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Writing Assignment: BP’s Oil Spill Response

On April 20th, 2010, the British Petroleum (BP) oil spill was one of the largest environmental disasters in world history. A loss of the control of drilling rigs in BP’s oil well, located in the Gulf of Mexico, caused the spill. BP suffered a severe reputational loss as a result of the crisis. Not only was BP responsible for fixing environmental damage done to the Gulf of Mexico, but BP also had to repair its reputation. In the article “Crisis Management and Communications,” author Timothy Coombs defines a crisis as a “significant threat to operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly.” A crisis as large as the BP Oil Spill can be enough to destroy an organization’s reputation if not handled correctly through crisis management (Coombs 2007). To restore its reputation, BP created a multi-page website specifically designed to inform the public of its crisis management strategies. BP’s “Gulf of Mexico Restoration” website uses these three strategies to repair its reputation: first, the website provides pictures of restoration projects with captions directly below the pictures to demonstrate that BP’s workers are dedicated to restoring the Gulf’s environment and economy, which shows that BP is committed to restoring the region’s condition prior to the spill; second, the website provides a code of conduct to improve BP’s growing reputation for ethical misconduct, which shows that BP values and clarifies the ethics and compliance expectations for everyone who works at BP; and finally, the website provides text that states the facts that eleven people died during the accident and how BP is taking responsibility to pay legitimate claims to people for damages resulting from the accident to demonstrate veracity and honesty, which signifies that BP deserves to regain public trust.

BP attempts to repair its reputation by providing pictures of restoration projects with captions directly below the pictures to demonstrate that BP’s workers are dedicated to restoring the Gulf’s environment and economy, which shows that BP is committed to restore the region’s condition prior to the spill. On its “Restore the Environment” page, BP includes a picture of its employees working together as a team on a beach in Texas engaging in Kemp’s Ridley Sea Turtle Emergency Restoration Plan. Under the picture, there is a caption stating that this project would improve the nesting and rearing success of endangered sea turtles on the Texas Coast. By allowing the public to see that BP is demonstrating that they are committed to prevent environmental problems after the spill, BP attempts to make the public feel sympathetic towards them putting BP in the same position as those in the gulf. Coombs would agree that “prevention involves seeking to reduce known risks that could lead to a crisis.” This response would fall under Coombs classification of a pre-crisis that all organizations should follow once a crisis occurs. On its “Restore the Economy” page, BP includes a picture of a woman in a science lab testing sources of oil contamination in seafood. Under the picture, a caption states that the results, which are publicly available, have found no evidence of contamination from oil or dispersions that would pose a threat to human health. By allowing the public to view its progress in successfully testing and monitoring the safety of the seafood industry along the Gulf, BP attempts to restore consumer confidence in seafood, which is now safe to eat.

BP also attempts to repair its reputation by providing a code of conduct to improve BP’s growing reputation for ethical misconduct, which shows that BP values and clarifies the ethics and compliance expectations for everyone who works at BP. BP’s code of conduct is designed to provide training sessions to help employees apply the code requirements and its principles to their work. New BP employees are required to attend induction training, which addresses BP’s values, codes, and expectations. To facilitate understanding, the code is translated into languages as diverse as Mandarin, German, Azeri, and Arabic. BP intends to give clear guidelines for individuals covering five key areas: the environment, business partners, government and communities, company assets, and financial integrity. BP also requires its employees to complete the code of conduct certification, which is mandatory for all employees, including senior leaders up to the chief executive officer. When employees complete their certification, a record is kept that they fully understand the code and have been in compliance with its requirements. The code of conduct certification reminds individuals of their accountability to uphold BP’s values, to do the right thing and to create an environment where people can openly raise concerns. The certification process gives leaders an opportunity to engage their staff on the need to comply with the code and understand the company’s values. This enforces their understanding of the ethics and compliance risks and consequences BP faces as an organization. By providing a code of conduct on BP’s website, the public can see that BP is setting standards of behavior for its employees to help them do the right thing in a complex business environment.

The final strategy that BP uses to attempt to repair its reputation is by providing text that states the facts that eleven people died during the accident and how BP is taking responsibility to pay legitimate claims to people for damages resulting from the accident to demonstrate veracity and honesty, which signifies that BP deserves to regain public trust. The fact that eleven people died and many others were injured during the crisis is information that does not help BP’s reputation, but by accepting responsibility and working under the direction of the federal government, the public can see that BP is not trying to hide anything. This truthfulness makes readers feel like BP is not trying to cover up the damage caused by the accident, which helps BP’s reputation by showing honesty to regain public trust. BP is also honest in regards to the legitimate claims brought against the company resulting from the accident. Providing information such as the “Gulf Claims Fraud Hotline” allows anyone who was affected by the crisis to make an anonymous phone call and be compensated for damages resulting from the accident. This helps protect the integrity of the claims processes relating to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. While BP continues to take steps to avoid fraud and corruption and assure the integrity of the claims process, the company remains committed to the Gulf and to the payment of legitimate claims for real losses. So far, BP has spent $14 billion on response and cleanup to help restore the environment. The company has also paid more than 300,000 claims totaling over $11 billion to help restore the Gulf economy. By not hiding any information on its website regarding the tragic mistakes made by the company allows for a more favorable image by the public in BP’s attempt to deserve public trust.

Through BP’s “Gulf of Mexico Restoration” website, BP has continually made efforts to repair its reputation: displaying various pictures of restoration projects to improve the sustainability of the Gulf’s environment and economy; providing a code of conduct designed to show that BP values and clarifies the ethics and compliance expectations for everyone who works at BP; and demonstrating veracity and honesty by accepting full responsibility of the oil spill. BP’s public image was damaged immensely by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and its poor public relations management during the weeks that followed the crisis. Providing various forms of crisis management restoration strategies, BP’s “Gulf of Mexico Restoration” website effectively informs the public about its efforts in cleaning up the spill and to help restore public trust in the company.

**References**

Coombs, W. T. (2007, October). *Crisis management and communications*. Retrieved from: http://www.instituteforpr.org/topics/crisis-management-and-communications/

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