The United States Postal Service

Saint Ambrose University

Kelsey Lehman

Abstract

This study provides an investigation of how the mass media has portrayed the United States Postal Service in the national news media over the past year. Research questions were formulated to help narrow the information that was used for the study. Agenda setting's theoretical framework helped guide the research. A content analysis of 561 articles found that the articles containing information on permanent post office closings, financial difficulties, and federal postal officials all damaged the reputation of the USPS.

Introduction

The decline of the American economy not only influences the general public, but also government funded services that many people take for granted. The United States Postal Service is one government entity that has been financially struggling over the past year. The USPS debt, which is expected to rise to over $10 billion, resulted in national uproar. Raising stamp costs, cutting back on delivery days and shut downs of small post offices are all being considered as ways to eradicate the USPS debt.

This study examines how the USPS has been portrayed in national news media over the past year. An evaluation of tools provides information about the public relations techniques that can change the reputation of the USPS. A rationale, research question, and the agenda setting theory all help to narrow the results of this content analysis. A method and procedure section explains the process of the content analysis. Finally, results are displayed and discussed to answer the research questions.

Evaluation of Tools

This section evaluates the effectiveness of four tools used in the public relations field. Social media, billboards and outdoor advertising, websites, and television advertising are evaluated in terms of their advantages and disadvantages, as well as how they are employed in different scenarios.

Social Media

Social media, as defined by Sweester and Lariscy (2008), is anything that is centered on a "read-write web". This term describes the act of an audience moving beyond a passive viewing

of a website to actually contributing to the content in the site (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2008).

Spiller, Tuten, and Carpenter (2011) define social media as the "means of communication

enhanced by the anytime, anywhere benefits of the Web and mobile technologies, built around

online communities and based on interdependent relationships and cooperation" (p. 76).

Spiller, Tuten, and Carpenter (2011) state that this medium allows advertising and public

relations to reach a more personal level. Social media allows the relationship to be the most

important part of the tool (Spiller, Tuten, & Carpenter, 2011). This medium offers the

opportunity to enhance consumer relationships with the anytime, anywhere feature of the Web

(Spiller, Tuten, & Carpenter, 2011). Social media also allows direct responses from the

consumer through email or web postings (Spiller, Tuten, & Carpenter, 2011). It can guide the

consumer to retention and acquisition as well. The awareness and credibility social media accrue

lead to more retention and ultimately acquisition of the idea or message (Spiller, Tuten, &

Carpenter, 2011). Unfortunately for public relations professionals, the consumer now has more

control over what they consume. They choose the companies with which they want to interact

and when they want to interact with them (Spiller, Tuten, & Carpenter, 2011). Social media's

anonymity has created some ethical dilemmas in the public relations field. Marketers can post

content as a consumer to sway a user into using their product or brand (Sweester, 2010). Social

media is not controlled by the firm; therefore the firm cannot control the user's voice

(Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010).

Gallaugher and Ransbotham (2010) explain that Starbucks uses social media to its

advantage and is a great example of successful practice of this medium. Starbucks currently

delves into 12 types of social media (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010). Gallaugher and

Ransbotham describe social media in three parts: the megaphone, firm initiated dialogue; the

magnet, customer initiated dialogue; and the monitor, customer to customer dialogue.

The megaphone of Starbucks is their own social media site, MyStarbucksIdea, and the

use of third party sites like Facebook and Twitter. Gallaugher and Ransbotham state that many

consumers already participate in the third party sites, making firm initiated dialogue even easier.

As a magnet, Starbucks tries to actively guide their customer initiated dialogue by setting

parameters in the MyStarbucksIdea site. They encourage positive behavior on their site by

offering a gift card to the top 100 contributors (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010). Finally,

Starbucks monitors the customer to customer conversations on their site and selectively mediates

conversations either publicly or privately (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010). The company uses

this monitoring to thank customers, clear up inaccuracies, and apologize for wrong doings

(Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010). The interaction between customers is also seen by their

friends, which allows the opportunity for more comments and more research on the customer to

be completed (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010).

