AT&T: “Apologies are not Enough”

William L. Benoit and Susan L. Brinson

AT&T’s long distance service interruption in New York on September 17, 1991 was a serious threat to its image. After some initial confusion, including an ill-advised attempt to shift the blame to lower level workers, Richard Allen, Chairman of AT&T, placed a full page newspaper advertisement to restore its image. This essay critically analyzes that statement, extending previous work on image restoration discourse by Benoit, Gullifor, and Panici (1991). Three primary strategies were developed appropriately in the discourse: mortification, plans for correcting the problem, and bolstering.

KEY CONCEPTS  Apology, AT&T, image restoration, long distance, crisis management

WILLIAM L. BENOIT (Ph.D., Wayne State University, 1979) is an Associate Professor in the Communication Department, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211. SUSAN L. BRINSON (Ph.D., University of Missouri, 1990) is an Assistant Professor in the Communication Department, Auburn University, Auburn, AL 36849.

Introduction


Observers considered this incident to be a serious threat to AT&T’s reputation. As Andrews explained: “The mishap is a big embarrassment for the American Telephone and Telegraph Company that is sure to tarnish its reputation for reliability and up-to-date technology” (9/19/91, p. C9). Ramirez agreed that it was “a serious blow to its image” (9/19/91a, p. C9). In response, AT&T printed a full page letter from Chairman Robert E. Allen in major newspapers entitled “Apologies are not enough” (New York Times, p. C3; Wall Street Journal, p. C22; Washington Post, p. C12).

This study investigates AT&T’s image restoration attempt by analyzing the nature of its rhetorical strategies and then evaluating their effectiveness. First, we sketch a typology of possible image restoration strategies. Then, we describe the events surrounding this particular incident. After our analysis of AT&T’s defensive discourse, we evaluate that discourse. Finally, we discuss the implications of this analysis.

Image Restoration Discourse

A recurring type of discourse is designed to restore face, image, or reputation after alleged or suspected wrong-doing. By “image” we mean the perceptions of the source held.
by the audience, shaped by the words and acts of the source (one's image can be influenced by statements of other actors to the audience as well). The “audience” members are those individuals salient to the source at the time. Similarly, in the corporate realm, Bernstein (1984) suggests that image may be defined as a representation of the reality of a company’s performance, and is constructed by both the public and the company.

Face, image, or reputation is an extremely important commodity. Goffman explains that “When a face has been threatened, face-work must be done” (1967, p. 27). Similarly, Brown and Levinson observe that “people can be expected to defend their faces if threatened” (1978, p. 66). Schlenker explains that predicaments “can damage his or her identity . . . adversely affecting relationships with the audience” (1980, p. 131). Therefore, when our reputation is threatened, we have a motivation to offer explanations, defenses, justifications, rationalizations, apologies, or excuses for our behavior.

There can be no doubt that government agencies, corporations, and other bodies are as concerned as individuals with their image or reputation, and for good reason. Since the early 1970s, organizations have become more aware of their responsibility for contributing to society in economic, social, environmental, and political ways. Brody states “organizations are being held to new standards of accountability” (1991, p. 37). As such, corporations must be concerned about their image in the public eye.

Research indicates corporations may at times take an indirect or preventive approach designed to cope with general negative feelings toward the company. Heath and Nelson (1986) asserted the importance of managing an issue before it becomes controversial and threatens public perception of the company. Schmertz (1988) further suggested that successful management of an issue often begins when the corporation injects itself “into the debate and [makes] sure [its] viewpoint is heard by the intellectual establishment” (p. 200). Post and Kelley explain this preventive approach by arguing that “effective issues management requires that the practitioner transform the daily job of reacting to an agenda beyond his or her control into an anticipatory system for responding to environment change, whether in crisis form or not” (p. 357; italics added). Crable and Vibbert (1983) identified an example of such a preventative approach in their analysis of the successful image management strategy in Mobil Oils’ “Observations,” a bi-weekly column published in newspaper magazine sections. Without addressing a particular crisis, Mobil Oil developed an active rhetorical strategy to combat a pervasive mindset critical of the oil industry generally, and Mobil Oil specifically.

However, at other times such businesses are forced to directly contend with corporate crises. For example, in 1979 CBS News accused Mobil Oil of “creative bookkeeping” in its announcements of quarterly profits. Mobil Oil responded by accusing CBS News of prejudiced journalism. What followed was a corporate repartee, in which each organization engaged in outright denials of the other’s denouncements, while simultaneously employing self-purification strategies (Dionisopoulos & Vibbert, 1988). Johnson and Johnson was able to resurrect Tylenol after experts had declared that the contamination of Tylenol capsules had poisoned this brand name as well as the human victims (Benoit & Lindsey, 1987). This type of crisis management is crucial for a company for, as Brody asserts, “early response to crises can limit the extent to which organizations are damaged. Prompt, open responses minimize damage potential” (1991, p. 189). Clearly the objective of crisis management is salvation of corporate image, for loss of a positive corporate image may quickly translate into an economic loss, as Exxon could testify (Williams, 1990).

