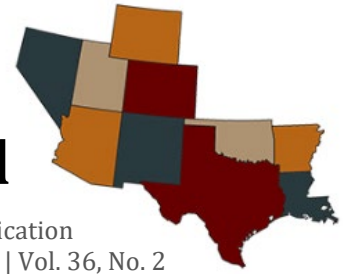


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## Company Responses in Times of Crisis: A Content Analysis of COVID-19 Emails

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This study searches for recurring themes appearing in the many emails sent during the COVID-19 pandemic from companies all over the world to their clients. The goal is to identify themes and if companies employed use of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) between national companies and local businesses. Through use of a content analysis, results indicate that many companies employed a corrective action approach to help mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, with national companies more likely to employ CSR than local businesses, if at all.

*Keywords: COVID-19, Crisis Communication, Email, Corporate Social Responsibility, Coronavirus, Image Restoration*

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**I**n early March of 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic began to have a significant impact on the United States as many communities began to adopt lockdown measures to slow the spread of the virus. In addition to impacting livelihoods and day-to-day activities, the virus also had an impact in an unexpected place: people's email inboxes. Early in the spread, many noted "a strange phenomenon whereby every restaurant you've ever eaten at or business you've ever patronized, no matter how long ago, has felt the need to email you to let you know that they're taking this very seriously" (Schwedel, 2020, para. 1). This onslaught of corporate email may have had unintended effects; rather than comforting and informing consumers, it may have increased consumer anxiety and led to an uptick in unsubscriptions from corporate email lists (Kornelis, 2020). The purpose of this study is to better understand how corporations utilized email to address their stakeholders at the outset of the coronavirus crisis. Based on literature addressing corporate social responsibility and crisis response, this study consists of a content analysis of 857 emails from businesses

and organizations sent at the outset of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States. Based on the content analysis, this study hopes to better understand organizations' initial crisis response strategies and priorities early in the coronavirus outbreak.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

At present, little to no research exists on the virus outside of official sources like the CDC due to the pandemic happening so recently. Much previous research deals with earlier diseases such as Ebola or Zika. What research that has already occurred over COVID-19 is minimal based on the virus' heavy appearance in Wuhan, China (Huang et al., 2020). For the sake of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic will be considered a natural disaster. A natural disaster is a force of nature that overwhelms the overall safety of a population (Gallant, 2008). In this setting, the pandemic becomes a natural disaster; as such, the corporate response to the pandemic becomes a form of corporate social responsibility (CSR). A key form of corporate communication with stakeholders is email.

### **Corporate Email**

In corporate communication, emails are frequently used as effective advertising methods, as emails are quickly sent and read to introduce goods or services to the target audience. Emails are often considered superior to traditional means of marketing (Salehi, Mirzaei, Aghaei, & Abyari, 2012) and have a higher return rate for companies to use as marketing tools (Hartemo, 2016) on the notion that the emails are relevant to the consumer and considered visually pleasing (Rettie, Grandcolas, & Payne, 2002). In addition, emails also require that all content is considered, not just usual measurements like reach and timing (Sahni, Wheeler, & Chintagunta, 2018).

Previous research also indicates that methods of determining the success of an email advertising campaign, such as the amount of audience members opening said email, is not an effective measurement as many members do not proceed to the desired action of the email further than opening it (Zhang, Kumar, & Cosguner, 2017). Emails also offer a convenient method for the audience to disengage through use of unsubscribing (Sahni, Wheeler, & Chintagunta, 2018). However, emails can be used as a means of communication for oncoming natural disasters, such as tornados (Sherman-Morris, 2010). With this, the research question is devised:

RQ1: To what extent does the corporate email response to COVID-19 include marketing messages?

### **Corporate Social Responsibility in a Crisis**

CSR is an action a company takes without being required to in response to helping a section or whole of society (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). A corporate image is something that should be highly protected (Barton, 2001) and helps to generate a trust between the client and business and therefore a competitive edge against other competitors in a field (Klink & Smith, 2001). Notably, corporate social responsibility showed to be major factor in influencing a company's image, customer value, and marketing performance (Alrubaiee, et. al, 2017).

Previously, CSR was introduced as a means of company reasonability to the community and clients a company serves (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). CSR has several characteristics: it comes from a mixture of a firms interest in doing good, while also upholding a trustworthy and integral brand image, even if CSR comes from a questionable motive (Smith, 2003). However, prior literature does not define a solid relationship between CSR and profitability (Aupperle, Carroll, & Hatfield, 1985). More recent

literature dictates probably benefits of CSR for a company but does not outright declare a relationship between CSR and profitability for an organization (Bhardwaj, Chatterjee, Demir, & Turut, 2018).