Web Sites

Kent and Taylor (2003) describe a website as the "window through which a company is

viewed" (p. 14). A web site "symbolizes an organization's competitiveness, enhances an

organization's image, and increases the practitioner's personal sense of professionalism"

(Sweester, 2011, p. 295). Today, there are roughly 15 billion websites (Spiller, Tuten, &

Carpenter, 2011). The direct information available to the consumer and the high speed at which

it is transferred makes this tool a great addition to the public relations field (Spiller, Tuten, &

Carpenter, 2011).

Websites have a great potential to persuade (Voorveld, Neijens, & Smit, 2011). This persuasiveness is determined by the interactive possibilities of the website, level of trust from the consumer, and the opportunity they provide the consumer at all stages of the sales cycle (Voorveld, Neijens, & Smit, 2011). This interactivity is what gives websites the edge above traditional media outlets (Voorveld, Neijens, & Smit, 2011). One limitation to the web site is that consumers may be used to the normal level of interactivity and want more (Voorveld, Neijens, Smit, & 2011). The registration factor to gain information also turns off consumers in the process of looking over the site (Voorveld, Neijens, & Smit, 2011).

A study by Bordeau and Watson (2006) found that many firms have not recognized the amount of impact their corporate website has on a consumer. Two thirds of the companies they sampled do not have an aligned corporate and web strategy. This could be for any of three reasons. First, the web site is not seen as part of the company's overall advertising strategy. Second, companies may not have the time or resources to align their campaigns. Finally, some firms may not think that a web site has enough impact on their consumer to align the details (Bordeau & Watson, 2006).

Bordeau and Watson (2006) explain that websites should be aligned with corporate strategy in order to be effective. One company that is effective in their website is Minnesota Mining & Manufacturing, better known as 3M. The company's website is user friendly and one can easily specify which of 3M's regions is of interest (Bordeau & Watson, 2006). The website is well translated so it is accessible to many cultures and reaches many people. Each of these country specific websites is also tailored for local customers, a trait that websites as a tool excel at. The website is also integrated well so that anyone who enters the site gets the same 3M "look and feel" (Bordeau & Watson, 2006).

Television Advertising

Rubinson (2009) describes television advertising as any televised content that stimulates consumer interest or retention in a brand. Television reaches a large audience and has the ability to segment to the consumer one would like to target. Television advertising has, however, come across some disadvantages with the rise of new technology like DVR and Ti-Vo (Rubinson, 2009). New television technology allows consumers to skip through the advertisements. This technology shift has made consumers block out the extra clutter and begin to multi task. The consumer often uses other forms of media, like a computer, while watching television (Rubinson 2009). This multitasking could, however, lead to increased research on the advertisements. After watching a television advertisement while using a computer, a consumer is more likely to do further research online about the product or service (Zigmond & Stipp, 2010).

Television advertising that successfully sparks interest and also incorporates this new technology is shown in the opening of "Night at the Museum: Battle at the Smithsonian". The movie was heavily advertised on television and used NBC's premiere night for regular 30 second advertisements as well as promotional time with the stars of the film (Zigmond & Stipp, 2010). By combining a new release with NBC's premiere night, the film sparked interest in the consumer. Zigmund and Stipp's (2010) study of the correlation between commercials and consequential internet searching found a hike in search queries about the film during the hours of the NBC broadcast (Zigmond & Stipp, 2010). The combination of television and Internet advertising allows consumers to take an immediate step to obtain more product information (Zigmond & Stipp, 2010).

Billboards and Outdoor Advertising

According to Taylor, Frank, and Hae-Kyong (2006), outdoor advertising and billboards are advertisements in which people are not involved in the medium as they would be when watching a television program or reading the newspaper. Billboards and outdoor advertising are unique in that in their case the "medium is truly the message" (Taylor, Frank, & Hae-Kyong, 2006, p. 23). Billboards provide quickly accessible information to tourists or people on a daily commute (Taylor & Taylor, 1994). Billboards allow regular commuters to get a high frequency of exposure, have high reach, a 24-hour presence, geographic flexibility, economic effieciency, visual impact, and promote brand awareness (Taylor, Frank, & Hae-Kyong, 2006).