Thus, corporations face threats to their reputations, and often resort to image restoration discourse in such cases. Of course, there may be differences in the defensive efforts waged by individuals and companies. For example, Cheney argues that “corporate mes-
sages tend to decenter the individual” (1992, p. 176), suggesting that statements are made and actions are taken by the corporation rather than any identifiable individual. Also, organizations might favor different options than individuals, or employ strategies in different configurations. Corporations may bring greater or different resources to image restoration efforts than individuals. Attorneys may recommend against certain utterances because of concerns about litigation. However, despite differences in how image restoration strategies might be selected, combined, or employed, the menu of persuasive options should be the same for individual and corporate apologists. Thus, it is appropriate to subject corporate discourse to rhetorical criticism (see Toth & Heath, 1992).

Typology of Image Restoration Strategies

Various approaches are available for examining verbal self-defense, some developed for rhetorical criticism and some for conversational analysis. The works of Burke (1970), Ware and Linkugel (1973), and Scott and Lyman (1968) clearly establish a variety of verbal self-defense strategies, but each of these theories offers options overlooked by the others. We present an integrated typology of five broad discursive image restoration strategies: denial, avoiding responsibility, minimization, mortification, and correction (for a more complete discussion, see Benoit, Cullifor, & Panici, 1991).

One image restoration strategy is denial, in which the accused either simply repudiates the accusation or shifts the blame elsewhere. A second strategy is evasion of responsibility, when the accused does not deny committing the offense, but rather claims a lack of responsibility because the misdeed was a result of someone else’s actions (provocation), a lack of information (defeasibility), an accident, or committed with good intentions.

A third method of image restoration is to reduce the perceived offensiveness of the act (and hence the damage to the accused’s image), which has five variants. First, bolstering strengthens the audience's positive affect toward the accused, counteracting negative feelings. Second, one can minimize the unpleasantness of the offensive act. Third, attacking the accuser may lessen the impact of the accusation. Fourth, differentiation may weaken negative feelings by favorably comparing the act to similar, but more reprehensible, acts. Transcendence, a fifth variant, places the act in a larger, more desirable, context to reduce the unpleasantness of the wrongful act. Finally, offering to compensate the injured party may function to reduce the act's offensiveness, and the damage to the accused's image.

Image restoration may occur through the use of a fourth method, mortification. Unlike previous options, this strategy requires the accused to admit the wrongful act and ask forgiveness (Burke, 1970). The fifth restoration strategy is correction, in which the accused vows to correct the problem. (These categories, and their relationship to the literature, are discussed more fully in Benoit, in press). With this typology in mind, we can turn to a description of the events in the AT&T long distance service disruption, and then to an analysis and evaluation of AT&T’s message of apology.

AT&T’S September 1991 Long Distance Service Outage

AT&T agreed to supply power for its New York City long distance switching plant from its own generators, to relieve demands on Consolidated Edison. However, a rectifier malfunctioned, and the plant automatically switched over to battery power. The batteries provided enough power to keep the long distance service working for about six hours, and alarms were designed to notify workers that the power supply had been interrupted. However, the alarms went unnoticed for almost six hours. By the time the situation was discovered there was not enough time left to correct the problem before long distance service was disrupted (Schwartz, 9/30/91; McCarroll, 9/30/91).
The effects of this disruption in long distance telephone were significant. Andrews reported that "more than five million calls into and out of New York" were stopped (9/19/91, p. A1). This service interruption lasted for about seven hours (Chicago Tribune, 9/20/91, p. 5). In addition to this inconvenience, "air traffic at the metropolitan area's three major airports" was interrupted (Ramirez, 9/21/91b, p. 15) for several hours, "stranding tens of thousands of passengers (Cushman, 9/21/91, p. 27). This occurred because air traffic control relies on "land-based telephone lines" (Ramirez, 9/19/91a, p. C9).

The air traffic disruption was potentially more serious than it might appear: "The airport shutdown had a ripple effect nationwide" (Chicago Tribune, 9/20/91, p. 1). Hevesi reports that, "some flights in and out of Boston were also disrupted in part because the New York control center could not communicate with Boston. This type of communications breakdown also affected service from Philadelphia, Washington, and most other Northeastern airports" (9/18/91, p. A1). The Chicago Tribune added that it created "hundreds of flight delays and cancellations in Chicago and other cities across the country" (9/19/91, p. 1). Even more importantly, "air traffic controllers, airline officials, and independent experts said the loss of communications had diminished the margin of safety for planes in the air in the region at the time of the breakdown" (Chicago Tribune, 9/19/91, p. 2). Although we were lucky that no collisions or crashes occurred, AT&T’s service interruption was more than simple inconvenience: it was potentially disastrous.

