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WA#3 An Analysis of BP’s Response to the Deepwater Horizon Spill

In April of 2010, a BP rig caught on fire and exploded, causing approximately 3.26 million barrels of to oil leak into the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 people. This oil spill also greatly affected thousands of birds and marine life. BP responded to this crisis by creating a “Gulf of Mexico Restoration” website to try to gain back consumer trust and its tarnished reputation. BP’s “Gulf of Mexico Restoration” website uses three strategies in an attempt to repair its damaged reputation: pictures and videos displaying a hygienic environment illustrating clean beaches and healthy wildlife of the Gulf of Mexico to show the efforts being made to clean up the oil spill; specific language repetition such as “accident,” “commitment,” and “recovery” to depict the oil spill as an accident instead of a crisis to deflect the blame placed on BP; and pictures and videos of “luscious seafood” to show that the once contaminated waters in the Gulf of Mexico are now clean enough to produce healthy seafood to consumers and tourists.

BP uses pictures and videos of unsoiled environments displaying clean beaches and healthy wildlife living in the Gulf of Mexico to illustrate that BP is making a serious effort to clean up the once contaminated water from the detrimental oil spill in 2010. According to *The Guardian*, 1,000 miles of coastline were affected and of that, 200 miles were heavily oiled (Bryant, 2011). To restore its reputation, BP uses pictures and videos to demonstrate that its efforts to clean up the once contaminated coastline have been successful. The “Early Restoration” tab on BP’s restoration website displays a picture of a beautiful sunset on the Pensacola Beach in Florida. This image shows the viewer that the water is clear and clean. This demonstrates that BP has effectively cleaned up the environment since the oil spill, showing fertile land that is growing healthy sea grass. On BP’s official YouTube page, videos illustrate clean beaches with tourists recreationally enjoying these beautiful waters. The minute long YouTube video, “BP’s Commitment to America,” constantly displays tourists enjoying clean beaches. The use of clean beaches shows the viewer that BP has restored the coast line that was once filled with oil, therefore restoring BP’s reputation as well. Another BP YouTube video that illustrates beautiful coast lines and thriving wildlife is called “BP Gulf Coast Update: Our Ongoing Commitment.” This video demonstrates all the work BP has done to restore the coast line back to the cleanliness it had before the BP oil spill occurred. The video shows white birds hunting for fish in the now crystal clear waters of the Gulf of Mexico. This restores the viewer’s opinion about BP because at the time of the spill, 2,200 birds were “visibly oiled” (Bryant, 2011). The spotless white birds illustrate that, due to BP’s restoration efforts, the water is now clean enough for animals to thrive. Using both pictures and videos of a clean environment to illustrate clean beaches and thriving wildlife, BP restores its reputation proving to consumers that not only are its restoration efforts are completed in the Gulf of Mexico, but it also continues its ongoing efficient efforts.

BP uses strategically planned repetition of key words such as “accident,” “commitment,” and “recovery” to deflect the blame for the oil spill crisis. Coombs, author of *Crisis Management and Communications*, provides a master list of reputation repair strategies. It is evident that BP uses these strategies through its word choices. On the BP restoration website, the word “accident” is used instead of "oil spill.” This use of language is seen throughout the website when BP names the oil spill the “Deepwater Horizon Accident.” BP satisfies Coombs’ “accidental” reputation repair strategy by emphasizing that it had “lack of control over events leading to the crisis situation” (Coombs, 2007). The word “accident” is used by BP to deflect the blame from the company to make BP seem less responsible for the crisis. BP also heavily uses the word “commitment” throughout its restoration website and its online facets of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. BP uses the common phrase “BP’s Commitment to America” throughout social media. On April 10, 2012 (two years after the crisis occurred) BP posted a Facebook status saying, “…we are continuing to take action to meet our commitments to the Gulf of Mexico community” (BP Facebook, 2012). In 2012, BP also posted a YouTube video that is titled, “BP’s Commitment to America,” YouTube which states the importance of BP’s commitment to restore the Gulf of Mexico and to reinstall faith of its consumers. Using the word “commitment,” BP fulfills Coombs’s reputation repair strategy of “reminder” which tells stakeholders about the good works of the organization (Coombs, 2007). BP uses the word “commitment” repeatedly to demonstrate to consumers that the company is not only financially, but also emotionally involved in the restoration of the Gulf of Mexico. BP also uses the word “recovery” as part of its strategic communication to convince consumers that efforts are being made to improve damage done by the oil spill. This acts as Coombs’s “compensation” reputation repair strategy by offering funds for the restoration process. On BP’s restoration website a chart called “BP's payments related to Gulf Coast recovery” explains the funding BP contributed to help the “recovery” process of the oil spill. On the website, BP also explains the different “recoveries” that are taking place, such as the seafood industry recovery. By using the word “recovery,” BP illustrates to the viewer that the oil spill restoration is improving by the continued efforts of BP. By strategically using the words “accident,” “commitment,” and “recovery” BP successfully deflects blame off of its company.

BP uses pictures and videos of succulent seafood to show healthy to eat food that was once contaminated by the 2010 oil spill to applaud BP for cleaning up the water and to restore trust in consumers and tourists. According to *The Guardian*, research found areas on the ocean floor that had 4cm of thick brown slime from the oil spill (Bryant, 2011). On the restoration website, a tab called “Seafood Industry Recovery” shows an enlarged picture of fresh seafood, such as shrimp, crabs, and fish ready to be sold at a local seafood market. This picture shows the viewer that the seafood in the Gulf of Mexico is safe for consumers to prepare and eat. This image gives credit to BP for cleaning up the water well enough for the seafood to be consumed safely and also restores consumers’ trust in the company. On BP’s YouTube page, videos show fresh seafood that is ready to be served safely to tourists. The video “Voices from the Gulf: Best Place,” shows happy tourists eating luscious seafood at a restaurant. This illustrates to viewers that seafood is not only healthy enough to consume, but it is also highly recommended by common tourists, appealing to the average viewer of the YouTube video. BP also posted a video on its YouTube page called, “Voices from the Gulf: Louisiana Restaurant Owners (Update),” which shows restaurant owners talking about how fresh local seafood is vital to their business. The restaurant owners are impressed with BP’s efforts to make sure that the seafood caught in the Gulf of Mexico are fresh and healthy for them to serve to customers. This helps restore BP’s reputation with the local community as well as tourists, and viewers of this video by showing that BP continues its restoration process.

BP’s “Gulf of Mexico Restoration” website uses these three strategies to try and repair its damaged reputation: pictures and videos displaying a virtually clean environment illustrating clean beaches and healthy wildlife of the Gulf of Mexico to show the efforts being made to clean up the oil spill; specific repetition choices in language such as “accident,” “commitment,” and “recovery” that depict the oil spill as an accident instead of a crisis to deflect the blame placed on BP; and numerous pictures and videos of “luscious seafood” to show that the once contaminated waters on the Gulf of Mexico are now clean enough to produce healthy seafood to consumers and tourists. The most effective strategy BP uses is the pictures and videos of a clean environment showing beautiful beaches and thriving wildlife. This communication strategy effectively reinstates BP’s reputation by showing its commitment to clean up the mess of the 2010 oil spill. Overall BP effectively reestablishes its reputation by using these communication strategies to convey that it is continually restoring the Gulf of Mexico since the “Deepwater Horizon Accident.”

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