Past responses to natural disasters, like that of Hurricane Katrina in 2008, shows that responses from companies have been directed at customer relations, stakeholders in the company, and the employees thereof and responses were mostly done through partnerships with nongovernmental organizations, or donations to nongovernmental organizations (Johnson, Connolly & Carter, 2011). While CSR often comes hand in hand with concepts of trust, previous research indicates that companies with high levels of trust may not be as prepared for crises (Longstaff & Yang, 2008).

Previous literature indicates that corporate social responsibility is a result of pressure from social, political, and economic pressures (Roberts, 1992). Communities can heal from crises if they have access to trusted information, and the opposite, believe that an entity cannot withstand a crisis diminishes trust in said entity (Longstaff & Yang, 2008). This makes a connection between company image and CSR a highly important factor. As such, the following research question is proposed:

RQ2: To what extent do corporate email responses to COVID-19 include CSR messaging?

### **Corporate Crisis Response**

Previous research shows that there are two types of natural disaster methods of communication for a corporation to use: primarily anticipatory or primarily reactive (McKnight & Linnenluecke, 2019). Responses are critical from organizations in order to help ease or alleviate the disruption caused by natural disasters in a community (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2014). Essentially, anticipatory actions catch the crisis and attempt to mitigate the reactions, (Herbane, 2010) while reactive is simply reacting, after the fact, to a crisis. Depending on what kind of crisis may be happening, firms react differently and to varying levels of reaction (McKnight & Linnenluecke, 2019). Companies reopening help to foster a sense of normality and social settings and allow for a first-hand view of a rebound (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2014). Given the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the response may be either anticipatory or reactive. As such, the following research question is proposed:

RQ3: To what extent are corporate email responses to COVID-19 reactionary or anticipatory?

**Image Repair.** In addition to anticipatory and reactive crises responses, companies often engage in “image repair” during corporate crises (Benoit, 2015). Through the lens of image restoration theory, the concept of “image” becomes almost synonymous with “reputation.” Benoit and colleges have previously used image restoration to study the reputation repairs of public figures and programs (Burns & Bruner, 2000). Image restoration occurs when a negative event has led to a “diminished reputation of a company or person” (Battle, 2016 p. 17). A rhetoric has emerged affecting almost every human (Jackson, 2008) giving way for ultimately three options: apologize, create an excuse why a negative event happened, or try to restore their image (Battle, 2016). In turn, this has created five options for defense: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Burns & Bruner, 2000). In short, it is a persuasive communication device that allows accused parties to build a defense and to determine if the defense was effective (Jackson, 2008).

Of the five options, each has its benefits and specific types of restoration situations to be used in. For example, the only effective way to restore Jim Cramer’s reputation during his 2009 battle with Jon Stewart was mortification (an apology) of Cramer’s poor decisions and misinformation to the viewers of his show. Notably, all other methods failed Cramer to restore his reputation (Browning, 2011). Benoit

dives deeper to develop his theory: denial contains two types, simple denial and shifting blame, and reducing offensiveness divides into bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack the accuser, and compensation (1995).

In regards to the current investigation, when companies have been faced with a natural disaster, corrective action has been employed as the dominant defensive strategy (Muralidharan, Dillistone, & Shin, 2011). In these situations, corrective action is most effective when it includes direct, concrete steps to be taken to address the crisis (Benoit & Henson, 2009). Corrective action has shown to be vital in improving an organization's reputation in a crisis (Cai, Ting, & Peng, 2009; Walsh & McCallister-Spooner, 2011). As such, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H1: Corrective Action will be the most frequent response in emails addressing COVID-19.

## **METHODS**

In order to help understand and classify the messages being sent from companies, a random sample of emails pertaining to how companies responding to the COVID-19 pandemic was collected via requests on social media. Over 1,200 emails were collected between March 10th and April 1st via messages posted to the investigators' social media soliciting social connections to forward them COVID-related emails—to the best of the researchers' understanding, this is the first time a study examining emails over the COVID-19 pandemic was conducted; using emails dealing with the pandemic as the unit of analysis. A content analysis was employed to further understand and categorize the messages coming from companies.