The effects on AT&T’s reputation, heightened by the substantial attention devoted by the media to this episode, were substantial. The Chicago Tribune reported that “Industry experts . . . said Tuesday's events will damage AT&T’s reputation for reliability and cause more customers to protectively switch at least part of their phone service to competitors such as MCI Communications Corp. and Sprint” (9/19/91, p. 2). Apparently AT&T recognized a need for image restoration discourse, because Advertising Age reported that AT&T "is hurriedly preparing new advertising aimed at rebuilding customer confidence after its East Coast telephone service outage last week" (Fitzgerald, 9/23/91, p. 3). If this weren't enough of a problem for AT&T, five other factors combined to increase the damage to AT&T's image.

One factor exacerbating the damage is AT&T's own advertising campaign. AT&T emphasized its reliability in many of its advertisements. For instance, in one advertisement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1 Image Restoration Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shifting the Blame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evade Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defeasibility/Biological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Intentions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce Offensiveness of Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolstering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Accuser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Benoit and Brinson
the spokesperson explained that “My expectations are high—I lose patience with things I
can’t count on. That’s why I like AT&T. I never have to worry” (Time, 8/5/91, p. 69).
Similarly, another advertisement targeting college students claimed that they can “fulfill all of [their] communications requirements with one course. . . . And with AT&T [they’ll]
always get the most reliable long distance service” (Time, 9/16/91, p. 29). Thus, AT&T’s
own advertising functioned to create high expectations for reliable service that were violated
by this service interruption.

Nor did this situation go unnoticed by industry observers. Keller reported that the
incident is “certain to tarnish the image of AT&T, which has used an advertising blitz to
promote the quality and reliability of its phone services” (9/18/91, p. B1). He also revealed
that “A senior FCC official . . . said Kenneth Garrett, senior vice president of AT&T’s
Network Services division, conceded that AT&T hadn’t yet delivered on previous commit-
ments to fix gaping holes in what AT&T calls its ‘fully redundant, self-healing’ network”
(9/20/91, p. B4). “AT&T has been saying for years its phone network has ways to route calls
around a problem at one site, ‘and yet things like this happen,’ said Richard Toole, a Merrill
Lynch & Co. analyst” (Chicago Tribune, 9/19/91, p. 2). Hence, this service interruption
seemed especially egregious given AT&T’s own claims about its ability to provide reliable
long distance service.

However, a second factor increased the potential damage to AT&T’s image: this was not
an isolated example of a service interruption. “In January 1990, AT&T attributed a major
snarling of long distance calls to a computer software glitch. Last January, an AT&T crew
accidentally cut an advanced fiber-optic cable . . . severing New York and Newark’s major
telephone link to the rest of the world” (Ramirez, 9/19/91a, p. C9). As Andrews explained,
“The breakdown was the third significant disruption of service in AT&T in less than two
years, and will almost certainly damage its reputation among business and government
customers (9/19/91, p. C9). Hence, AT&T could hardly claim this was an isolated
occurrence.

A third factor exacerbating the damage was the taunts by AT&T’s competitors, who
were quick to take advantage of this snafu. MCI and US Sprint both ran advertisements after
the incident that explained how people and companies could use their long distance
services even if they were AT&T long distance customers. MCI ran this full page advertise-
ment:

Remember this number for the next time AT&T’s system goes down. Just punch it in
before the area code and number, and (voila) you’ll be using MCI.
Better still, get an MCI card and you’ll always have a reliable long distance network
in your pocket.
And we do know one thing: you’ll have better luck next time. (New York Times,
9/20/91, p. A9; see also Wall Street Journal, 9/19/91)

There is a clear assumption that service interruption will happen again: “the next time
AT&T’s system goes down.” This advertisement not only tells AT&T customers how to use
MCI in an emergency, but encourages AT&T customers to switch to MCI. It also promises
better service: “we do know . . . you’ll have better luck.” The threat to AT&T’s image is clear
and obvious.

U.S. Sprint ran two full page advertisements on September 23. The New York Times ad
read, in huge block letters:

LAST YEAR AT&T SPENT HALF A BILLION DOLLARS ADVERTISING RELIABILITY.

Apologies are not Enough
Sprint’s *Wall Street Journal* advertisement also began with large, bold print:

**AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE TO EVERYONE WHOSE TELEPHONE IS THE LIFE-LINE OF THEIR BUSINESS.**

**ALWAYS HAVE TWO LIFELINES.**

If you have recently experienced difficulty calling long distance, then remember, you can always call on Sprint. (*Wall Street Journal*, 9/23/91, p. A7)

Notice that the *New York Times* ad reminds readers of AT&T’s advertising claims, implying that AT&T has been spending on advertising instead of investing in reliability. The *Wall Street Journal* advertisement focused on business customers, suggesting AT&T’s unreliability. Thus, Sprint’s attack on AT&T was intense.