All of these advantages to billboards come with some disadvantages. Billboards have a limited amount of space and a short exposure time (Taylor, Frank, & Hae-Kyong, 2006). They are also hard to measure and have low demographic selectivity (Taylor, Frank, & Hae-Kyong, 2006). Many would also argue that billboards too often depict harmful products, that they interrupt roadside scenery, and that they are harmful to small businesses (Taylor & Taylor, 1994).

Now, billboards are receiving a makeover with the addition of LCD and LED technology and moving pictures (Edwards, 2008). These digital signs have increased responsiveness in the consumer (Edwards, 2008). Signs can be updated much quicker to catch the ever-fleeting attention of the consumer (Edwards, 2008).

Digital billboards have been used by a variety of companies as the technology continues to expand. Edwards (2008) describes Samsung's use of phones. The company's billboard would send information to consumer's phones during the launch of their BluRay players (Edwards,

2008). Coldplay offered free clips of their music to passers by their billboard (Edwards, 2008).

As long as there is something new to catch the attention of the consumer, billboards, electronic

and classic, have the potential to be around for a very long time. Google has also taken

advantage of the electronic billboard trend. Google put adwords and graphic advertisements

onto the digital billboards in response to information the billboard picks up (Edwards, 2008).

An example of this is a digital information board in a shopping mall. If a consumer

searches "shoes", ad servers would put up advertisements that are relevant to shoes (Edwards,

2008). This technology caters to the consumer and gives the sign an edge that other mediums

lack (Edwards, 2008).

Rationale and Research Question

The United States Postal Service has made headlines recently due to their financial issues

(MacDougal, 2011; Greenhouse, 2011). To solve the financial problems the USPS has begun

taking steps to reduce their debt. Options include increasing the price of stamps to decreasing

their delivery schedule to only five days per week (MacDougal, 2011; Greenhouse, 2011). Polls

conducted by the Gallup organization found that 68% of Americans favor the change in delivery

schedule over other means of raising profits (Morales, 2010). Gallup found that because of new

technology like text messaging and email, individuals may not be as opposed to the shorter

delivery week, although many Americans still use mail for paying bills (Morales, 2011). To

further understand the public view of the USPS, this content analysis will attempt to answer the

following questions:

RQ1: How has the USPS been portrayed in the national news media over the past year?

RQ2: How are the United States Postal Service's primary competitors portrayed during the same time frame in the national news media?

Theoretical Framework

For the purposes of this content analysis, the theory utilized as the basis of the research is the agenda setting theory. This theory stems from the idea that the media do not tell their audiences what to think, rather the media tells the audience what to think about. Simply put, agenda setting is the act of giving mass media attention to an issue which causes that issue to be of elevated importance to the public (Severin & Tankard, 2001).

Agenda setting is not like the bullet theory that describes the media as having all powerful effects; rather, it assigns a central role to the media in initiating items for the public agenda (McCombs, 2004). This hypothesis is important because it suggests "a way that the mass media can have an impact on society that is an alternative to attitude change" (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 239). According to Jeffres (1997), media provide people with things to think about, thus increasing salience. This is the basis of agenda setting research (Jeffres, 1997). This theory is very important to those who wish to influence the media in that it is an exercise in power as different sources strive to get on the agenda in ways that are favorable to them (Jeffres, 1997).

Agenda setting occurs when an individual aspires to be oriented in the realms of public affairs (McCombs, 2004). Agenda setting has the power not only to allow surveillance of the environment, but is also a tool in which society transmits social culture (McCombs, 2004).

