of being responsible and committed to safety were contradicted by repeated recalls. Second, the company admitted full responsibility for the recalls and apologized to Chinese officials after weeks of consistently blaming Chinese subcontractors. Material inconsistencies arose when publications were saying that injuries had resulted from the recalled toys, while Mattel maintained that no injuries had been reported, and when Mattel claimed to have the majority of products off the shelves, while publications claimed the opposite.

Future research, focused on audience reactions to statements from Mattel, might offer unique insight into whether stakeholder and consumer opinions were affected by the proposed issues and inconsistencies.

While it is too soon to know exactly how successful Mattel's response strategies were, this evaluation indicates that there were problems with the company's crisis communication, and that at the very least, the toy giant must continue to carefully manage its image and take actions to maintain its position as an industry leader.

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Appendixes

Appendix A

Weak Perception of Crisis Responsibility	_____ <i>Defensive</i>	_____ <i>Weak Personal Control</i>
	_____ Attack the Accuser	
	_____ Denial	_____ Natural Disaster
	_____ Excuse	
	_____ Justification	_____ Tampering
	_____ Ingratiation	_____ Accident
	Strong Perception Of Crisis Responsibility	_____ Corrective Action
_____ Full Apology		_____ Transgression
_____ <i>Accommodative</i>		_____ <i>Strong Personal Control</i>

Source: Coombs, 1998

Appendix B