

Jersey Strong, Right?: A Communications Analysis of New Jersey's Post-Hurricane Sandy Tourism Recovery

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Abstract

Hurricane Sandy, also known as Superstorm Sandy, slammed into the New Jersey coastline in late October 2012. The power and destructiveness of the storm distinguished it as the worst in the state's recorded history. New Jersey officials faced a monumental task of rebuilding their state while also facing serious threats to the state's most-valuable industry—tourism at the Jersey Shore. This case study analyzes the ways New Jersey was able to recover a summer tourism season in the face of incredible obstacles, both natural and manmade. The case offers students of crisis management illustrations of how years' worth of strategic communications efforts were concentrated into just a few months of marketing, advertising, and public relations work resulting in a record-breaking 2013 summer tourism season.

Keywords: New Jersey; Hurricane Sandy; Superstorm Sandy; crisis management; Chris Christie; Stronger Than The Storm; Atlantic City; Jersey Shore; tourism; Image Restoration Theory

Introduction

Image Restoration Theory (Benoit, 1995) provides scholars of strategic communication a range of options to understand more clearly how and why an organization responded to a given crisis. Often, these crises take on a persuasive defensive position, such as those stemming from corporate mismanagement, product safety scares, or political scandals (Benoit, 1997). The purpose of this study, however, is to analyze a natural disaster crisis communication response and recovery using Image Restoration Theory. This theory will also be incorporated within the context of advancing communication-focused technologies like social

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media—pervasive communication technologies that developed long after the theory was first put forward. By their very definition, natural disasters seem like crises in which no human is to blame, and therefore, an organization’s image may not be in serious need of restoration—after all, it is not as if a company president embezzled funds or someone poisoned a product. However, when the state of New Jersey faced the worst natural disaster in its history, and while the state’s leaders were of course not to blame for Hurricane Sandy, its leaders were responsible for recovering from it. Part of that recovery included monumental physical rebuilding efforts, but New Jersey’s leadership also faced an equally daunting task of recovering and restoring its image as a summer playground destination—hosting millions of visitors and generating billions of dollars each year. The purpose of following case study is to analyze the magnitude of Hurricane Sandy’s destruction on New Jersey’s shore industry and how the state’s leaders embarked on diverse image restoration initiatives to persuade tourists to come back to its beaches. This case also looks at how social and new media aided in restoring this image, but how it helped contribute to its destruction as well.

Background Information

Benoit’s Image Restoration Theory incorporates five main categories—denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1995). This analysis specifically looks at the reduction of offensiveness category and two of its subcategories: bolstering, which stresses good traits and accomplishments; and attack accuser, which reduces an accuser’s credibility and lessens their damage to reputations (Blaney & Benoit, 2001).

Image Restoration Theory builds on the premise that communication is goal-centered, and that maintenance of a positive image is among these primary goals (Clark & Delia, 1979). Accordingly, New Jersey’s initial reaction to restoring its image as a major tourism destination following Hurricane Sandy took on a defensive communication position seeking to discredit misreports of total devastation to the state’s shore towns. Millions of social media, as well as traditional media followers, received erroneous and outright deceptive reports about the destruction in New Jersey. Accordingly, the state’s image as a summer resort destination was in peril. Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow (2007) note, “In essence, image

restoration and its variants attend to questions of reputational repair by articulating a range of assorted strategic messages likely to repair the image of the organization or individual under attack” (p.130).

Because much of this false, yet damaging information was being disseminated through multiple media channels, the state’s leaders immediately implemented reputational repair plans to discredit/correct them and their sources. Benoit (1997) notes, “...perception is more important than reality...” when referring to image restoration (p. 178). Accordingly, if Americans’ perceptions were that New Jersey was all but washed into the ocean, then the sources of those perceptions must be addressed as soon as possible. Part of that effort was to reduce the credibility and believability of the accusers’ messages (in this case the people posting these stories), but also to bolster the image of the state at the same time.

To do so, New Jersey implemented a massive marketing and public relations campaign to bolster the publics’ belief that the state’s shorelines would be restored and ready for visitors just months after Hurricane Sandy’s landfall. The success of this plan hinged on identifying relevant audiences.

Benoit (1997) notes, “A key part of persuasion is tailoring one’s message(s) to the audience” (p. 182). In this case, New Jersey’s leaders needed to identify those most likely to believe and accept its messages, while also identifying those most important to its tourism industry. Moreover, organizational leadership played a major role in the management of this crisis, and the post-crisis responses also focused on the values of this leadership, which ultimately helped promote the response of renewal (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001).