The idea of agenda setting was the result of researcher's dissatisfaction with the limited-effects model of communication in the 1950s and 1960s (Severin & Tankard, 2001). The theory

was also compatible with the emerging ideas of cognitive psychology around the same time

(Severin & Tankard, 2001). There is evidence that the media are shaping the public's views of

major problems facing society and that the problems emphasized in the media may not be the

ones that are dominant in reality (Severin & Tankard, 2001). A newer suggestion of the theory

states that media not only tell us what to think about, but how to think about it (Severin &

Tankard, 2001).

Agenda setting theory was first systematically studied in 1972 by McCombs and Shaw,

although hypothesis of the theory were found dating back to 1958 (Severin & Tankard, 2001).

McCombs and Shaw (1972) studied the presidential campaign of 1968 and guessed that the mass

media set the agenda for each political campaign and influenced the salience of attitudes toward

political issues. The study focused on undecided voters from Chapel Hill, North Carolina

because the undecided population is more susceptible to agenda setting effects (McCombs &

Shaw, 1972). A content analysis of the media serving these voters was performed based on

respondent's opinions of the major problems in the country as they saw them (McCombs &

Shaw, 1972). The findings of what would later be known as the Chapel Hill Study showed an

agenda setting effect where the media emphasis was directly correlated with the importance of

the issue to the voter (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

After their study, McCombs and Shaw (1977) decided to find out if the media agenda

influenced the public agenda, or if the public agenda influenced the media agenda. The

Charlotte Study focused on the 1972 presidential campaign. Voters were interviewed at three

time periods in the campaign: June, October, and November after the results were in (McCombs

& Shaw, 1977). The results were not as conclusive as the researchers would have liked, but

McCombs and Shaw did find that the media do have a casual effect in shaping the public agenda

rather than vice versa (1977).

Funkhouser (1973) added another aspect to agenda setting research. Along with news

coverage and public perception, Funkhouser added another variable to his study: the actual

prominence of the specific issue in reality (1973). His research found that the news media

coverage did not respond well with the realities of the issues. For example, media coverage of

the Vietnam War and the protests that coincided with it peaked a year or two before these events

climaxed in reality (Funkhouser, 1973). Funkhouser suggests that the media did not give a good

picture of what was going on in the 1960s (1973).

Research by Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder in 1982 found more evidence for the agenda

setting theory. They found that the media uses a process called priming in which the media

attend to some issues and not others and thereby alter the standards by which people evaluate

election candidates (Severin & Tankard, 2001). Zucker (1978), suggested that the obtrusiveness

of the issue may also be an important factor as to whether or not agenda setting takes place. He

argued that the less direct experience the public has with an issue, the more it will have to

depend on the news media for information on that area (Zucker, 1978). Yagade and Dozier

(1990) found that the more abstract an issue is, the easier it is for agenda setting to take place as

the public needs the media to explain the difficult information to them.

Methodology

The methodology selected for the current study of the USPS is content analysis. Content

analysis was selected for its applicability to a variety of inquiries (Neuendorf, 2002).

This quantitative method for assessing media content is based on counting (Treadwell, 2010). Neuendorf (2002) describes content analysis as the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics. Content analysts create categories for coding content based on research interests (Treadwell, 2010). These categories could be coded purely for existence, or for frequency (Treadwell, 2010). A content analysis allows a researcher to create a basic assumption from clear and observable examples (Treadwell, 2010).

Content analysis has been the fastest growing technique for research in the communication field over the past twenty years (Riffe & Freitag, 1997). This could be due to the advancement of technology and computer software, as well as the development of online archives and databases (Evans, 1996). It is now easier than ever to complete this sort of analysis (Neuendorf, 2002).

This methodology can be traced back to the time of Aristotle, who first took the art and practice of human communication seriously (Neuendorf, 2002). Content analysis has allowed historians to make breakthroughs into the writings of history. For example, when the Rosetta Stone was discovered in 1799, Thomas Young translated the three types of scripts on the stone by a process of counting occurrences of the signs on other ancient sources (Neuendorf, 2002).

