THE SHifting CORPORate-CONSUMER RELATIONSHIP: HOW 
SOCIAL MEDIA HAS CAUSED A RHETORICAL SHIFT IN 
CORPORATE CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

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ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT

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There has been a steep rise in the popularity of social media since 2007. It has permeated several academic and professional fields, including business, marketing, communications, and public relations. With this rise in popularity has come a shift in the corporate-consumer relationship; it has given consumers more power than they have had before. Social media gives customers a public – even global – venue to voice their likes, dislikes, complaints, and comments. It also fosters the building of relationships between customers and between corporations and consumers. This latter relationship is far more equal than what existed in the past because social media has made customers more knowledgeable by giving them access to more information and more powerful by providing a public stage to voice preferences, criticisms, questions, and other feedback. This has allowed for an increased demand by customers for more transparency, honesty, and accountability from companies with which they do business. Essentially, social media has democratized the corporate communications field. This article looks at how these characteristics of social media have influenced crisis communications, culminating in suggestions on how these changes are best addressed by adopting alterations in corporate rhetorical strategies. Both social media and crisis communications are interdisciplinary topics that can benefit from an understanding of business, marketing, communications, and public relations. Such an interdisciplinary perspective can also benefit from considering rhetorical principles. There has already been a rhetorical shift in the study of public relations. However, in this new approach, the term “rhetoric” is often used superficially. In the field of rhetoric, there is little current research on corporate rhetoric in crisis situations. As a result, there is still ample room for further research on crisis communications in the age of social media from a rhetorical perspective. This paper will suggest connections that can be drawn between literature on social media in the marketing, communications, and public relations fields on the one hand and Aristotle’s three topoi of rhetoric – ethos, pathos, logos — on the other.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL MEDIA</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXAMINING SOME OF THE CHANGES SOCIAL MEDIA INSTIGATED IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing to One: Speaking to the Individual</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialommerce: Knowing Your Connected Audience</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDENTIFYING RHETORICAL PRINCIPLES THE RESEARCH REVIEWED IN PREVIOUS SECTIONS</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethos</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathos</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logos</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NARROWING FOCUS TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT &amp; RELATED RHETORICAL STRATEGIES</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Management in the Age of Social Media</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorically Looking at PR’s Four Claims of Effective Crisis Communications</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing the Audience</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a Human Ethos</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Trusting Relationships</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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INTRODUCTION

Social media has been a topic of interest for scholars and professionals for several years. Researchers in many different fields have explored its definition, reach, use, and potential. Considering social media in the corporate sphere, Brian Howlett, Chief Creative Officer at the Toronto advertising and marketing firm Agency59, describes the effect social media has had on his field and his clients’ business: “There has been a fundamental shift in the corporate-consumer relationship, resulting from the steep rise in popularity and use of social media since 2007.” Howlett’s statement suggests that, rather than being an asymmetrical power dynamic where the organization communicates a story to their stakeholders, social media sites have accustomed users to expecting that organizations will communicate with them, and put more emphasis on dialogue.

It is important to study how social media has influenced corporate crisis communications because, firstly, more and more organizations are including social media strategies in their crisis management plans. Gitanjali Laad and Gerald Lewis, support this suggestion by stating, “Organizations are increasingly implementing Social Media strategies as a part of their crisis management planning.” Secondly, social media has essentially changed the communication landscape. New problems have arisen, such as consumers’ expectations for an organization to communicate on a public stage and their increased expectation for timeliness. This combination leaves significant room for error and crisis mishandling because organizations have not been faced with these expectations before. Ultimately, if an organization fails to communicate effectively during a crisis, the public stage allows for mistakes to be more public than in previous decades. Also, Laad and Lewis suggest that the rise of social media has resulted in the power being taken from “those in marketing and public relations by the individuals and communities that can create, share, and consumer blogs, tweets, facebook entries, movies, pictures, and so forth.” Essentially, they are arguing that social media has made it increasingly easy for consumers to take the power that public relations and marketing professionals had over an organization’s brand. In a crisis situation, this adds increased pressure for organizations to communicate effectively with their
customers because poor communications can lead to added brand damage caused by the crisis. In a crisis situation, the rhetorical exigency is providing critical information to customers. Yet, on social media sites, the level of detail, style, and personalization that customers may expect is changing. With the shift in the power relations between organizations and their customers, Erik Qualman quotes Ken Robbins, Founder of Digital Agency Response Mine Interactive, as saying, “The market will be much less tolerant of poor service and poor products and high margins with this social communications infrastructure” (98). As a result of the dialogue that social media supports, customers are interacting more with each other, making them better informed on product/service features, benefits, deficiencies, and value for money. Similarly, social media also supports greater dialogues with companies, which enables customers to comment, complain, and ask questions on a company’s products or services, and expect that an organization will respond more.

Essentially, with the increased level of information to which customers have access with the rise of social media, they have the power to be less tolerant of inadequate products or services. As the relationship is changing, the methods of communicating to the public are changing, and thus the messages the public receives have are changing as well. Research into social media’s influence on corporate communications and public relations is abundant, and scholars in Public Relations have begun to see the need for a rhetorical perspective in their research, but connections between the fields that promote a deeper understanding of rhetoric still have room for growth.

By nature, social media is an interdisciplinary topic. It is used in personal, academic, and professional settings. One area in particular that has been changed by social media is crisis communications. For this topic to be fully understood, it must be looked at from many angles. Timothy Coombs recognizes this and asserts that Crisis Communications is an interdisciplinary field (*Ongoing Crisis* xi). Social media has permeated business marketing, communications, and public relations fields. Crisis communications also affects each of these fields. As a result, studying the use of social media in crisis communications calls for the use of different professional and academic perspectives. Coombs is a professor in the Nicholson School of Communication at the University of Central Florida. He created the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which will be discussed later in this article.

Understanding crisis rhetoric in the age of social media requires review of several fields
because it is being used and its possibilities are being explored in several areas – business, marketing, public relations, and communications. To illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of crisis management, Coombs argues that: “A crisis manager would have to review the business communication consumer research, rhetoric, organizational communication, and public relations literature to collect and integrate all the ideas needed to develop guidelines about what to say during a crisis” (Ongoing Crisis xi). In other words, a professional employed in crisis communications is responsible for understanding that crisis communications is an interdisciplinary field and becoming educated in each mentioned field he mentioned. Likewise, scholars studying modern crisis communications should also recognize its interdisciplinary nature and study it from an interdisciplinary perspective, with greater attention paid to rhetoric. This is especially true as social media is permeating corporate communications, marketing, and public relations. A rhetorical perspective on this shift in communications can be useful for scholars studying these fields because it would allow further exploration of how an organization’s communication strategies work to persuade and influence audiences even as they have gained power.

Scholars studying marketing, communications, and public relations have been looking at social media’s effect on their areas of specialty for several years. There has also been a rhetorical shift in the study of Public Relations. Scholars in this field have recognized the importance of using a rhetorical perspective to study topics in public relations. However, “rhetoric” is often used as a static term by these scholars and with the assumption that the audience of public relations journals understands its meaning. For example, Steve Mackey claims, “The turn seems to take the notion ‘rhetoric’ as a given and then use rhetoric as a term which is used to theorise the activity of public relations. What is missing is engagement with the flourishing theoretical field which is currently revising the notion of ‘rhetoric’” (Mackey 2). Scholars in the field of public relations aren’t using the term “rhetoric” as deeply as they could to bring a new lens through which to study their field. Ultimately, a more thorough understanding of the term “rhetoric” may be useful for a new kind of understanding of public relations practices. Traditionally, research on public relations relies more on social science methodology than an approach characteristic of the humanities. The former provides more objective data and empirical evidence while the latter is more concerned with logic, analysis, and speculation. Elizabeth Toth, Professor and Chair of the Public Relations
department at the University of Maryland, believes that this difference in focus can lead to a different perception of the interactions between organizations and the public. She states, “Rhetoricians and critical scholars take a humanistic approach to their studies of public relations. They consider the organization as a speaker or rhetor, who seeks to influence stakeholders, employers, media, government, activist groups, and society” (48). By studying organizations as rhetors, especially in the age of social media when customers expect organizations to speak more like humans, scholars can gain further insight into how an organization’s communications work or fail.