An added point of interest to this case is the new communication media associated with it. Until recently, traditional channels of communication provided information on “...understanding, surviving, and recovering from natural disasters” (Paul, 2001, p. 43). Recently, this one-way model of communication has moved to a two-way model when dealing with natural disasters (Paul, 2001). Today, most of society expects instant updates about a disaster, now possible with Internet-connected smart device technology (Corbley, 1999). Noack (1997) noted that the Internet was

becoming the No. 1 means of communication during natural disasters as evidenced later in studies on California wildfires (Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2008), the Los Angeles earthquake (O'Reilly & Milstein, 2009), and the Palo Alto floods (Zinko, 2000). Effective crisis recovery is dependent on the speed in which an organization can deliver its messages (Marra, 1998). This case illustrates the point that social media use during a natural disaster is now the most-important means of communication between organizations and their stakeholders. New Jersey's leaders harnessed the speed, pervasiveness, and efficiency of social media with its messages to millions of people whose smartphones were their only sources of information and only means of communication. Never before had so many people in need relied so heavily on this new form of communication. Interestingly, New Jersey's image restoration efforts were both thwarted and bolstered through its use, and this case provides one of the first glimpses of social media's communication power on such a grand scale. While this technology is advancing every day, the fundamentals of Image Restoration Theory still apply to those organizations seeking to utilize, as well as, control its use.

The Institute for Crisis Management (ICM) identifies four causes of crises as: acts of god (weather-related incidences like hurricanes), mechanical problems (infrastructure problems), human error (accidents, miscommunication), and management decisions, actions, or inaction (poor planning and/or execution).

In this case study, acts of god, combined with management decisions, actions, or inactions, are analyzed through social texts focusing on how New Jersey's leadership enacted strategic communications measures during the initial as well as later stages of the Sandy crisis through the lens of Benoit's Image Restoration Theory. Baxter and Babbie (2003) define social texts as any document that can identify actions, trends, or outcomes of an event or events.

"When social texts are the primary form of data, they corroborate with other social texts of relevance. Social texts contextualize one another, positioning the researcher to construct a mosaic of meaning from this 'conversation between texts'" (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p. 348). Lindlof (1995) adds, "To the analyst, documents are very important because they are the 'paper trail' left by events and processes. Documents indicate,

among other things, what an organization produces and how it certifies certain kinds of activities” (p. 208). Social texts in this study include nonpartisan media reports, official New Jersey news releases, and media commentaries on the state’s handling of the Sandy crisis from a communications perspective.

Situation

A once-in-700-year storm; the only tropical cyclone to hit the Middle Atlantic in recorded history; the highest flood waters measured since sensors were installed in 1920. Hurricane Sandy hit the New Jersey shoreline on October 29th 2012 with a near perpendicular strike causing unprecedented destruction and leaving The Garden State reeling in terms of physical, emotional, financial, and human loss. Sandy’s tremendous size, coupled with its landfall occurring during a full moon, left tides 20 percent higher than normal and forecasters with no comparable storm models to accurately predict what it might be capable of (Howell, 2013). No storm like this had ever been seen in the Mid-Atlantic region. The National Hurricane Center reported (Porter, 2013) 72 deaths attributed to Hurricane Sandy, later renamed Superstorm Sandy—the second-highest storm-related death toll since the center began keeping records in 1851. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie summed the situation up, “The devastation is unprecedented, like nothing we’ve ever seen reported before” (Linhorst & Reitmeyer, 2012, para. 10).

EQECAT, a company that estimates losses from catastrophes for insurance companies, concluded that the storm caused approximately \$50 billion in damage (Isidore, 2012a), making it the second-costliest hurricane in U.S. history second only to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Porter, 2013). Mark Zandi, chief economist for the economic research firm, Moody’s, stated, “There’s so many ways it weighs on the economy that can’t be measured” (Isidore, 2012a, para. 13). Hurricane Sandy’s physical damage on infrastructure, homes, and businesses cost approximately \$30 billion in New Jersey alone. Reduction of business-related activity dropped normal business output in the region by as much as 60 percent (Argosy University, 2012). Even worse, many meteorologists and weather experts predict the frequency of similar “1-in-700-year” storms will likely increase to about every 20-50 years because of climate change (Oskin, 2013).