Harold Lasswell was an individual whose standout contribution to research is on the development of content analysis as a quantitative technique (Neuendorf, 2002). He began with a content analysis of World War I propaganda. This study became more qualitative and critical, but it was the first attempt to *classify* propaganda (Neuendorf, 2002). Lasswell later noticed his mistakes and found that he did not report criteria for selection of the propaganda styles he

identified (Neuendorf, 2002). During World War II, Lasswell continued in his propaganda

research and fixed these errors (Neuendorf, 2002).

Lasswell (1958) found that content analysis operates on the assumption that the

communication process is an aspect of the historical process. He defined the technique of

content analysis to be one which aims at describing, with objectivity, precision, and generality,

what is said on a given subject in a given place at a given time (Lasswell, 1958). Lasswell also

created methods of testing, coder training, and reliability assessment that served as early models

of sound content analysis practice (Neuendorf, 2002).

Content analysis complies with the goals of survey research (Neuendorf, 2002). It is an

attempt to measure variables as they naturally occur with no manipulation of independent

variables (Neuendorf, 2002). To make findings more generalizable to a larger group, some sort

of random sampling is typical when using content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002).

There are both advantages and disadvantages to the content analysis method. According

to Royse (2007), the advantages to content analysis are that it is unobtrusive, generally

inexpensive to conduct, and allows a researcher to work with large volumes of data. Content

analysis also allows the researcher to look at the facts without being emotionally fired up by

passion that usually comes with focus groups or surveys (Smith, 2005). This method allows the

researcher to examine past messages and can be used to compare trends and separate the routine

from the unusual (Smith, 2005). Additionally, content analysis is applicable to statistical

analyses and provides logical and statistical basis for understanding how messages are created

(Stacks, 2011).

One of the disadvantages of content analysis is that the counting and coding of categories examines only the manifest content of the data (Royse, 2007). Another risk in this method is the susceptibility to coder influence and bias, since the manifest content that is being coded is not always equally obvious and apparent to everyone (Smith, 2005).

Procedure

For the purposes of this study, content analysis was performed to answer the research questions. Thirteen coders from Saint Ambrose University's Public Relations Cases and Research course coded 561 articles for variables related to the USPS and its competitors, FedEx and UPS, over the past year. The articles were compiled through the Lexus-Nexus database. Articles from the Associated Press were chosen between October 26, 2010 and October 26, 2011.

This time span was chosen as the financial crisis that the USPS has been facing climaxed over the past year. National news media, for our study, consists of all articles published in a medium that reaches the whole United States. The Associated Press was the provider of these articles because their articles reach a national audience.

A total of 41 variables were coded in a variety of categories. Coders recorded the primary organizational focus of the article as USPS, FedEx, UPS, or another postal service as well as the geographic location where the article was published. Date and length of the articles was also coded. The primary topic of the article was coded as well as the sources identified in the article. Coders then coded the headline of the article and the article itself for the portrayal of each organization. The portrayal could damage the reputation of the organization, enhance the reputation, or be neutral or unmentioned.

The portrayal of the companies was determined in a variety of ways. For example, if an article mentions USPS negatively, it enhances the reputation of the other postal organizations. Articles that show the USPS positively could either negatively impact the other postal organizations or be categorized as a neutral mention in the article.

The positive or negative nature of the article's portrayal of an organization was determined by the use of adjectives and specific wording of the article. The topic was also taken into account in determining the nature of the article, as those articles with topics pertaining to closings and increased postal rates are obviously damaging to the organization involved.

Results

A total of 561 articles were read and coded. The results of the coding books were analyzed and the following results were found.

Within the 561 articles coded, 88.4 percent (496) dealt directly with the USPS. UPS was not coded for any of the articles. This could be a result of the search terms in the Lexus-Nexus database as the "P" in UPS represents "parcel" and not "postal." FedEx was coded as the primary focus of 2 percent (11) of the articles and other postal companies accounted for 9.6 percent (54) of the articles coded.