The fourth element increasing the damage to AT&T was governmental investigation into the incident. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that both state and federal authorities were investigating the incident (9/19/91). Requests for government intervention and inquiries emphasize the perception that AT&T’s activities need outside monitoring and, hence, damage its reputation.

Finally, the fifth element exacerbating AT&T’s image problem was the extensive media coverage of the breakdown. Following the collapse of service, most of the major news outlets in the United States focused on the event, including newspapers (*Atlanta Constitution, Chicago Tribune, New York Times, Wall Street Journal,* and *Washington Post*), and newsmagazines (*Newsweek* and *Time*). Broadcast news organizations responded similarly. Both CBS and NBC covered the breaking story on their September 17 newscasts. More significantly, however, each network devoted two minute segments on their September 18 broadcasts to coverage of the AT&T malfunction, a time slot that represents a sizable portion of their available air time. As a result of this extensive news media coverage, individuals who may not have been affected by the outage probably learned of its occurrence. Thus, damage to AT&T’s reputation was not limited to those directly affected by the service interruption.

Thus, AT&T’s long distance service interruption was a significant incident. Millions of calls were blocked for hours. Air traffic was delayed and its safety was compromised. Moreover, five factors intensified this problem for AT&T’s image: AT&T’s own reliability advertising, earlier service problems, counter-advertising by competitors, governmental investigations, and extensive media coverage of this debacle.

**AT&T’S Image Restoration Efforts**

Our analysis of AT&T’s statements after this long distance service interruption indicates that it’s defense went through three stages. The initial stage consisted of shifting the blame (victimage) to lower level union workers at the power plant. Andrews reported that on Wednesday “AT&T officials said the problems at the switching station were largely a result of an ‘operating judgment error’ and that technicians at the station had failed to notice alarms intended to alert them when the plant is running on batteries” (9/19/91, pp. A1, C9). In fact, Joseph P. Nacchio, vice president for business communications, explained that “the workers violated company procedures by failing to inspect the equipment when the company converted to its own power” (Andrews, 9/19/91, p. C9). Thus, AT&T initially blamed the workers for the loss of long distance service, citing “judgment errors” and violations of company procedures. If this explanation held up, outrage could be directed at low-level workers, rather than at AT&T generally or its policies.
However, the Communication Workers of America union was quick to refute this attempt to shift the blame from AT&T itself to low level employees. First, the alarms were not working properly. Keller reports that CWA officials “said audio alarms didn’t sound. . . . And they said visual alarms . . . were hidden from view behind equipment that had recently been installed in the facility” (9/20/91, p. B4). Second, Laura Unger, president of the CWA, explained that “staff reductions had left the plant without any properly trained workers” (Andrews, 9/20/91, p. C9). Third, and most significantly, “‘the company is blaming people who weren’t even there,’ said Robert Swanson, secretary treasurer of the CWA local 1150 in New York. ‘They were at a class to learn about a new computerized alarm system’” (9/20/91, p. B4). It seems clear that management, rather than workers, should be held responsible for reducing staff and scheduling training sessions that would leave the plant without adequate staffing. Nor can workers reasonably be blamed for failing to notice hidden or disconnected alarms.

These revelations prompted AT&T to enter the second stage of its defense, which can best be labeled as one of confusion. At first, AT&T admitted that employees were attending a class, but “would not confirm that the three were those normally assigned to the power station” (Andrews, 9/20/91, p. C1). AT&T officials also “confirmed that some of the audio and visual alarms were not working properly” (Keller, 9/20/91, p. B4). Andrews reported that AT&T’s position was not clear:

After union officials charged that AT&T had falsely blamed technicians for the breakdown of long-distance service in New York on Tuesday, company officials admitted that some alarms were not working and that managers had not followed proper procedures. But they declined to be specific and their statements appeared to be inconsistent. (9/20/91, p. C1)

Eventually, AT&T acknowledged that “No AT&T technicians were at fault” and that “if all appropriate procedures had been followed by management personnel, the problem could have been averted” (Keller, 9/20/91, p. B4). Furthermore, Robert E. Allen, Chairman of AT&T, wrote a letter to his employees, admitting that “AT&T had explained the accident poorly,” that “we were inconsistent in explaining what happened.” This “was not because we sought to excuse ourselves but because events were moving so fast, and, in our desire to explain as quickly as possible, there were misinterpretations of exactly what happened and why” (Ramirez, 9/22/91b, p. 27). This ended the second phase of AT&T’s image restoration, as the full story emerged and the company abandoned efforts to place blame on the workers.