Rhetorical literature on crisis communications, especially in the age of social media, is rare. Dan Millar and Robert Heath begin providing rhetorical perspectives on corporate crisis communications in their book *Responding to Crisis: A Rhetorical Approach to Crisis Communication*. In their introduction, they illustrate their purpose for contributing and compiling this book. They claim, “Public relations literature is littered with case studies of organizations which lost brand equity, suffered damage to products, services, and lost issue positions because of inept handling of crisis preparation and response….Taking a rhetorical view of crisis events and utterances, this book is devoted to adding new insights to the discussion” (1). Timothy Coombs and Elizabeth Toth also contributed an article on crisis and rhetoric in *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations II*, that argues for taking a rhetorical and critical approach to the study of public relations because this new perspective can help to further develop public relations scholarship. Finally, scholars at the University of Georgia contribute a rhetorical perspective on crisis communications in a chapter titled “FEMA and the Rhetoric of Redemption: New Directions in Crisis Communication Models for Government Agencies” in Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay’s book *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*. However, the focus is on governmental crisis communications, not corporate. As mentioned, Øyvind Ihlen suggests that rhetorical studies of public relations practices are often confined to case studies, not theoretical examinations. There has, however, been extensive work done on organizational rhetoric over the past two decades as George Cheney and Jill McMillan indicate the rise of scholarly interest in this in 1990, “scholars have only recently begun to discover and examine the pervasiveness of persuasion within every area of organizational life… “(93). This shows that even though scholars have been interested in the persuasive, or rhetorical, abilities of organizations for several years,
there is still room for further inquiry and research. Dr. Heath confirms that *Responding to Crisis: A Rhetorical Approach to Crisis Communication* is one of few substantive modern works on the rhetoric of corporate crisis communications (Personal interview).

Social media has brought a change in the rhetorical decisions organizations make regarding the construction of their ethos and their understanding of their audiences. Organizations have had to adapt to a new kind of corporate-consumer relationship, develop new ethos that appeal to the new kind of consumer and ultimately alter the traditional communications strategy that suits the increase of power that customers have in the corporate-consumer relationship. As previously mentioned, W. Timothy Coombs’ theory of Situational Crisis Communication (SCCT) is one of the leading current theories on crisis communications and includes insights on corporate crisis communications that fit with the changed relationship between organizations and consumers. It states that there are key facets of the crisis situation that influence the attention that is given to aspects of the crisis and the reputations held by stakeholders. First, there are three factors that shape the reputational threat: (1) initial crisis responsibility, (2) crisis history, and (3) prior relational reputation. Each of these factors is assessed in accordance with audience’s perspective (Coombs, “Crisis Management”). This theory suggests that, when framing a crisis, an organization should consider its audience’s perception of the organization and its role in the crisis more than it considers how it wishes to be perceived. During a crisis situation, the consumers’ demand increases for transparency, a human ethos, being spoken to as individuals, and establishing a relationship with a reliable company. While the company evaluates these three factors in relation to the crisis at hand, and knowing the audience’s expectations, it must also strategize about how to communicate to its customers. This is rhetoric. According to Deirdre McCloskey, rhetoric is “merely speech with designs on the reader” (xiv). In other words, it is speech strategically designed for a specific audience. In their book *Responding to Crisis: A Rhetorical Approach to Crisis Communication*, Dan Millar and Robert Heath describe a rhetorical approach to crisis. They say that, “A rhetorical approach to crisis explicitly acknowledges that the responsibility for the crisis, its magnitude, and its duration are contestable. It stresses the message development and presentation part of the crisis response… It features discourse, one or more statements made over time” (6). Now, in the age of social media, this contestable nature of a crisis means that an organization’s claims on
responsibility, magnitude, and duration can be contested by social media users on a public stage and that, since timeliness is valued, it cannot always extensively prepare its responses to questions and comments by users. An organization’s communication strategy often calls for some decisions to be made without certainty. This is relatable to Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as “things about which we deliberate but have no systematic rules…We only deliberate about things which seem to admit of issuing in two ways; as for those things which in the past, present, or future be otherwise, no one deliberated about them…for nothing would be gained by it” (1.2.1357a). This means that rhetoric is about this idea of contestation. It is about taking contestable facts or situations and using the available means of persuasion to make an argument for one way of perceiving the situation. For the purposes of this article, this means that an organization needs to acknowledge the contestable nature of the facts it communicates to its audience, and that the dialogue that may ensue is a part of crisis management in the age of social media. Before engaging in this dialogue, to ensure that an organization remains consistent in its messages, even with the contestable nature of crises, an organization should know how it is perceived, how it wishes to be portrayed, who the target audience is, and what information the organization needs to share, and what information the audience expects to learn, if its crisis communications are more likely to be effective. These considerations encompass the four principles, or topoi, outlined in communications and public relations literature - transparency, audience, human ethos, and trust.

This article aims to highlight the shift in communications that social media has enabled, some of the ways it has affected the corporate-consumer relationship, and some key themes in effective crisis communications. A review of some literature from the corporate communications, public relations, and marketing fields, in addition to a few scholarly articles from the rhetoric field, will lead to my conclusion that a deeper engagement with rhetorical concepts may be useful when looking at crisis communications in the age of social media. It will be suggested that there are important connections between literature written by scholars and professionals in the Communications, Public Relations, and Marketing fields and the three topoi in Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric – ethos, pathos, and logos.

This article first defines social media and, then, after reviewing some literature on social media’s influence on business, suggests some ways that it has pushed organizations to
alter their rhetorical performance in the public sphere. Previously, communications from organizations to their customers was just that – a rhetorical performance. Now, with social media sites, corporate communications have become more open and participatory. To borrow terms from Mikhail Bakhtin, previous organizational communications were monologic performances – authoritarian and often without consideration of audience. Current communications on social media sites are dialogic performances - constant interactions with other users, responses to other messages, and evolutions of the organizations’ previous comments (Bakhtin 292-293). Previously, organizations considered their audience mostly when developing their external communications and more often hoped that the communications would evoke a positive and singular response. Currently, social media sites allow customers to question communications sent by organizations, and to communicate their own stories to the public. Now, the organization is not only responsible for the original message, but also for engaging with all subsequent comments. The relationship has shifted from being more asymmetrical to more symmetrical. Customers now have more power than ever before, making corporate communications less of a performance and more of a social interaction. The way an organization communicates to its stakeholders is highly rhetorical (Millar and Heath 6). It must use an ethos, which is essentially a carefully developed persona, that suits the channel of communication, the audience, and contain relevant and appealing content (Millar and Heath 13). This ethos can be achieved by adhering to four main guiding principles used in Public Relations, Business Communications, and Marketing literature. These principles suggest that organizations should: be as transparent as possible during a crisis situation, know its target audience and should speak to the audience as a group of individuals, develop a human ethos to more easily relate to audience members/customers, work towards building trusting relationships with customers.
SOCIAL MEDIA