Additionally, 37.4 percent (210) of the headlines damaged the reputation of the USPS, 29.9 percent (168) remained neutral, 16.2 percent (91) enhanced the USPS reputation, and 16.4 percent (92) of the articles did not mention the USPS in the headline.

Of these 561 articles, 178 focused on the permanent closing of post offices around America. When analyzing the headline in these articles, 47 percent (78) pointed to a damaged

reputation of the USPS. Only 11.4 percent (19) of the headlines pertaining to permanent post office closings enhanced the reputation of the USPS, while 32.5 percent (54) showed the USPS reputation remaining neutral.

The image of the USPS presented in the overall articles concerning permanent post office closings was damaging, as 56.6 percent (94) were coded this way and only 13.3 percent (22) enhanced the reputation. A contrast to this is seen in the images of FedEx where the company's reputation was enhanced 34.9 percent (58) of the time or remained neutral 49.4 percent (82) of the time.
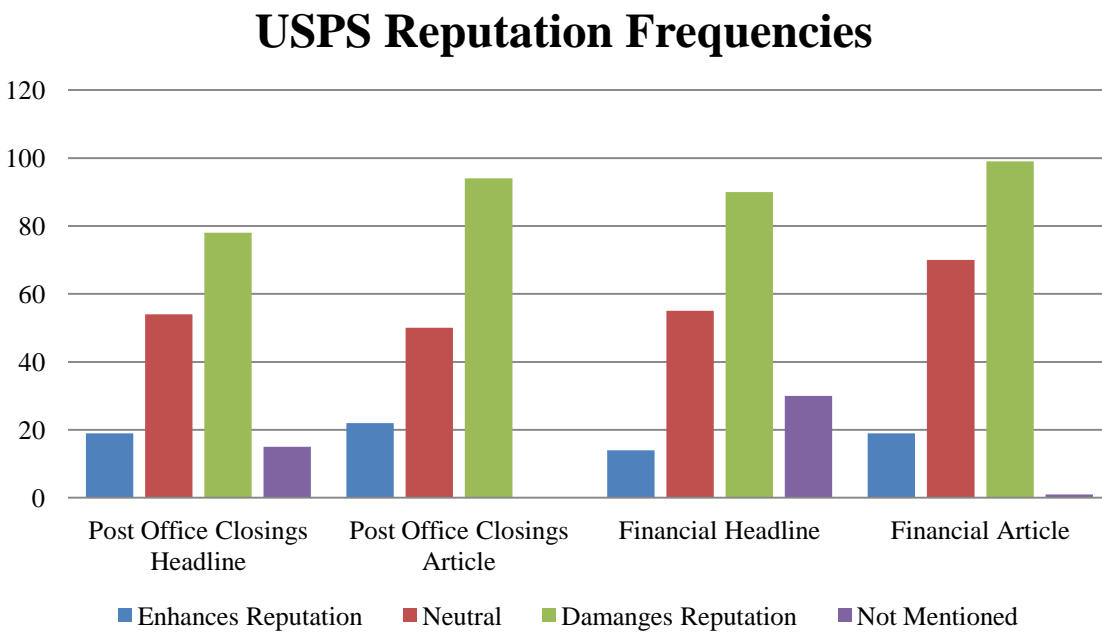
USPS Reputation Frequencies

Figure 1: This graph illustrates the number of articles that display each category of reputation effects on the United States Postal Service.

Another large portion of the articles coded focused on the financial difficulties that the USPS has been experiencing. Of the 189 articles coded within this category, 47.6 percent (90) of the headlines appeared to damage the reputation of the USPS, while 29.1 percent (55) remained neutral and only 7.4 percent (15) enhanced the USPS's reputation.

The overall perception of reputation in the entire article pertaining to financial difficulties is, again, damaging. Of the articles coded, 52.4 percent (99) damaged the reputation, 37 percent (70) remained neutral, and only 10.1 percent (19) enhanced the USPS reputation. Evaluation of FedEx reputations show that these articles enhance their reputation 32.8 percent (61) of the time and keep their reputation neutral 57.7 percent (109) of the time.