The third phase was one of apology. On September 23, 1991, Chairman Allen published a letter of apology in newspapers. The remainder of our analysis of AT&T’s image restoration attempts will focus on this message. It was printed in the New York Times (p. C3), the Wall Street Journal (p. C22), and the Washington Post (p. C12). Analysis of the text of the message reveals three primary image restoration strategies: mortification, plans for correcting the problem, and bolstering of AT&T’s image. Bolstering is in a sense not a separate strategy, but a beneficial side-effect of the way the first two strategies are developed. Each strategy will be discussed separately.

**Mortification**

The first strategic component of this discourse is mortification. Allen begins this message by accepting responsibility for the disruption: “I am deeply disturbed that AT&T was responsible for a disruption in communications service.” Not only does he explicitly accept full responsibility for the incident, he makes no attempt to minimize the impact of the
service outage, acknowledging that this service disruption “not only affected our customers but also stranded and inconvenienced thousands of airline passengers.” Later in the letter he acknowledges that: “The recent disruption underscored a fundamental truth: our services have a crucial impact across the economy, across society. They affect people’s work and personal lives, in the most critical ways.” The first paragraph ends with an explicit apology: “I apologize to all of you who were affected, directly or indirectly.” This could be considered a textbook example of mortification. The apologist accepts responsibility, acknowledges the suffering of the victims without attempting to diminish the undesirable consequences they suffered, and directly apologizes for the offensive act.

Correction

The second strategy, revealing plans to correct the problem, is developed much more extensively in the message. Echoing the title of this discourse, the second paragraph opens with the statement that “Apologies, of course, are not enough.” First, Allen indicates that: “We have identified the cause as a combination of mechanical and human failures. And, most regrettably, management practices were not followed that would have prevented the problem from affecting the public.” Identification of the cause(s) of a problem is important to solving it and preventing its recurrence. Mentioning “mechanical failures” could have initiated an attempt to shift the blame (for typically such breakdowns cannot be predicted or prevented). However, he does not turn away from the course of mortification adopted in the first paragraph. While mentioning the mechanical problems, he also explicitly admits that AT&T management not only could have prevented the incident, but in fact management had not followed company procedures, allowing it to occur.

Of course, identifying the cause of the problem will not guarantee that it will not recur. Accordingly, Mr. Allen announces that: “We have already taken corrective and preventive action at the affected facility.” However, rather than stop here, he reports that he has “directed a thorough examination of all of our facilities and practices, from the ground up.” Thus, in addition to correcting the causes of the problem at the New York switching plant, he has ordered study and review of the entire AT&T system and its practices to identify—and presumably prevent—other potential problems.

AT&T’s Chair indicates his commitment to solving potential service disruptions. He stressed previous expenditures—“billions of dollars of investment and the skilled work of AT&T people”—and future investments—“we plan to spend billions more over the next few years to make them even more reliable.” Of course, success in achieving reliable service depends upon the ability to identify potential problems, a willingness to expend sufficient money, and the ability to devise and implement effective solutions to those problems. It is clear that the “billions of dollars of investment” in the past did not prevent this service disruption. However, identification of potential problems and commitment to expend further monies to correct such problems are the appropriate steps to avoid future disruptions.

Allen further reassures readers of his commitment to solving the problems through “working closely with government officials to satisfy concerns about the need for communications backup in situations that affect the public’s welfare.” In this manner, Allen intimately links AT&T with the organization charged with both representing and protecting the public—the government. This utterance seems designed to provide comfort that a major corporation will work with our representatives to prevent a breakdown from occurring again.

AT&T’s plan to assure reliable service is also reinforced by the goals Allen reveals in this message. In one place he declares that “Perfect service continuity is our goal.” Elsewhere he
reports that “we have designed and built our systems to the world’s highest standards.” This goal is backed by his personal commitment: “Ultimately we have to be able to provide the certainty of service that is its own safety net. And we will.” Although lofty goals do not assure desired results, they are an important prerequisite.

Allen’s letter ends with predictions of success in this endeavor: “I have great confidence in AT&T people.” He promises that we “can count on our people’s commitment to service.” This takes a letter which began with apologies for a problem that occurred in the past, through a description of current policies, to a positive vision for the future. Together, these utterances demonstrate AT&T’s commitment to take action designed to forestall the recurrence of the problem.

**Bolstering**

The third image restoration strategy, bolstering, is expressed throughout the message. First, and subtly, the act of mortification conveys a strong sense of security. It is neither easy nor pleasant to confess responsibility for suffering of others. This means that AT&T’s statement is likely to appear honest and trustworthy to readers. After all, if Allen had been willing to attempt to mislead or deceive readers, he surely wouldn’t have admitted culpability. Notice that because this apology occurs at the beginning of the message, AT&T’s apparent sincerity increases the likelihood that the remainder of the message (and the strategies contained in it) will be given credence by readers.