A more traditional definition of social media by Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein is, “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (61). This definition highlights the unique characteristic of users being able to generate content that is visible by a large public that has lead to the shift in the power relationship between organizations and users. Since this article discusses the changing communication strategies that have resulted from the rise of social media, such as organizations building relationships with customers and customers expecting organizations to use a human ethos, the following two definitions are from a marketing perspective. The Marketing department is largely responsible for how the organization is perceived by customers and thus this perspective can shed valuable light on how social media is understood by the people who use it to begin building relationships and constructing personas, or eth. Rob Peterson of Barn Raisers, a Marketing Solutions company, defines social media as: “the media channel that relies on listening and conversation, as opposed to a monologue, to get your point across, make a connection and build a relationship” (qtd. in Cohen). Deborah Cohen of Strategic Objectives, a public relations agency, as providing a more detailed definition:

Social media is the new Wild, Wild West of Marketing, with brands, businesses, and organizations jostling with individuals to make news, friends, connections and build communities in the virtual space. A plethora of platforms ranging from Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube to a vast variety of newly emerging and rapidly dwindling services, like, Foursquare and MySpace, social media is all about influencing people one-on-one; and achieving P2P (person-to-person) communication that influences awareness, acceptance and behavior. Powerful tactics and tools of communication, social networks can and should play an important role in every brand-building, maintenance and protection strategy. (qtd. in Cohen)

Unlike previous Internet sites, social media sites allow communities to form around certain subjects or topics of interest. Previously, users could streamline their information searches, but could not easily interact with others searching similar information. Social media sites are
community-oriented. Within this community, there are many smaller communities united by topics of interest, such as organizations, politics, etc. Users from around the world can now interact with each other and build these communities. With changing customer expectations over the past few years, building traction quickly since 2007, companies are now challenged to interact with and build relationships with these communities. For many businesses, using social media sites to interact with customers has become a necessity (Murphy). The marketing definitions above describe a range of capabilities that are characteristic of social media. However, each of these characteristics overlaps on its capability to foster the building of relationships between users. These sites enable for individuals to create relationships with strangers and to strengthen relationships with friends, family, and acquaintances around the world. Over the past decade, these sites have continued to grow in popularity and uses. Individuals, politicians, and corporations are all involved in social media to promote their brand, events, elections, to build networks, and more. These are online sites that can be accessed by any person with an Internet connection. More importantly for the purposes of this article, social media has introduced a new model of engagement for both business and non-business relationships (Social Media Academy). This model of engagement requires a new set of rhetorical strategies that incorporate the changing expectations of consumers. I will discuss these changes in more depth in the following sections and will then discuss the implications for crisis communications.

Historically, organizations have had greater influence over their public image and reputation. They had the knowledge, finances, and means to shape stories for the media. Now, this power has also been given to the stakeholders. If organizations do not engage on social media sites, consumers have more power over stories. To mitigate this power reduction, organizations are increasingly choosing to become involved. With one 140-character tweet, a company can send a message to any individual or any group instantly. This is a new, relatively easy, and inexpensive way for corporate communicators to establish relationships with customers and potential customers (Feniak). Boyd Neil, National Practice Leader of Hill and Knowlton Canada’s Social Media team, says: “a light went on five years ago when I realized that the social web really is a communications game changer.” There is now a vast opportunity for interaction with the customer that can lead to brand strengthening, cheaper market research, and more effective external communications. Ron Ruggless, writer
for National Restaurant News, quotes Denny Lynch, the senior vice president of communications at Wendy’s as saying, “Social media is really crafted to have individual conversations, so the more you can engage your consumers – you hope and believe – the more interested they are in your brand.” Social media and the power that it has given to the consumer has also given organizations the opportunity to build consumer trust and brand loyalty to be stronger than before. When not engaging in a monologic performance to communicate with customers and, instead, using a dialogue to achieve a more personal level of engagement, it can help to strengthen corporate-consumer relationships to be stronger than they may have had the opportunity to be before. These relationships are especially important during crises. By engaging with consumers on social media before a crisis occurs, a company can already have established relationships and be contributing to the online conversation when a crisis hits. This allows a company to immediately focus on mitigating damage through online communications rather than building trust when consumers’ likely perceive the organization negatively. Further suggestions on how social media can be used to establish corporate-consumer relationships before crises occur, and the effects that these relationships can have on crisis communications, will be discussed later in this article.
EXAMINING SOME OF THE CHANGES SOCIAL MEDIA INSTIGATED IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Because social media has changed the power relationship between corporations and consumers, communications by the consumer now have more reach than before. Individuals can now post online and form communities in which they can write about positive or negative experiences. If displeased with an experience, consumers can post online. If posts that are critical of a company go viral, serious reputation damage, loss of consumer loyalty, and possibly negative financial implications can result. Many companies are therefore now developing online personas as a means to better connect with their customers. The audience can better identify with and engage with a company whose ethos is constructed to appear as an approachable individual rather than a large inhuman entity. For example, when O.B. Tampons unexpectedly discontinued a favored product without notifying its consumers, customers were very vocal in expressing their displeasure on social media sites. Rather than issuing a press release that either formally apologized, explained the discontinuation, or remaining silent, the company used social media to personally apologize to affected customers. The company released a video of a man playing the piano and singing an apology on the Internet. To view the ad, customers had to type in their name. Then, when the man sang the apology, he sang it to the name entered, creating a personalized apology for every customer saying that O.B. Tampons is “really, really sorry.” This meets consumer expectations for personalized treatment, a caring organization, and a human ethos since there was one man representing the organization in the apology. Where online company personalities are established, customers may be more likely to expect the organization to hear their comments and respond. The power dynamic between companies and their customers has shifted. Essentially, customers expect a new kind of experience from companies with which they do business – an experience that mirrors an interpersonal relationship. To help build this relationship, companies are increasingly expected to interact on a personal level with their customers. To help convey a personal interest in them, many customers expect
companies to interact with them on topics outside business, such as hockey or football games, as well as those valuable to the company. For example, Emily Lamb, Marketing Coordinator at TrojanOne Integrated Brand Activation in Toronto, Canada, finds this to be a key aspect of communications that social media has changed. For her, social media sites are spaces for conversations to begin and for relationships to evolve, to foster identification between the public and a company. She says:

Social media is where we open a space for our clients to speak to their clients, much like how we’d converse with a neighbour. We discuss our client’s products and services, but also about things that are meaningful to their clients. The conversation has to be worthwhile if it’s going to successfully start a relationship, and if we are going to earn brand loyalty from that customer. (Lamb)

Since social media has allowed for these kinds of personalized conversations to happen between companies and their customers, the latter can now expect a two-way conversation and that organizations will be interested in showing that they care about them by treating them as individuals.

It is interesting to note that social media was not launched by an industry giant, but is actually more of a grassroots development (Hamilton). The people who started these sites were entrepreneurs who saw an opportunity for a global network, a shift in power relations, and the individual’s right to have their voice heard. These sites are not the product of large companies, like IBM. With the enhanced corporate transparency that social media has brought, organizations can spin a story, but there are ramifications. Now people are more likely to find out whether it is true or not and, if the organization is caught in a lie, this lie will likely be published on social media sites. This results in quick damage to the organization’s reputation. In *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*, Coombs argues for the importance of dialogue between consumers and an organization. He claims, “Regular, two-way communication between the organization and the stakeholder is the life-blood of a favorable organizational-stakeholder relationship” (Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis* 150). Before social media, stakeholders had less ability to question or disprove the story told by the corporation through the media. Any questions or opinions they held had to be directed through formal, organization-controlled channels.