Overall, 857 emails were collected once duplicate emails were disposed. Using a confidence interval of four, a sample of 361 emails were coded. Emails were numbered and split into two folders for two independent coders. 50 emails (13.9% of sample) were coded by both coders to establish intercoder reliability using Holsti's formula. Emails were coded looking for recurring themes and categorized into one of image restoration theory's five denominations: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. In this setting, denial became the concept that the pandemic was not serious, evading responsibility became ignoring regulations from the CDC or WHO and other leading health officials, reducing offensiveness became downplaying the pandemic and the organization's responsibility to directly address the situation without denying it as a serious situation, corrective action became a company taking action to correct their current standards and practices to reflect the pandemic and mortification became fear of or disgust from the pandemic (CR=.9). All responses were deemed anticipatory or reactive to COVID-19 (CR=.96), with reactive messaging applied to emails where the company had been directly and specifically impacted by the virus. Due to the size of corporations sending emails—some national or international, and others local businesses—coders also determined if the email was sent from the national office of a major organization or if the message was sent from a local franchise or smaller regional/local business (CR=.92). Also, type of business was coded from categories such as transportation, food and drink, and arts, culture, and entertainment (CR=.8). Lastly, coders determined if the emails contained some sort of corporate social responsibility (CSR) for triggers such as employees receiving paid time off when sick or the company making a donation of some kind to an organization in need (CR=.8) and if the emails contained any form of strategic communication, such as promotional codes to promote purchasing and help drive sales in the pandemic (CR=.8).

## Sample

The majority of emails in the coded sample ( $N = 361$ ) came from national offices (60.7%,  $n = 219$ ), with the remaining 39.3% ( $n = 142$ ) coming directly from local franchises or small businesses/organizations. The largest category of organizations was shopping and retail (18.3%,  $n = 66$ ) followed by food and drink (13.6%,  $n = 49$ ). Table 1 includes the complete breakdown of emails by organization category.

## RESULTS

The first research question asked to what extent corporate email response to COVID-19 would include marketing messages. The vast majority of emails did not include a marketing message (75.9%,  $n = 274$ ). In addition, there were no differences between national organizations and local organizations regarding the inclusion of marketing messages,  $\chi^2 = 1.73, p = .19$ . The majority of national (73.5%,  $n = 161$ ) and local organizations (79.6%,  $n = 113$ ) did not include marketing messages.

The second research question asked to what extent corporate email responses to COVID-19 would include CSR messaging. As with marketing messaging, the vast majority did not include CSR messaging (84.2%,  $n = 304$ ). However, there was a statistically significant difference between national and local organizations,  $\chi^2 = 15.73, p < .001$ . While the majority of both types of organization emails did not include CSR messaging, national organizations (21.9%,  $n = 48$ ) were more likely to include CSR messaging than local organizations (6.3%,  $n = 9$ ).

The third research question asked to what extent corporate email responses to COVID-19 were reactionary versus anticipatory. Anticipatory messaging constituted the overwhelming majority of email responses (96.1%,  $n = 347$ ). There was not a statistically significant difference between national and local organizations in this regard,  $\chi^2 = 0.69, p = .41$ . Both national (96.8%,  $n = 212$ ) and local organization (95.1%,  $n = 135$ ) emails focused on anticipatory messaging.

Finally, hypothesis one posited that since the pandemic is not the company's fault, corrective action will be the most frequent response to the COVID-19 crisis. The majority of email responses' tones were corrective action (82.5%,  $n = 298$ ). The next largest category was reducing offensiveness (16.1%,  $n = 58$ ). The other three categories had negligible results: .6% were denial ( $n = 2$ ), .6% were mortification ( $n = 2$ ), and .3% were evading responsibility ( $n = 1$ ). There were significant differences between national and local organizations,  $\chi^2 = 17.01, p = .002$ , as national organizations (21.0%,  $n = 46$ ) were more likely to have the tone of reducing offensiveness than local organizations (8.5%,  $n = 12$ ). The complete results of the chi-square are included in Table 2. As corrective action was the tone of the majority of emails for both national and local organizations, this hypothesis was supported.

## DISCUSSION

These findings dictate consistencies and some differences between businesses at a national and local level in their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This denotes a response at either level would most likely not include marketing messages, and that national businesses were more likely to contain a message constituting CSR than local businesses, if at all. Overwhelmingly, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic were considered to be anticipatory and preparing for the pandemic such as closing shops to promote social distancing, as opposed to reactive dictating that at the time of these emails, businesses contacting their clients were not threatened by the pandemic. Lastly, the majority of responses were considered to be corrective action of some kind. Noticeably, many of the messages detailed what the

company was doing to help mitigate the spread of the coronavirus in their location having options from sanitizing high contact locations to temporarily closing their store(s).

These findings indicate that many corporate organizations were taking the pandemic seriously and doing what they could to mitigate the spread and retain business. By using image restoration theory, responses to the pandemic are noted in a means that maintain the company reputation—overwhelmingly, the companies sampled used corrective action in an attempt to maintain a trustworthy image that they were doing everything they could to slow the spread of the coronavirus in their locations. This supports previous research suggesting corrective action is a key defensive strategy employed when organizations are impacted by a natural disaster (Benoit & Henson, 2009; Muralidharan et al., 2011). In addition, with previous research showing that stores reopening help to bring a society back to a sense of normalcy (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2014), it can be speculated that businesses, although recognizing the pandemic, are working to maintain a sense of normalcy with their clients by communicating their goals.