Chairman Allen’s development of the second image restoration strategy, plans for correcting the problem, contributes more directly to bolstering AT&T’s image. He reports initially that the causes of the service interruption have been corrected. However, AT&T does not stop here, but announces a comprehensive review of AT&T facilities and policies. Allen details the effort (billions of dollars and skilled work invested) expended by the company in the past to service its customers. He reports that billions more will be spent on serving AT&T’s customers in the future, which can be taken as an answer to Sprint’s “half a billion dollars advertising reliability” (we say it can be “taken” as an answer because both advertisements were published the same day). Furthermore, Allen promises that “we will” succeed in assuring service. If his descriptions of these plans for assuring quality service are accepted—and the groundwork for such acceptance is laid by the sincerity emanating from the initial act of mortification—AT&T should have restored much of its damaged image.

Allen reinforces the positive image of AT&T by reminding readers that “we have designed and built our systems to the world’s highest standards.” This assertion buttresses AT&T’s reputation in three ways. First, it suggests that, because AT&T develops and builds equipment to accommodate the “highest standards,” they must be pre-eminent in the field of telecommunications or, at the very least, unsurpassed by anyone. Second, AT&T construes itself as a world-class organization; they compete with, and by implication, surpass international telecommunications companies. Finally, this claim subtly reminds readers of the basic message of AT&T’s advertising campaign: they are the best at service and reliability.

This analysis reveals a relatively simple strategy for image restoration in the final stage of AT&T’s defense. There is no attempt to deny the injurious act: AT&T acknowledged both the interrupted long distance service and the disruption of the airline service. In fact, Allen acknowledges the problems caused by the service disruption. Furthermore, no attempt was made to minimize the offensiveness of the event. Opportunities existed for doing so; for example, he could have argued that no lives were lost, he could have stressed the limited geographical extent of the service outage, or he could have emphasized the fact that service was only interrupted for a few hours. Nor does he ignore the airline passengers’ inconve-
nience, perhaps hoping that if he fails to mention it the public will forget. In fact, he stresses the claim that AT&T's "services have a crucial impact across the economy, across society. They affect people's work and personal lives, in the most critical ways." Thus, no attempt was made in this image restoration message to deny the injurious event or to minimize its offensiveness.

Although there were initial attempts to blame workers, once the facts emerged these attempts at victimage ceased. It is quite possible that these statements were made in honest ignorance of the situation (early spokespersons may well have simply assumed that workers were at fault, without first checking to see that the alarms did function properly and that the workers were at the facility). AT&T admits in the newspaper advertisement that it was responsible for a service interruption. While mentioning "mechanical failures," Allen explicitly admits that "management practices were not followed that would have prevented the problem," thus accepting responsibility for it.

AT&T chose to engage in mortification, with a commitment and plans to correct (and prevent future instances of) the problem. Mr. Allen acknowledged that AT&T was responsible for a serious disruption, that management procedures were not followed that could have prevented the problem. He apologized. Given the understanding of the situation as reported in the newspapers, there was little choice in this matter. However, some choice was available in describing this situation. For example, AT&T's responsibility could have been downplayed (e.g., simply reporting plans to correct problems without bringing up the question of blame). The specific utterances supporting these two defensive strategies also functioned to bolster AT&T's image.

**Evaluation of AT&T's Image Restoration Efforts**

In this section we discuss two questions. First, was AT&T's image restoration message well-designed? Second, was its advertisement printed in appropriate outlets?

Apart from the ill-advised attempts to shift the blame to workers, and confusion about the service outage in the first few days, we believe that AT&T dealt with this threat to its image appropriately. First, AT&T engaged in mortification. In our society, we hold people responsible for their actions. The interruption was AT&T's fault and they apologized for it, as they should have. Readers may well have admired Allen's forthright acceptance of responsibility. Thus, accepting responsibility for the service interruption and apologizing for the consequences should be considered a wise choice.

Second, taking corrective action is an appropriate and important image restoration strategy. As the ad said, apologies are not enough, so AT&T went on to describe its plans to prevent recurrence of the problem. Allen made several statements concerning corrective action: the causes of the outage have been corrected, a comprehensive review has been initiated, billions invested in the past, promises of billions more invested in the future, and a commitment to quality service. As long as the corrective action sounds reasonable and appropriate to the relevant audience, it should reassure them that the problem has been solved and/or will not recur. Although the action Allen promised was a bit general, his apparent sincerity, his declaration of the goal of "perfect service," and his personal commitment were probably persuasive for much of his audience (one cannot expect detailed discussion of changes in alarms, policy review, and the like in this kind of discourse). After having taken corrective action, there is little else an apologist could do (other than to offer compensation, which AT&T did not do; see Atlanta Constitution, 9/24/91, p. B8).