For the consumer, expectations have changed. Brian Solis argues for the distinction between assuming that the changes occurring in corporate communications are not a direct
result of social media, but rather the change in consumer expectations that social media has enabled. He states, “What the social media gurus aren’t telling you is that the landscape for business isn’t changing because of social media, it’s changing because consumer expectations are evolving” (Solis). Social media has not changed business; it has facilitated a change in how customers expect companies to interact with them. Social media has given customers a venue to voice their wants and needs and has prompted companies to hear them, resulting in an opportunity for a Hegelian dialectic in which opposing views can confront each other, which results in a changed relationship (synthesis). With the added power that social media has given them, customers have come to expect that their voices are heard, that the organization is interested in them individually, and that the organization is interested in presenting itself as transparently as possible. Customers are less likely to unquestioningly accept the company’s story communicated to the media. Now, they expect that companies will communicate directly to them truthfully. If a question is asked, the company is expected to answer. If the answer is not yet known, customers expect to be told so (Godin). The changed expectations of customers also effects crisis communications, and these effects will be discussed in later sections.

**MARKETING TO ONE: SPEAKING TO THE INDIVIDUAL**

Rather than marketing to masses, or segments, or even microsegments, consumers expect a personalized approach. This characterizes the age of Markets of One (Gilmore and Pine). Social media supports the progression of this personalized attention for the consumer. With the direct connection between consumer and corporation that social media allows, consumers can expect companies to market to them directly. Chris Anderson has coined the “The Long Tail.” Essentially, this term describes the shift in business that consists of retailing strategy now being more about realizing the profitability of selling smaller amounts of many harder-to-find and unique digital items, as opposed to selling large amounts of a smaller selection of digital items. This allows for companies to profit off storing unique items that customers are difficult to find elsewhere. This provides more selection for individuals to find items that precisely suit their needs, rather than being lumped into a generalized category of consumers. Sales from each item are relatively low, but the profit comes from not incurring storage costs and selling a lot of different unique items to a large number of
individuals. In the age of social media, it is about finding ways to serve everyone. Anderson says, “Rather than lumping consumers into predetermined demographic and psychographic categories… treat them like individuals who reveal their likes and dislikes through their behavior” (123). This individualized treatment of customers extends into marketing, as described by Chris Feniak, Client Solutions at Rogers Media, Inc. He says, “Social media allows consumers to share what they like and why they like it, rather than being told what they like and why through traditional forms of marketing.” With companies having the ability to serve their customers’ needs, customers expect their individual needs be acknowledged and met. This is also true during crisis situations. Companies can see what information or actions customers want from them after a crisis occurs. Knowing this, customers are likely to maintain their expectation that companies will listen to their comments and deliver the information that they want during crises.

**Socialommerce: Knowing Your Connected Audience**

The Internet has made large amounts of information available to anyone. The difficulty is that people need to know what they are looking for in order to find it. Social media sites have made navigating through this ocean of information significantly easier while individualizing each user’s experience. Qualman provides the example of a teen and her mother searching for “Paris Hilton.” If the teen often uses the Internet to find information on celebrities, her search for “Hilton” will likely result in many links to pages about the heiress. However, her mother’s search results may be more likely to provide links to Hilton Hotels in Paris, France (Qualman 7). Considering the influence that this individualization may have on business, it is possible that an organization’s customer is more likely to find news about the organization, and comments by other customers, than someone completely unconnected to the company. Qualman also suggests that, “consumers will soon search Facebook, hi5, Orkut, and so on for products and services they want to research and/or purchase” (8). This capability supports Qualman’s idea of socialommerce: “Socialommerce harnesses the simple idea that people value the opinion of other people” (Qualman 89). The appeal of sharing personal opinions, experiences, and thoughts is appealing to many people, so the online community has grown to be significant in size. It is often mistakenly believed that these
updates are about mundane personal activities, but they are often about positive and negative experiences with different products, services, or businesses. Facebook alone has 100 billion status updates per day (Qualman 90). This impacts business on two levels: marketing and reputation management. This is a new way for businesses to market themselves, at a much lower cost. Qualman also reports that 78% of people trust their peers’ opinions (89). This means that a negative post by a friend is extremely detrimental, while positive posts can be very positive. People trust their network more than an appealing marketing campaign (Qualman 94-95).

With social media, individuals within the target group can publish their perceptions for the organization to see (Siler). However, this also means that customers have a very public forum to vocalize negative experiences. Once a relationship is established online, stakeholders expect that the organization will stay involved. The relationship cannot be abandoned. The better the relationship between an organization and consumer, the more feedback the organization will receive on its products/services and the more the consumer will feel increasingly important to the organization. Stronger relationships help to keep customers interested and happy to continue to do business with an organization (Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier). To build relationships with this new kind of vocal customer, organizations have had to change their rhetorical strategies. These changes are also applicable to crisis communications. Since consumers are becoming increasingly connected and interested in sharing experiences, it is likely that customers will continue to share their experiences during crises. This can lead to an increase in negative publicity and brand damage. Understanding how to effectively develop strategies for communicating with customers during a crisis on the public and connected stage of social media is helpful for mitigating reputation damage.

The following sections will further discuss the changes in communication strategies that social media has instigated and suggest connections with traditional rhetorical principles, using examples of real corporate crises to illustrate these concepts.
IDENTIFYING RHETORICAL PRINCIPLES THE RESEARCH REVIEWED IN PREVIOUS SECTIONS

AUDIENCE

An organization’s response to a crisis is important because an ineffective response can result in the organization’s losing control of the messaging about the crisis or even the opportunity to deal with it. An organization must be careful when conveying its interpretation of a crisis to an audience of consumers because by either distancing itself from objective facts or glossing over the facts to be overly favorable to the organization, a company’s crisis communications can come to be seen as a distortion of reality that is intended to minimize the organizations culpability. This is otherwise known as “spin” (Millar and Heath 15). As mentioned earlier, organizations have a new level of accountability for their communications, especially during a crisis. The level of transparency expected by stakeholders is not conducive to “spinning.” The audience is “smarter” and individuals are more vocal than before. Not only can an organization risk losing consumer trust when “spinning” a crisis story, but it can also be risking this loss of trust more publicly. Now, the audience can also contribute to the story, meaning that if lies are told or critical information is withheld, social media users can reveal it. With the global visibility of social media messages, stakeholders know that they have more power over an organization’s brand image than ever before. Thus, an ethical rhetorical response is required in a crisis situation. These responses require a message that is both beneficial for the organization and informative for stakeholders. Millar and Heath claim, “The value of this rhetorical approach is that it endures because it helps the key players to know what happened or will happened, what actions have been taken, will be taken, or should be taken to benefit the persons whose interests are at stake” (15). These kinds of communication appear more honest and transparent, and as a result can alleviate stress for affected stakeholders. Social media calls for quick messages and responses. By communicating necessary information to and answering questions by stakeholders, communications can seem more trustworthy, which can help to alleviate customer stress.
Rather than appearing to have more interest in protecting itself, an ethical rhetorical response suggests to consumers that the organization also cares about protecting its customers during crises.

Millar and Heath describe crises as rhetorical problems (10). Problems need solutions. Thus, they argue, effective crisis responses often come in the form of a problem-solution presentation, which suggests that an appropriate solution for crisis situations is for the organization to communicate more objective specifics of the situation, such as possible cause(s), significance, duration, and effects, and to suggest factors that may increase or decrease the effects, not just a story or framing of the incident that sheds positive light on the organization, which is reminiscent of “spinning” (10-11). This is not necessarily a complete “solution” in the strict meaning of the word, but rather more of an addressing of public concerns. For Millar and Heath, crisis communications appear to be more of a dialogue through statements and counterstatements. It is not just about cleverly framing a crisis and expecting the negative implications of crises to evaporate as a result, but rather understanding that there will still be a dialogue of comments and counter comments by the organization and consumers in this frame. If the organization fails to communicate, “these markets, audiences, and publics rightly call on other organizations…to force the offending organization to control itself. Punitive responses to the organization can include refusal to buy its products, onerous legislation and regulation, and litigation” (Millar and Heath 8). Though these authors are discussing a “worst-case” scenario where legal governing bodies are needed to force a company to publicly communicate about a crisis, social media gives power to consumers to pressure an organization to communicate with and respond to its stakeholders in a crisis.