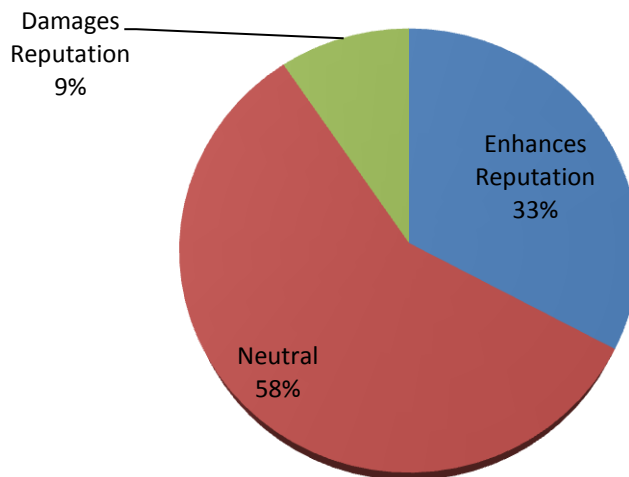## FedEx Reputation from USPS Closings

Figure 2: The percentages illustrated here explain the reputation of FedEx as the reputation of the USPS is altered based on the articles pertaining to post office closings.

A main source identified in the articles is Federal Postal Officials. Of the 205 articles containing a federal postal official source, 55.1 percent (113) of the articles damage the reputation of the USPS, while only 14.1 percent (29) enhance the reputation. In comparison, the articles containing this source enhanced the image of FedEx in 39.5 percent (81) of articles.

Discussion

The first research question analyzed in this study is the relationship between the national news media and its portrayal of the USPS over the past year. The analysis of our coding categories show that the primary nature of the article and the topic of the article determined whether or not the reputation of the USPS was damaged, enhanced, or remained neutral.

When examining the results of the articles pertaining to post office closings and financial difficulties, a majority of the articles damaged the reputation of the USPS. Within the post office closing articles 56.6 percent (94) damaged the USPS reputation and only 13.3 percent (22) enhanced the reputation. Looking at the financial difficulties, 52.4 percent (99) damaged the reputation, 37 percent (70) remained neutral, and only 10.1 percent (19) enhanced the USPS reputation.

The same pattern holds true in the headlines of these articles as well. Headlines pertaining to post office closings damaged the USPS reputation 47 percent (78) of the time while only 11.4 percent (19) of the headlines pertaining to permanent post office closings enhanced the reputation of the USPS. Within financial difficulty headlines, 47.6 percent (90) of the headlines appeared to damage the reputation of the USPS, while only 7.4 percent (15) enhances the USPS's reputation.

With these results it can be concluded that the reputation of the USPS has been damaged by the national news media over the past year.

To address the second research question, coding categories were again compared to the articles to determine the reputation of USPS main competitor: FedEx. The research points to a slight enhancement of the reputation of this company, but most articles seem to keep their reputation in a state of stasis. Unfortunately, results were limited for this research question as only 11 articles coded pertained directly to FedEx, however, by comparing the results of the USPS's reputation we can gather some information to reach a tentative conclusion for this question.

For example, in the articles related to post office closings, FedEx's reputation was enhanced 34.9 percent (58) of the time and neutral 49.4 percent (82) of the time. Articles concerning the USPS financial difficulties enhanced the image of FedEx 39.5 percent (81) of the time.

As the national news media is the source of the articles, our research points to a strong example of the agenda setting theory at work. This media isn't telling the public what to think, but by releasing 561 articles about USPS over the past year, they are certainly telling them what to think about. As Severin and Tankard (2001) explain, giving mass media attention to an issue causes that issue to be of elevated importance to the audience. This content analysis points to a negative agenda toward the USPS. The headlines and articles not only damage the reputation of the USPS, but the sources identified in them do as well. Federal Postal Officials have also earned this negative attention from the news media as articles containing their views damage the reputation of the USPS in 55.1 percent (113) of cases.