Third, these two strategies—mortification and corrective action—worked well together to bolster AT&T's image. The apology may well have contributed to perceptions of sincerity, and the specific corrective actions described should foster a favorable image of AT&T.
Therefore, there is reason to expect a favorable reaction to AT&T's image restoration discourse. An immediate result of this message was to silence AT&T's competitors. An examination of relevant newspapers following AT&T's defensive discourse reveals that neither MCI nor Sprint ran any more advertisements touting their services "the next time AT&T’s system goes down." Sprint dropped the "half a billion dollars advertising reliability" ad after a single insertion. This can be considered indirect evidence of the effectiveness of AT&T's response: had the discourse been poorly conceived, surely competitors MCI and Sprint would have continued their attacks.

Before leaving the first question, we would like to consider a different assessment of AT&T's discourse. Meyers, a crisis management consultant, characterized Allen’s apology as "self-serving puff about how wonderful A.T.&T. service is" (1991, p. C13). While we agree with other criticisms (AT&T should not have tried to shift the blame, Allen could have acted sooner), we strongly disagree with the statements that "AT&T botched the job" or that "An apology is no place for a commercial" (1991, p. C13).

Much of the message is devoted to describing corrective action, as just described. We see this as more than "self-serving puff." It is reasonable for customers to ask what will be done to prevent the problem from recurring, and Allen provides a clear, though general, answer. Certainly Allen engages in bolstering, but describing corrective action is an important and reasonable image restoration strategy. We are impressed with his forthright acceptance of responsibility and his decision not to attempt to minimize the problem. Hence, while AT&T’s response may not have been perfect, we offer a considerably more favorable assessment of AT&T’s image restoration discourse than Meyers.

The second question we take up is whether AT&T placed its ads in appropriate outlets. It published the full page apology in three newspapers: the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post. The selection of these three papers is justified, in large measure, by the audiences relevant to this image restoration discourse. The New York Times is an obvious choice because it reaches two important publics for AT&T's purposes. First, many of the individuals most immediately affected by the breakdown—residents of New York City—were probably exposed to the apology. Second, as a newspaper with a national circulation, the New York Times would present the apology to a wider audience as well.

Placement in the Wall Street Journal was also a good choice. Like the New York Times, it circulates heavily in New York City and nationally. Moreover, the Wall Street Journal is an important source for business and financial interests. As a result of its breakdown in service, AT&T would want to restore its image not only with consumers, but with businesses, investors, and stock market analysts. Thus, the Wall Street Journal was another excellent choice for placement of its defensive message.

In this regard other New York newspapers, such as the Post, Daily News, or Newsday would not have been as effective for placement of the apology. Although they may reach larger audiences collectively, they have neither the prestige nor the same audience base as the New York Times. Also, unlike the New York Times and the Washington Post, these other newspapers have a narrower regional focus. Thus, an apology placed in these outlets would not have reached the wider audience beyond the New York area. Remember that the fifth factor increasing the damage to AT&T’s image was heavy national media attention.

The Washington Post also reached an important target audience for AT&T. As mentioned earlier, investigations by governmental agencies emerged in response to the service disruption. As a corporation governed by several Federal regulatory agencies, including the Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Trade Commission, it was in AT&T’s best interests to prominently publicize its voluntary corrective actions with these groups. Hence, use of each of the three newspapers is amply justified.

Apologies are not Enough

85
It is interesting to note that Sprint’s advertisements attacking AT&T appeared in the New York Times, Washington Post, and Chicago Tribune (“half a billion dollars advertising”) and in the Wall Street Journal (“two lifelines”), while AT&T’s advertisement only ran in three of these outlets (not in the Chicago Tribune). Was this a mistake on AT&T’s part? Of course, because AT&T’s defense appeared the same day as these attacks from Sprint, AT&T probably was unaware of Sprint’s insertions when it ran its defensive advertisement. Still, AT&T could have placed an advertisement in the Chicago Tribune in the next available issue. Should AT&T be concerned that people may have been exposed to Sprint’s attack without also hearing AT&T’s defense? It seems likely that a number of people who read Sprint’s Chicago Tribune advertisement might not have read AT&T’s defense. Furthermore, the discussion of the service outage presented earlier in this essay makes it clear that AT&T’s problem was publicized in the Tribune. However, we do not believe this was a serious flaw in AT&T’s image defense.

The service interruption occurred on the East Coast. While long distance calls to and from, for instance, Chicago, were interrupted (and while the national news media did cover the situation), the outage was primarily felt in the Northeastern part of the country. Similarly, while the effects of the air traffic disruption spread out from the initially affected airports, the most serious effects were concentrated in and around New York. The audience most directly affected by AT&T’s problem was an audience that their advertisements can be expected to reach: New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Post. While it was important to take responsibility for the problem and apologize, we believe it would have been a mistake for AT&T to belabor the point. So, AT&T’s advertisement placement, while not reaching every person aware of the outage or everyone exposed to Sprint’s attacks, was generally well-chosen, given the audiences it was most important for AT&T to reach.