**ETHOS**

In classical rhetoric, “ethos” is developed from a speaker’s knowledge of the target audience. Many classical theories suggest that audiences have a range of typical motives, values, prejudices, and appeals (Bauman 263). As defined in the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, “This knowledge enables the speaker to project a favorable self-image to shape arguments in ways that accommodate differing audiences and occasions” (Bauman 263). The effectiveness of a rhetor’s message is heavily reliant on the construction of this self-image for the particular audience. Though classic rhetorical theory often uses “ethos” to refer to a single
orator, in the modern context of social media, organizations can also present themselves as an individual entity. In chapter three of the *Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*, Cheney and McMillan, argue that there has been a change in the understanding of ethos in modern society: “While classical rhetoric emphasized the intentionality of the speaker, contemporary rhetoric examines a range of communication situations in which intentions are not tied to one person or decision maker” (82). This suggests that multiple people can contribute to the construction of an organization’s ethos. Since social media sites make it easier for customers to perceive an organization as a unified entity, while not identifying an actual person as the sole orator.

On social media sites, corporate accounts often looks very similar, if not the same as, other users’ personal accounts. For example, on Facebook, a corporate page still has a display picture, a place for its name, sections for photos, wall posts, and friends, just like other users’ accounts. This makes them appear more as an individual entity, possibly even more human, than ever before. This not only supports the creation of a human persona, or ethos, but has become characteristic of social media communications, as Coombs and Evans both argued. Stakeholders are beginning to interact with their organizations as individuals on social media sites. As a result, it is more effective if an organization embraces this perception and develops an ethos that best suits communicating with customers on social media, rather than attempting to fit past communications strategies, where corporate entities pushed information to their stakeholders, to this new communication channel.

Social media communications usually entail more informal language, little to no jargon, and forming engagement that involves asking and responding to questions and comments in real-time. Millar and Heath claim, “The key rhetorical guideline is that style must fit the rhetorical exigency” (13). As discussed in the previous section, the rhetorical exigency of crisis situations is delivering critical information to stakeholders that discuss solutions, effects, and durations. On social media sites, stakeholders are more likely to expect a human ethos and timely delivery of information, not a self-serving persona. The human ethos helps to take away the negative perceptions that customers may have of traditional corporate entities, and help to make the message appear more trustworthy. Essentially, the premise for crisis communications from a rhetorical perspective is that “the organization needs to look to the quality of its performance as the foundation of its messages that are
generated in response to inquiries and implied by the nature of the crisis. Then it needs statements that address the key topics and themes from the perspectives of its stakeholders” (Millar and Heath 14). This means that, in crises, when communicating with organizations, stakeholders are likely to expect an organization to ensure them that the crisis is being dealt with and they are being protected. For this organization, this likely means that it needs to look at the quality of its performance in several ways. Rather than evaluating its performance just in traditional media outlets or press releases, it must also attempt to evaluate it on the more personal and informal stage of social media.

An organization’s performance during a crisis is often judged successful by the organization itself if it can mitigate reputation damage, while customers are satisfied if the organization responds more honestly, acknowledges the crisis, and appears interested in the impact it has on stakeholders. Essentially, many stakeholders value a humane crisis response from organizations. For example, in The Handbook of Crisis Communication, Coombs and Holladay discuss the emergence of the term “corporate apologia.” This is a rhetorical concept that describes the use of communications for self-defense, especially when protecting perceptions of one’s character. Coombs claims that “a person’s character is called into question when she or he is accused of engaging in an action that involves wrongdoing” (Coombs and Holladay, Handbook 30). This applies to organizations as well. When a crisis occurs, it disturbs customer expectations of how an organization is supposed to act. Coombs claims, “A crisis violates stakeholder expectations of how an organization should operate, thus calling its social legitimacy into question” (Coombs and Holladay, Handbook 30).

Corporate apologia, or an apology, is used to defend its reputation. It suggests that an organization knows it has done wrong, that it has negatively affected its customers, and that it is working to fix the situation. By appearing apologetic, it helps to support an organization’s trustworthy ethos. An example of effective use of corporate apologia will be discussed in the following section to illustrate the beneficial results an apology can have on an organization’s ethos, as well as a link between using ethos to create effective pathos.

Audience members like to be connected to people with similar interests, as Qualman and Anderson argue. This suggests that they may be browsing social media profiles of other customers, even connecting with other customers, while seeing any comments made about the company and watching how the company responds. With the real-time, direct
communication characteristic of social media, in a crisis situation, there are more problems to address on a stage more public than before. Not only should companies address steps they are taking to minimize the effect on stakeholders as a whole, but it should also address the individual problems of affected stakeholders. Each individual question or complaint by an affected stakeholder on social media sites can contribute to the public perception of the communications during a crisis, and thus, part of the rhetorical exigency of a crisis situation. By fulfilling the information needs of individual customers on a public stage like social media, other users can see this fulfillment and more customers can see that the organization is working to keep stakeholders informed during a crisis. This, in turn, can support a credible ethos, and that can help contribute to a positive perception of the organization.

**PATHOS**

The Encyclopedia of Rhetoric outlines the difficulty that classic rhetoricians had for developing a standard definition of “pathos” as it was constantly evolving and changing for different rhetoricians. However, with the resurgence of rhetoric in the twentieth century, a consensus was reached between scholars of rhetoric that defines “pathos” as “an appeal based on passion or emotion… it is [pathos] that impels an audience to act. Emotions range from mild to intense” (Green 555). These emotions can be gentle, from wishes for well-being to inciting fury. In some situations, it can overrule rational thought (Green 555). In a crisis situation, an organization often wishes to mitigate fury or irrational thought. It wishes to incite understanding, trust, and, essentially, a calm perspective on the situation. Thus, rather than spurring the audience to action, pathos may be used more to withhold action against the organization. For example, during the recall of all Maple Leaf Food’s products in 2008 due to a listeria bacteria outbreak, the organization openly dismissed all financial and legal counsel, refused to focus its communications on the compensation to affected families, but instead accepted blame and then declared the crisis as one of public health (Howell and Miller). In subsequent communications, the company was diligent about communicating on their blog. Maple Leaf Foods provided safety information on this site, answered questions, and kept customers updated on the containment of the bacteria. This decision appealed to the audience’s emotions by moving the focus of the crisis to affected families with sick and/or dying members. This use of pathos paired with the organizations apologetic, sympathetic,
and responsible ethos it achieved by taking responsibility and diligent actions to contain and solve the crisis, made this move for pathos more effective than had the organization not reacted as humanely. If used effectively throughout crisis communications, effective use of ethos and pathos may help to incite stakeholders to speak positively about the organization in the midst of a crisis, which can help to mitigate distrust or other negative implications of crises.

Using a human ethos can help an organization use pathos effectively. By developing a human ethos, an organization may be able to more easily find a message or topic that can develop pathos for its audience. A human ethos provides more potential for an audience to identify with an organization, and, with identification, an audience may be more likely to be affected by the pathos used. For Millar and Heath, “the identification between the organization and the members of the community is a bond of mutual trust…” (16). Whether it is members of the physical community or the online community, an organization can benefit from these identifications: “Before, during, and after a crisis, key organizations need to foster identifications with markets, audiences, and publics” (Millar and Heath 16). These identifications can lead to relationships, and with relationships can come trust. As trust grows between an organization and consumer, when an organization appeals to the emotions or sympathies of the customer, it may affect the customer on a deeper level, which can help them to view the organization more positively, especially at a time of crisis.

