

The Difference Between Differentiation and Manipulation

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In a world with no shortage of crises, it is likely that your organization will face one of its own. Under stress, it might be appealing to manipulate certain details in order to smooth over the situation. However, to intentionally manipulate anything during a crisis not only puts you at risk of elongating the issue, it jeopardizes the reputation of your business. It has become increasingly common for animal advocates to go undercover as farmhands and film inside organizations that raise animals for food. Now, I am not here to comment on the righteousness of animal advocacy. Instead, I am going to use this example to analyze a type of crisis communication used by the farming industry: differentiation. It is important that we draw a line between differentiation and manipulation when responding to crises. We'll reference the real case of Gary Conklin, a dairy farmer who came under fire for allegations of animal abuse. While one employee was filmed committing serious acts of abuse, Conklin is also seen kicking a cow in the video. In responding to the crisis, Conklin did not manipulate the circumstances. Instead, he differentiated himself from the abusive employee by changing the context around his own action.

Manipulation can be defined as “to control or play upon by artful, unfair, or insidious means especially to one's own advantage; to change by artful or unfair means so as to serve one's purpose” (Merriam-Webster). Basically, using information in a way that intentionally warps the original meaning in order to serve a personal goal. For example, let's pretend I'm a student diagnosed with asthma. During gym class, the coach tells students to run laps. Before running, I say that I am experiencing symptoms of asthma (without experiencing any). This leads to the teacher excusing me from running. While it might be true that I have asthma, in this situation, I

have manipulated my diagnosis in order to get out of running. If I *were* experiencing symptoms, it would be a valid excuse, but in this instance, it is manipulative because I did not have symptoms.

Researchers Kendra Lancaster and Josh Boyd define differentiation as a strategy that “takes a concept that the audience thinks of as a unitary concept and argues that it should actually be divided into two different concepts: one which is deplorable and one which is acceptable.” (p. 191). In essence, a responder presents an example that is similar to their circumstance. Then, they prove that this other example is intolerable while their own situation is actually permissible. This tactic is meant to lessen the severity with which the public views the organization’s issue. Go back to the running example. Let’s say the teacher finds out that I was not experiencing any asthma symptoms and accuses me of lying. In an effort to differentiate, I might bring up an example from the previous year when another student pretended to have a broken ankle. I would differentiate myself by saying they lied about a condition that they did not have at all, whereas I was afraid of experiencing real symptoms due to running. In doing this, I’ve redefined my action as a protective measure and juxtaposed it with another student’s outright lie.

In the case of Conklin Dairy, Conklin came under fire for a segment in the released video which showed him kicking a cow on the ground. Conklin argued that he was not kicking the cow to be abusive, rather he was prompting her to stand up in order to prevent muscle deterioration. Now, if he had made this claim but offered no proof that the cow was at risk, we could say the statement is manipulative. However, because Conklin went on to consult large animal veterinarians who validated his actions, he actually differentiated himself from the abuse that did

occur. This was an especially strong choice on his part because the differentiation did a few things: 1) it further separated him from the other abuser on tape, 2) it proved his knowledge of proper caretaking methods, 3) it demonstrated his commitment to taking care of the animals himself, and 4) it made the accusing film look like a form of manipulation. Conklin redefined the act of kicking from animal abuse to animal care and did so in a way that avoided manipulation.

While other companies may not experience the same circumstances, it is likely this kind of infiltration from animal advocates will continue. When responding to similar crises, animal agriculture businesses must be prepared to differentiate themselves from the perpetrators of abuse. NOTE: If your farm is plagued with rampant abuse, that is a much different crisis. In the given example, there was a single actor among the employees. Conklin was swift and firm in his action against the known abuser. Differentiation will not save your company if there is nothing to differentiate - sometimes, abuse is abuse. However, organizations that are committed to ethical practices may be able to learn from Conklin's communication tactics. To avoid even the appearance of manipulation, he enlisted third party experts to support his claims of differentiation. This was imperative to maintaining the integrity of his rebuttal. He distanced himself and his business from the abuser by leaning on the company's established values. Conklin then used those very values to diffuse the claims against him, further proving that his behavior was nothing like that of the former employee. Organizations must commit to presenting truthful information at all times during a crisis. Strategic communication is not an excuse to manipulate facts to blur reality. Any crisis response relying on differentiation must do so with integrity.

Citation

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