### Implications of the Analysis

The final question we consider is what can we learn about image restoration attempts. The theory of image restoration has implications for public relations. The typology of image restoration strategies applied here is more complete than other, comparable approaches. For example, taking corrective action, a key element in AT&T’s defensive strategy, is discussed by none of the three theories integrated here (Burke, 1970; Ware & Linkugel, 1973; Scott & Lyman, 1968). Burke discusses mortification, which AT&T used prominently and to good effect, but this option is not discussed by either Ware and Linkugel or Scott and Lyman. Thus, while this theory of image restoration may not yet be complete, it is an improvement on existing approaches, providing a list of useful options for those who need to restore an image (or those who conduct critical analyses of such discourse). We do not argue that businesses’ image restoration attempts are identical to those of individuals, but this theory identifies key strategies that both individuals and corporations can use.

Second, although the development of this theory is not complete, we are evolving an understanding of which strategies might be most useful in particular situations. For example, we believe it is very risky for a company (or person) who is at fault to deny their culpability. If the truth comes out, the accused compounds the offense (not only performing an offensive act, but then lying about it). For example, President Richard Nixon continually denied any knowledge of the Watergate break-in and subsequent cover-up (Benoit, 1982). This may have worked, to some extent, at first, but ultimately he was forced to resign the presidency. Until the Tower Commission report was issued, President Reagan continued to deny knowledge of the Iran arms sale. His popularity declined from 63% to 40%, and only began to improve after that admission (Benoit, Gullifor & Panici, 1991). There is also some experimental evidence that suggests that denial and shifting the blame are not considered
by those who are injured by the actions to be as appropriate or effective as other potential image restoration strategies (Benoit & McConnell, 1993). In this case, we believe AT&T should not have attempted to shift the blame to workers, as it did at first. However, it quickly moved to the more appropriate stance of mortification. Thus, we recommend that those guilty of wrong-doing accept their responsibility immediately and apologize. To do otherwise can risk even more damage to one's image.

We also believe that it is important to report plans to correct and/or prevent recurrence of this problem. While people frequently want to know who to blame, it is more reassuring to know that steps have been taken to eliminate or avoid future problems. This would be especially important for those who admit responsibility (as President Reagan announced changes in personnel and procedures to create the impression that he was acting to prevent future problems [Benoit, Gullifor, & Panici, 1991]), but others can use it as well. For example, while Tylenol denied responsibility for the deaths from poisoned capsules, they introduced tamper-resistant packaging after the first incident, and phased out capsules altogether after the second incident (see Benoit & Lindsey, 1987). Allen's message emphasized AT&T's corrective action, and we believe that was an important component of AT&T's defense. Thus, corrective action is an important strategy, especially for those who are forced to accept responsibility for a problem.

Finally, this analysis reveals how image restoration strategies can be intertwined. We argue that the two principal strategies—mortification and plans for correcting the problem—also tended to bolster AT&T's image. While it is possible that strategies could conflict in some instances, they reinforced each another in this discourse.

**Conclusion**

AT&T's long distance breakdown of September 17, 1991 posed a substantial threat to its image. In addition to the interruption of long distance telephone calls and disruption of air travel, this debacle contradicted AT&T claims of reliability, was the latest in a serious of problems, was exploited by MCI and Sprint, caused calls for governmental investigation, and was the subject of strong media attention. After an initial period of confusion, including a misguided attempt to blame lower level workers, Robert Allen, Chairman of AT&T, published a full page newspaper advertisement to restore its image. This essay critically analyzed that discourse. Three primary strategies were developed in it—mortification, plans for correcting the problem, and bolstering—which were evaluated as appropriate for the situation.

**NOTE**

1Burne discusses the purgative-guilt cycle, in which humans inevitably violate the social order, requiring redemption. Burke (1970) sees two primary methods of purification, mortification and victimage. They have an important similarity in the way in which they deal with guilt: symbolically "killing" it. Burke suggests that they are both a form of death: mortification a kind of suicide, and victimage a kind of homicide (1970, p. 248). For our purposes, we separate them because of the different effects: mortification places the blame on one's self (the "bad" self) and begs forgiveness; while victimage shifts the blame elsewhere, to a scapegoat. Hence, we see victimage, or shifting the blame, as closer in effects to denial than to mortification.

**REFERENCES**


Williams, R. (1990, April 23). Exxon wounds starting to heal. Oil and Gas Journal, 88, 44.
Copyright of Communication Quarterly is the property of Eastern Communication Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.