LOGOS

“Logos” is the rhetorical term that refers to the argument used. The definition in the Encyclopedia of Rhetoric is: “[Logos] has always referred to the verbal structure of arguments – to words, the connections among them, and their power to persuade” (Wells 456). In the age of social media, an organization’s logos needs to be ever-evolving because communications with stakeholders are continually evolving. Before social media, an organization’s crisis communications were more static and prepared. Traditional crisis communications could also be more in depth. Interviews and press releases were one act of delivering information to customers, so these communications had to contain a more in-depth argument that both calmed and provided necessary information (such as safety measures) to customers. However, social media calls for more instant, brief messages delivered multiple
times on multiple sites. Thus, logoi used on social media sites are likely to be quite different than in traditional methods. The users still need similar information, and organizations still want to minimize brand damage, but have a far more limited space in which to deliver this message.

In response to this change, the organization may select to address one key part of their message and direct users to another location for further information. Or they may deliver several messages, each highlighting a different aspect of the crisis. However, it is even more important on the interactive public stage of social media that the organization develops its communications to be understandable by the audience. If an organization’s communications are too complex for the audience to understand, the desired effect – a calming of the audience to mitigate brand damage – is unlikely to be achieved. This is supported by Timothy L. Sellnow and Robert R. Ulmer who claim that “the complexity of evidence limits the ability of consumers to make judgments about the crisis and to select appropriate reactions to it” (256). If an organization focuses on simply providing facts without explanation or it uses too much jargon and complicated explanations of the crisis, the audience is less likely to react positively towards the organization. If they can’t understand the argument, the audience can’t be guaranteed to interpret the facts in a way that is favorable towards the organization. Additionally, since many customers now expect transparency, an organization should aim to make its messages comprehensible. Complex and difficult to understand crisis communications can suggest that an organization is not being transparent and aiming to hide information by not being clear. Essentially, the argument used by an organization on social media must suit the crisis, from its content, to its timing, to its style. Millar and Heath argue for the importance of style consideration: “The key rhetorical guideline is that style must fit the rhetorical exigency” (13). This includes the messages that the company needs to send to its customers and how it develops those messages to make an argument. The argument selected and the tone used to convey it are a helpful consideration for crisis communications, and social media has called for organizations to see the exigency of the crisis (what information needs to reach all customers) and the exigency of individual customers (what social media users want to know). Since stakeholders are now more likely to expect that organizations will respond to them as individuals, organizations are being called on to reevaluate their logoi, in addition to their ethos and pathos.
NARROWING FOCUS TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT & RELATED RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

To begin looking at crisis management and the four principles of effective corporate communication from a rhetorical perspective, an understanding of what constitutes a crisis is helpful. There are several definitions for “crisis” but, in essence, most define it as situations that can negatively affect an organization and/or its stakeholders. Coombs defines a crisis as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can generate negative outcomes” (Ongoing Crisis 2-3). Kathleen Fearn-Banks defines a crisis as “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or a good name” (2). There are three categories of crises: those that result in a risk to public safety, those with financial implications, and those that cause reputation loss (Coombs, “Crisis Management”). Safety crises can result from malfunctions, product failures, product recalls, environmental disasters or impacts. Financial crisis can result from a negative financial situation or immediately causing negative financial implications. Crises that result in reputation damage can result from the public boycotting of products, to product tampering, to product failure, strikes, workplace issues, etc. (Fearn-Banks 1, 19). Crises can come in many forms and many levels of severity, but all can have lasting negative impacts on the organization unless handled properly.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Coombs suggests that crises are currently looked at in three stages: (1) pre-crisis, (2) crisis, and (3) post-crisis, and that an organization should communicate with its customers in all three stages (“Crisis Management”). The literature distinguishes the difference between communicating outward and communicating with customers. There is a difference between traditional external communications and external communications via social media. It used to be that organizations pushed information to the consumer. This gave them significant control
over the story. They could frame it in the most beneficial way, spin it, and only answer to a relatively small group of journalists and media employees. However, as outlined in the previous sections, organizations can no longer “spin” the story to their advantage and expect that, if the story is inaccurate or false, people will not find out and communicate that. An organization can, and should, still frame the crisis. To determine how to frame the crisis, Coombs suggests using his Situational Crisis Communications Theory.

When framing a crisis, organizations are making a rhetorical decision about how to best influence their audience’s beliefs and assumptions about a crisis. However, to do so effectively, it is beneficial to consider the audience’s perceptions of the crisis before addressing an ethos, pathos, or the logos they intend to use. How an organization frames a crisis is its first rhetorical decision in crisis communications, and subsequent rhetorical decisions should be consistent and compatible. Public relations literature suggests four main principles for effectively communicating on social media that should be considered as an organization decides on its frame for a crisis and subsequent messages to its customers. These principles are transparency (or apparent transparency), using a human ethos, building relationships, and building trust. To put each of these principles into action requires rhetorical decisions regarding ethos, pathos, and logos. In the following sections I will suggest connections that can be drawn between these principles and rhetorical strategies.

**RHETORICALLY LOOKING AT PR’S FOUR CLAIMS OF EFFECTIVE CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS**

As Timothy Coombs reiterates several times in his book *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*: “The dialogue must be maintained during good times and communicating with stakeholders aids the crisis management team in its efforts to contain and to recover from the crisis” (150). The organization cannot ignore the social media sphere and then lean on it to mitigate brand disaster and expect very good results. It would be like a football coach putting a new quarterback in during overtime. There is no feeling about what is occurring, no relationships established between players, the quarterback would likely be left floundering. It would be very difficult for him to play effectively and win the game. Prior communications are extremely beneficial to success during a crisis. Paul Holmes and Arun Sudhaman of the *Holmes Report*, an online source for
industry news and information for public relations professionals, say, “Reputations can have tremendous endurance if they are built on authentic action rather than exaggeration or downright deception.” This is also a rhetorical strategy that can help to support a credible ethos. By building relationships with customers before a crisis situation occurs, and doing so by being honest rather than “spinning” facts, an organization builds consumer trust. This trust is created because the organization does not only communicate with its customers after a crisis occurs, but also before one occurs. Since social media fosters conversations and communities, it may not have many customers to interact with if it waits until a crisis occurs to begin interacting with them. Additionally, after a crisis occurs, if a relationship has not already been built, it is more difficult to create trust rather than using trust that has already been established to make the organization’s communications more credible. These kinds of communications strategies are essential for any organization to understand, not just large companies or a consultant (Siler). Integration of these rhetorical considerations into the crisis communication strategy of an organization can help to alleviate some pressure during a crisis. By leveraging an already established ethos can allow an organization to focus more immediately on developing effective strategies for pathos and logos, rather than attempting to build relationships and construct a trustworthy ethos when stakeholder perceptions are already negatively influenced by the crisis at hand.