If, like McCombs (2004) states, agenda setting assigns a central role to the media in initiating items for the public agenda, then our results show the national news media has, in fact, given the public negative ideas of the USPS to discuss.

Additionally, the negative connotation to the majority of these articles again promotes thinking about the negative aspects of the USPS, thus damaging the overall reputation of the organization. The damaging results of this study confirm Severin and Tankard's idea that the media can shape the public's views of major societal issues.

Recommendations

To restore the reputation of the USPS, the following recommendations are made to take advantage of the agenda setting theory. This theory should be used by the USPS in their attempts to repair their image as it is an exercise in power as different sources strive to get on the agenda in ways that are favorable to them (Jeffres, 1997).

A first recommendation is the implementation of a highly organized website. As stated previously, a website "symbolizes an organization's competitiveness, enhances an organization's image, and increases the practitioner's personal sense of professionalism" (Sweester, 2011, p. 295). The three aspects of this tool can aid in building the reputation of the USPS. All of the information on the site can be controlled by the USPS and contain pertinent information regarding their financial situation and the rationale in their attempts to fix it.

As 37.4 percent (210) of the headlines coded damaged the reputation of the USPS, a website would be a smart implementation because their interactive possibilities and level of trust from the consumer give them a great potential to persuade (Voorveld, Neijens, & Smit, 2011).

The USPS can use the interactivity of the website to make their information easily accessible and gain back the trust from their consumers.

This tool would allow the USPS to set their own agenda and reverse some of the damaging effects the national news media created for the organization. If, like Funkhouser (1973) explains, the media do not give realistic pictures of major issues, this would be a great opportunity for the USPS to get the proper information out to the public to increase the only 16.2 percent (91) of the headlines that enhance their reputation.

Another recommendation to mend the USPS's reputation would be to use television advertising to reach those who are not as computer savvy. Television reaches a large audience and has the ability to segment to the consumer one would like to target (Rubinson, 2009). This tool again allows the USPS to control the content and is a credible source of information to change their image.

For example, this tool could be used to allow the USPS to explain the benefits of closing post offices in attempts to rid the 56.6 percent (94) of damaging articles on this topic. Releasing their information in many channels of communication will also allow the USPS to set an agenda for their public. By making their issues the most prevalent, USPS can grab the positive attention of their audience.

The final recommendation for the USPS is to use billboards and outdoor advertising. These can be placed in many different locations to inform a large variety of audiences. The content can again be controlled by the USPS. The quickly accessible information allows consumers to get the information they need to change their opinion in a fast paced manner.

Another example of this tool could be used to quickly disseminate information regarding the financial difficulties of the USPS. As 52.4 percent (99) of the articles coded pertaining to this topic damaged the USPS's reputation, implementation of this tool could help repair the image. This will also aid in the idea that the more direct experience the public has with an issue, the less it will have to depend on the news media for information on that area (Zucker, 1978).

Social Media would be a tool that would be unwise for the USPS to implement. Because of the ability for consumers to post their own content, there is a high possibility of an overwhelming amount of negative content to be displayed. This tool is not easily controlled and when used incorrectly can further harm a reputation. If the USPS wants to set a reputation enhancing agenda with the public, this would not be an intelligent tool to create as anyone can set the agenda of these pages. If the USPS wants to eradicate the 37.4 percent of articles that damaged them over the past year and create a better image for the organization, social media should be avoided.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine how the media portrays the United States Postal Service. Through a content analysis, it has been determined that the USPS has been negatively portrayed by the national news media within the past year. Although this study has concluded that the USPS has earned a negative reputation, further research should be conducted to truly cement this finding. As this study did not have many articles pertaining directly to the competitors of USPS, it is hard to come up with a concrete conclusion about the relationship between these few organizations.

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