Noticeably, the pandemic responses from companies did not feature much use of CSR messaging. In addition, these findings indicate that the local businesses were less likely to use CSR when compared to large national or international businesses. Research suggests the CSR activities are connected to brand image and social, economic, and political pressures (Roberts, 1992; Smith, 2003), which suggests that CSR is a part of the larger branding and brand relationship efforts of major corporations. Small to medium size businesses often lack the knowledge, access to necessary resources, and understanding of the benefits of branding efforts undertaken by major corporations (Inskip, 2004). As such, it is not surprising that smaller business would include CSR messaging at the same rate as larger organizations. National companies typically have more money to spend on CSR and more supplies or means to make donations than local businesses. However, it is worth noting that for the majority of emails from both categories of business, local and national, CSR messaging was not actually an important aspect of their messaging. The focus was on the consumer, suggesting organizations perhaps see email as being most effective when focused on their consumers, themselves, and not other organization stakeholders.

However, despite being consumer-centered, there were little to no marketing messages in the email responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. While emails are a useful, effective, and convenient means of corporations to market to their audience, corporations did not appear to consider these to be marketing emails at all. Previous research has focused on the effectiveness and measurement of email messages as a marketing tool (i.e. Hartemo, 2016; Salehi et al., 2012; Zhang, et al., 2017). The current investigation suggests corporations see value in email beyond simple marketing messages. Specifically, email was employed to assuage customer fears and protect corporate reputations through the corrective actions organizations were taking in light of the global pandemic. This was done without focusing on specific CSR or marketing cues.

### **Limitations**

The most significant limitation of this study is the fact that data was collected at the beginning of the pandemic's outbreak in the United States, and as such the emails reflect one slice of time compared to the entire span of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the emails selected are only reflective of the companies available through the convenience sample. While a complete sample of all emails sent addressing the coronavirus would not be possible to collect, a more robust sample would provide more

definitive insight. Furthermore, as this study employed a content analysis, it does not address the reaction of consumers to these messages, nor does it address the effect of such messaging.

### **Future Research**

Future research should look at different time points of the pandemic (these emails primarily looked at the beginning of the pandemic in America: namely March 2020) and through different mediums such as social media posts rather than emails. Additionally, future research should look at the aftereffects and communications of companies after the end of the formal pandemic.

Future research could also look at audience reactions to these emails. The size of the overall sample and the consistency in messaging across the sample suggests this was not a limited phenomenon, and it can be extrapolated that email users' email inboxes saw a significant volume of similarly themed messages. As such, future research should determine if these email messages had their desired effect of reassuring consumers about the organizations' commitment to their safety and their communities, or if the volume of email had some other effect.

In addition, many emails contact graphics and other visuals, which could make future research to see if attention grabbing images promoted the audience reading company COVID-19 emails. Future research should also examine the different types of messaging employed via email by corporations beyond specific marketing applications, with particular attention paid to the effectiveness of such efforts.

### **Table 1**

#### ***Organization Categories of Emails (N = 361)***

<i>Category</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Arts, Culture & Entertainment	26	7.2%
Automotive	1	.3%
Banking & Finance	24	6.6%
Business Services	9	2.5%
Community Organizations	23	6.4%
Church and Religion	14	3.9%
Dentists & Orthodontists	6	1.7%
Education	34	9.4%
Food and Drink	49	13.6%
Health Care	28	7.8%
Home Improvement	6	1.7%
Insurance	3	.8%
Internet & Web Services	3	.8%
Lodging & Travel	10	2.8%
Marketing & Advertising	2	.6%
News & Media	5	1.4%
Pet Services	3	.8%
Real Estate	2	.6%
Shopping & Retail	66	18.3%
Sports & Recreation	26	7.2%
Transportation	10	2.8%
Utilities	10	2.8%
Wedding, Events & Meetings	1	.3%

**Table 2*****Image Restoration Tone by Organization Scope (N = 361)***

<i>Category</i>	<i>National Organization</i>	<i>Local Organization</i>
Denial	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.4%)
Evading Responsibility	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.7%)
Reducing Offensiveness	46 (21.0%)	12 (8.5%)
Corrective Action	173 (79.0%)	125 (88.0%)
Mortification	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.4%)

Note.  $\chi^2(4, N = 361) = 17.01, p = .002$

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