As mentioned earlier in this article, social media has shifted consumer expectations. Previously, crisis communications were expected to be timely, but now, many stakeholders expect it to be almost instantaneous. Though organizations still frame their crises, message content should work to mitigate reputational damage as well as protect the customers. In a crisis, organizations need to communicate in a way that serves to both protect the organization and satisfy the customer. Lovell Communications, a Public Relations firm specializing in Crisis Management, describes its approach to managing a crisis for corporate clients as “designed to prepare leadership, minimize harmful media coverage, limit negative impact among stakeholders, and help retain or rebuild credibility and trust.” In this statement, ethos and logos are addressed. The perception of leadership and the retention of credibility and trust are a result of constructing a credible ethos. For example, had Maple Leaf Foods not openly accepted responsibility and framed the crisis as a public health concern rather than a financial or legal crisis for the company, or had it simply recalled products and remained
relatively silent, the public response to its crisis communications may not have been as positive. The company’s ethos may not have been perceived as trustworthy, and its messages may not have met the information needs of its stakeholders, allowing further panic and/or false information to develop. Minimizing harmful media coverage can result from a trustworthy ethos and by using logoi that positively situate facts of the crisis in the broader story of the crisis, and, finally, limiting negative impact among stakeholders is also an effect of logoi that may protect the stakeholders and/or fulfill their information needs and expectations.

Social media sites are spaces where relationships can be fostered, information shared, questions answered, all of which result (if handled openly, honestly, and knowledgeably) in visible credibility and increased trust. Additionally, any extraneous positive light on the organization’s role, or a false framing of the situation, is more likely to be discovered in the connected age. Thus, when communicating during a crisis, organizations must carefully craft their messages to be well-received by their target audience and to satisfy the audience’s need for information, while also minimizing harm to itself, and these can all be understood as rhetorical decisions.

**Transparency**

To achieve the first principle, transparency, organizations can use social media to build a perception of honesty and openness, which contributes to their credible ethos. This credibility can lead to increased consumer trust. In a crisis, it is better for an organization to engage and remain transparent than keeping silent until all questions can be answered. This leaves less room for the media and social media users to begin filling the information gap that is characteristic of a crisis situation with false or harmful information during a crisis. As Coombs argues, “It is accurate to say that a crisis creates an information void…Any information void will be filled somehow and by someone. The media have deadlines, so they are driven to fill the information void quickly” (*Ongoing Crisis* 141). If an organization is willing to engage quickly with its affected stakeholders, even if it is guilty of wrongdoing, it can begin to have a credible *ethos*. Transparency suggests honesty to the audience, which can help to build trust.
An example case that will be discussed in greater detail below is EUROCONTROL’s handling of the eruption of an Icelandic volcano in 2011. This case illustrates how a trustworthy ethos can be constructed by communicating honestly and appearing transparent, and how, in turn, this can result in stakeholder trust. EUROCONTROL is the European Organization for the Safety of Air Navigation. Prior to the eruption of an Icelandic volcano in April 2011, EUROCONTROL had very little presence on social media sites. However, during its communications with the public on Twitter and Facebook, its number of followers doubled within days of the volcano’s eruption, and tripled by the time the volcano was declared dormant in mid-May. The crisis communications were effective because they spoke to people affected by the crisis about relevant issues, but also because these communications bettered the organization’s image on these sites. A member of EUROCONTROL’s social media team, Kyla Evans, states in her *Communication World* article “Clearing the Way for Crisis Communications” that EUROCONTROL’s crisis communications were so successful because the public trusted that the organization was being transparent on their social media sites (37). This supported the organization’s credible ethos because the public did not feel that the organization was withholding or spinning information. If an organization does mislead, it is likely that the public will find out and see that the organization consciously attempted to protect itself and its employees by either providing misleading information or withholding information from stakeholders altogether (McNeely Pigott & Fox Public Relations). In the age of social media, this is seen as archaic and unacceptable. Coombs titles this the “MUM Effect” (*Ongoing Crisis* 129). It is natural for organizations to want to block the flow of negative information, but maintaining silence and/or altering information is not beneficial. Firstly, as Coombs states, “Silence is passive” (*Ongoing Crisis* 128). During a crisis, an audience will likely not respond positively to a passive ethos. Remaining open and not misleading stakeholders is the first step to developing trust. As Seth Godin suggests:

There's an argument for transparency. If you make it easy for people to see right through you, the thinking goes, you are easier to trust….We'd like our tools and our replaceable institutions to be transparent. We want the bank and the radiologist and the tax man to be totally clear and invisible, so they can get out of the way and we can focus on what's true.

In other words, the transparency that social media allows has made many customers value transparency in a company because this shows that they are honest and, as a result, can be
trusted. Thus, to construct a credible and trustworthy ethos, organizations can use communications to show that they are willing to be transparent with their audience, even when that may share some negative information about the company.

Customers now expect organizations to communicate more details about their organization and crisis situations than before. They expect uncertainties and negative information to be shared, not silenced. Most importantly, they expect the organization to be proactive and upfront. This is part of constructing a credible ethos. By being proactive, it can suggest to the audience that an organization is not withholding information or deciding on how to best spin it, but rather being open about the crisis. It can seem more honest. Before social media, details could be released or silenced at the organizations discretion. However, with the global visibility of social media commentary, questions left unanswered during a crisis situation can lead to suspicion by stakeholders. Additionally, after the rise of social media, customers are more likely to find out if an organization withholds critical information. One example is Wikileaks. Any user can upload documents to this webpage and, if the information contradicts or shows a significant gap in the crisis story an organization communicates to its stakeholders, not only will the credible ethos be destroyed, but it will be far more difficult to regain a credible and trustworthy ethos in the eyes of customers.

However, it is less about utter and complete transparency than about engagement, openness, and discussion. When speaking of “transparency,” it is often intended to show an improvement in transparency, rather than becoming entirely transparent. One example is the EUROCONTROL case. Prior to the crisis, the organization was not very active on social media and thus had not really established itself as transparent or honest. During the crisis, the organization improved its efforts to appear transparent and admitted when there was a lack of information and shared negative facts. There may have been more information that was not shared with the audience, but there was a visible improvement in the organization’s transparency and that resulted in more interaction, more followers, and an effective handling of the crisis on social media.

**Knowing the Audience**

By knowing its target audience, an organization can make better decisions about how to best construct its ethos and identify with the audience through its communications, so that it
can shape how it is eventually perceived. influence how it constructs its ethos, how it identifies with the audience through its communications, and, eventually, how it is perceived. It is no longer a push of information at the audience, but a dialogue with it. If an organization knows its audience, it can more effectively communicate in a way that resonates with that audience. As Aristotle said, “Rhetoric is the art of seeing the available means of persuasion” (I.2, 1355b26f). This means knowing the most effective ethos for an organization to use when communicating with its stakeholders on social media sites, understanding the desired content and developing the logos to convey this information in a style suitable for the social media site. It also involves seeing the most effective pathos for its audience members’ sympathies and, possibly, shed a sympathetic light on the organization.

One example of a company in crisis who used these rhetorical decisions to effectively communicate on social media is Delta Airways. In 2011, Delta faced an unexpected crisis that began on social media. A group of soldiers returning from Afghanistan was faced with a two hundred dollar baggage fee for carrying extra baggage. The baggage was government-issued equipment and firearms from the soldiers’ work overseas. The upset and shocked soldiers uploaded a video to Youtube in which the soldiers voice the “rude awakening” that met them upon their return to the United States. One soldier, Staff Sergeant Hiliker, ends the video by saying, “Good business model, Delta. Thank you. We're actually happy to be back to America. God bless America. Not happy, not happy at all. Appreciate it. Thank you” (Mashable). This is the soldier’s appeal to his audience’s emotions, or his use of pathos.

Delta is an American airline, so it is likely that the soldier’s audience would have been primarily American. Culturally, The United States is largely a supporter of its military and Americans are known to care about the well-being of their soldiers. Mistreatment of servicemen and women can lead to significant negative publicity for a company, as it did for Delta when the soldiers’ video went viral. However, Delta responded immediately via a blog. Rather than returning to traditional methods, the company responded on social media (SimpliFlying). It apologized and accepted responsibility. More importantly, Delta made amends using logoi that consisted of personal stories of employees that created connections with these soldiers. These messages also articulated Delta’s support for military servicemen and women. Finally, Delta communicated that it valued these soldiers’ feedback and that it was keen to continue their dialogue to continue to better their services.
This communication plan used ethos, pathos, and logos effectively. By communicating quickly, accepting responsibility, apologizing, and indicating that it wished to continue the conversation with its affected customers, Delta Airways constructed a credible, yet humble, ethos. Its logoi were constructed to create connections, which allowed for identification between itself and the soldiers. Both this ethos and logoi allowed for the company to effectively use pathos to aid in the mitigation of brand damage.

Because this video went viral and subsequent communications occurred on a very public stage, one likely seen by many Americans, the humble ethos and personalized logoi showed the public that Delta not only respected the military personnel and valued their feelings, but that it also held much of the same respect for these men that the American public did. The company’s humility at inconveniencing the soldiers appealed to the audience’s own respect for the experience of military personnel returning home. This may have helped the audience to see the baggage fees as a mistake that the company had possibly overlooked and was quickly remedying, rather than something more serious and intentional.

Poorly done crisis communications on social media sites consist of organizations engaging in one-way messaging, unlike the dialogue engaged in by Delta. Not only does the former approach make it easier for the customer to ignore the message, it also fails to meet the changing expectations of most customers. Thus, effective crisis communications engage the customer in a mutually beneficial dialogue. This supports an organization’s human ethos, which helps to build credibility. By meeting the information needs of customers while also protecting its image, the organization will likely only improve an audience’s perception of it. This can result in a stronger relationship between organization and consumer.

Since people want to be treated like individuals, and many expect organizations to interact with them on a more personal level on social media sites, effective crisis communications consist of organizations adopting a human ethos that presents them as real people and equal to customers, allowing them to communicate with customers on social media sites on a personal level. According to Kyla Evans, this method of communication allows organizations to enter the ongoing conversation on social media in a way that “belongs” (Evans 37).
Developing a Human Ethos

By communicating in a conversational tone, the organization can make itself seem human to stakeholders. This ethos makes the organization more approachable – essentially representing an equal corporate-consumer relationship. On social media sites, the organization should communicate with the public in an informal manner and refrain from using industry-specific jargon to ensure that all readers can understand (Evans 37). This helps the audience feel as though the organization is almost human by the way it listens to and responds to their comments or questions (Evans 37). Rather than withholding information and acting superior to customers, an organization that is more transparent, conversational, and available to stakeholders is more trustworthy, and may be more forgivable.

One example of a crisis situation where a company benefitted from transparency and a human ethos on social media is the EUROCONTROL handling of the crisis resulting from Iceland’s volcanic eruption, mentioned above. The following will further discuss the above example and identify particular connections to rhetorical concepts. Prior to the event, the company was relatively inactive on social media. As a result of the eruption, several hundred flights were cancelled around the world due to unsafe conditions resulting from the ash floating in the atmosphere. By the end, the company had acquired more followers and built stronger relationships than they had before the crisis. Kyla Evans discusses EUROCONTROL’s original social media strategy in her article “Clearing the Way for Crisis Communications” and how it evolved during this crisis to result in such a successful conversation between corporation and the public during the volcanic eruption in Iceland.

Passengers were stranded and looking for answers. One key lesson that she highlights having learned from this case is that an organization should “speak like a human” on social media (Evans 37). Or, in other words, use a human ethos to speak to customers. Even if there is no previous relationship from which to benefit, an organization can still reach its customers and begin building relationships with them during a crisis by responding to their need for information. During Iceland’s volcanic eruption, customers were stranded and thousands were seeking information on the state of the crisis. There was not always information available, and available information was not always positive, but by communicating with the audience like as a human would on its Twitter account, the organization made the information that was available more easily understood. This is a rhetorical decision on logos,
or how the organization will use words to convey its information in a persuasive argument for its audience. When information was lacking, EUROCONTROL admitted that it could not answer at that time. This helped the audience begin to trust their communications were honest. This, again, contributes to a credible, honest ethos. By communicating with a carefully constructed ethos, companies can humble themselves by appearing human. In doing so, they can reflect that they understand the newly symmetrical corporate-consumer relationship. This will likely make their audience more receptive to their message.

**Building Trusting Relationships**

By communicating transparently and honestly, using informal and understandable logoi, and using its knowledge of an audience to foster identification, an organization develops its human ethos. With a human ethos, an organization presents itself as more equal with its customers. As previously discussed, social media has changed the power dynamic in the corporate-consumer relationship and many customers expect organizations to represent this shift by acting more equal with them. This suggestion of equality can help an organization to build relationships with its customers.

Additionally, by using an ethos that is credible and appealing to the audience and by knowing the audience, an organization can see available ways to use pathos. As previously defined, “pathos” refers to using emotion to appeal to the audience. In a crisis, this may often be seeking sympathy and understanding from the audience. To do this, an organization can use a human ethos to seem more alike with the audience, and use its knowledge of the audience’s beliefs, assumptions, likes and dislikes, to see particular content or style that may be bring the audience to feel more connected to it. This identification process shows stakeholders that there is a connection between the organization and themselves that goes beyond business. This may be achieved simply by communicating apologetically and indicating that the organization is interested in the well-being of its customers, such as in the example of Maple Leaf Foods’ listeria crisis. Or, an organization can use logoi that suggest it has shared interests with its stakeholders, interests such as the environment.

To most effectively build a trusting relationship, not only should organizations consider ethos, pathos, and logos as broad ideas, they should also give thought to how these three topoi are connected to the four principles outlined in this section. An organization
cannot build trust if it is caught withholding information or “spinning” facts. This destroys
the ethos. If the organization does not know its audience, it cannot effectively use pathos to
appeal to the sympathies of its stakeholders in hopes that they will look favorably on the
organization’s handling of the crisis and mitigate reputation damage. Finally, if it resists
consumers’ changing perception of how organizations should communicate with them and
operates formally and distantly on social media, it risks alienating customers either through a
lack of understanding of their needs and desires or a failure to provide them with an ethos
with which they can identify.
CONCLUSION

Social media has increased in popularity and use since 2007. Since then, it has been playing a critical role in the evolution of corporate crisis communications. Organizations are significant machines of change and influence in our society. Organizational communications, especially during times of crisis, can affect a significant portion of our society. Studying how corporations communicate with the public is critical to understanding how their communications work to mitigate, or fail to mitigate, crisis situations. Public Relations scholars have realized the importance of including rhetoric in their study of the industry but often use the term superficially. This does not always lead to the most inclusive examination of crisis rhetoric. Yet, much of the literature does discuss audience, ethos, pathos, and logos, but indirectly. The corporate-consumer relationship has shifted from asymmetrical to symmetrical, giving customers more power than before. With this added power, they expect organizations to communicate with them more informally, like equals, to listen and respond to their comments or questions, and appear transparent during a crisis. These responses can help foster trusting relationships. Since social media sites allow customers to connect with each other and watch an organization’s communications with other customers, there is an added level of visibility when complaints and questions arise. Organizations have had to adapt to this new power dynamic and globally connected world. They have started developing a human ethos, utilizing pathos tailored to each individual customer, and developing logoi that suit social media communications. Organizations are beginning to realize the importance of appearing transparent, building relationships and trust with customers, and being perceived as human. A further investigation into a rhetorical understanding of crisis rhetoric would help to evolve the rhetorical shift in Public Relations scholarship, as well as provide a more current and in depth understanding of organizational rhetoric in general.
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