The state of New Jersey alone sustained more than half of the \$50 billion in East Coast damage and recorded 37 of the 72 storm-related deaths, according to Governor Chris Christie's office (Johnson, 2012). More than two million households lost electricity. In the days following Sandy, lines at gas stations stretched for miles, causing fights between patrons and price gouging among some station owners (Isidore, 2012b). Freehold, New Jersey, mayor, Anthony Ammiano, commented, "It's like the Jimmy Carter years. It's a flashback of bad memories [to the 1970s]" (Smith & Maglio, 2012, para. 3). The Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) noted that nearly 350,000 homes were damaged. Christie tried to reassure New Jersey residents shortly after the storm hit that life would eventually resume normalcy, stating:

We will continue to provide immediate relief for our citizens who were struck hard by Sandy. But be assured, I will spare no effort and waste no time to rebuild and restore our tourism industry, our transportation and utilities infrastructure and the lives of our citizens for the long term. (Johanson, 2013, para. 5)

The state of New Jersey had its greatest challenges ahead, not only with the cleanup efforts of the physical damage and the healing of the emotional losses, but also with widespread reports of the complete destruction of the state's No. 1 industry, its \$40 billion-a-year pride and joy—tourism.

New Jersey's government faced the overwhelming rebuilding efforts and ongoing care of its residents while also facing the long-term negative effects from not only the actual storm damage, but also erroneous reports of the real damage and misconceptions about rebuilding efforts. A massive communications plan needed to be established for the immediate needs of New Jersey residents who faced housing shortages; food and water distribution deficiencies; electricity and fuel reductions; stacks of insurance and government forms to complete; and total income losses, to name a few. The state also faced the continued onslaught of nationwide misreports about the damage to New Jersey, as well as its ability to rebuild. A combination of immediate communication through social media, as well as traditional media, was necessary for the state to keep its citizens up-to-date with information on the storm—in addition to the state's efforts to help them, both in the short and long term. Additionally, the state needed to embark on a national persuasive information

campaign to clear up the misperceptions that Americans had about the long-term effects to New Jersey and the state's progress to overcome Sandy's destruction.

Nearly nine million New Jersey residents living in less than four million square miles of land makes the state the most-densely populated in the union (United States Census Bureau, 2012). That, coupled with the fact that the state sits directly east of Philadelphia and immediately south of New York City, means New Jersey's infrastructure serves as the primary artery for commuters moving up and the down the East Coast every day. Nearly 240 million vehicles traveled the New Jersey Turnpike in 2010 alone (New Jersey Turnpike Authority Operations Department, 2010). Along with the daily drivers, the state plays host to millions of tourists each year along its 127 miles of white sand beaches dotted with tourist destinations. The largest of Jersey Shore towns, Atlantic City, hosts more than 30 million visitors a year ("Atlantic City," n.d.). More than half of the entire state's tourism industry (\$19 billion) occurs in just four shore counties: Atlantic, Cape May, Monmouth, and Ocean (Wulfhorst, 2013). Tourism Economics (2012, 2013) found that tourism in New Jersey:

directly supports 318,500 jobs and sustains more than 500,000 jobs including indirect and induced impacts. These jobs represent 1-in-10 jobs in New Jersey. The tourism sector generated \$34.7 billion of state GDP in 2012, 7% of the entire state economy. Tourism in New Jersey generated \$4.5 billion in state and local taxes and \$5.1 billion in federal taxes. In the absence of state and local taxes generated by tourism, each NJ household would need to pay \$1,420 to maintain current government revenues.

Because of the unique nature of Hurricane Sandy in its size, track, and landfall angle, meteorologists' predictions were indecisive at best. Many forecasts offered several computer-generated scenarios that offered multiple trajectories of the storm; however, these scenarios ranged from a complete miss of the coastline to other more southerly and northerly tracks. Because of Sandy's uniqueness, the state of New Jersey's government had to plan for the worst and hope for the best. Therefore, despite advanced warning, the state government and its residents could not rely on definitive information that would allow them to completely prepare. Erring on the side of caution was the mandate. As Sandy's fury struck New Jersey causing immediate loss of power, flooding,

infrastructure closures, overburdened emergency response efforts, and loss of life and limb, the need for up-to-the minute information became a priority. For many, the only means of communication came via their Smartphones. As the United States Department of Homeland Security noted in a June 2013 report on Social Media and Hurricane Sandy:

Throughout the course of the storm, including the days prior to landfall and for several weeks following, government agencies, response partners, utilities, nonprofits, ad hoc groups, and individuals leveraged various social media tools for a variety of purposes. Many of these instances represent the first time a government agency officially used social media for response activities. (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2013, p. 7)

The most-popular social media sites like Facebook and Twitter offer their users the means to communicate any thought at any time, nearly anywhere in the world, to millions of people instantaneously. With such a powerful communication media, the benefits it can offer society seem limitless. However, a criticism of social media is that it is too easy to use for any purpose. Meaningless status updates, product placement pitches within the most-popular sites, simplistic political commentaries, etc., are all common criticisms of social media. To many, the effectiveness and efficiency of social media has not yet been realized. “Despite the question, ‘Who owns social media in an organization?’, PR and communications professionals are in an excellent position to guide all types of communications...including social media. It’s time to seize the opportunity and embrace communications and technology” (Breakenridge, 2012, p. 2). The state of New Jersey seized its opportunity when social media’s speed and accessibility provided the ideal, or even the only platform for any communication, during the disaster.

Hurricane Sandy marked a shift in the use of social media in disasters. More than ever before, government agencies turned to mobile and online technologies. Before, during, and after Sandy made landfall, government agencies throughout the Northeast used social media to communicate with the public and response partners, share information, maintain awareness of community actions and needs, and more. (Cohen, 2013, para. 4)

Statistics from social media's most-used sites illustrate this importance. Facebook mentions of "Hurricane Sandy" and "Frankenstorm" increased more than one million percent during the storm. Facebook released its top-shared terms by all U.S. users, as of 10 a.m. the day following Sandy's landfall (Garun, 2012):

1. We are OK;
2. Power—lost power, have power, have no power;
3. Damage;
4. Hope everyone is OK;
5. Trees;
6. Made it;
7. Safe;
8. Thankful;
9. Fine; and
10. Affected.

Instagram CEO Kevin Systrom noted that during the height of the storm, "There are now 10 pictures per second with the hashtag 'Sandy'" (Bello, 2012a, para. 6).

Using Twitter, Governor Christie was able to help keep a state, much without electricity, informed about the storm. "Christie's tweets varied between informational updates and emotional expressions of empathy with the people of his state" (Parnass, 2012, para. 11). Christie used his personal Twitter account, tweeting: "Hurricane #Sandy is now moving twice as fast as I had originally been briefed—we are now expecting landfall in AC in the next hour."

In response to reports of many New Jersey residents ignoring evacuation orders, Christie tweeted: “I hope and pray there will not be a loss of life because of people’s decisions to stay.”

FEMA also urged its 163,400 Twitter followers to use social media and text messaging for the latest news and to communicate with loved ones affected by the storm (Bello, 2012a).

Andrew Raseij, founder of Personal Democracy Now, a firm that studies the relationship between technology and politics, commented, “It’s very clear that Governor Christie’s emphatic use of social media saved lives in a moment of crisis” (Parnass, 2012, para. 13). Systrom added, “I think this demonstrates how Instagram is quickly becoming a useful tool to see the world as it happens—especially for important world events like this” (Bello, 2012a, para. 6).

But for all the benefits that social media provided officials, namely the means to communicate instantly and as accurately as possible, it also quickly proved yet another obstacle for the state to overcome.

Images and video of flooded streets, crumpled boardwalks, toppled houses, and massive waves provided not only a historical record of the storm, but also fodder for social media postings, which as best, entertained the skeptical, and at worst, terrified a nation. Tim Donnelly, a writer and producer based in Asbury Park, New Jersey, said:

It was social media. You had Facebook and Twitter, but you couldn’t watch TV, and unless you could get to the store to buy the *Asbury Park Press*, the only way to get news was on social media, for better or worse. (Jordan, 2013, para. 7)

Photoshopped images, screen grabs from major motion pictures, and stock photos soon proved that false information can be just as “re-Tweetable” as the truth. Posted [photos of tidal waves reaching the feet of the Statue of Liberty, sharks swimming in a mall in New Jersey, and waves lapping the walls of the New York Stock Exchange](#) soon became sources for the established media as well.

CNN referenced the flooded Stock Exchange floor as being accurate, later recanting it, “[CNN] referenced a National Weather Service report that

turned out to be incorrect. We quickly made an on-air correction. We regret the error” (Bello, 2012b, para. 7). That National Weather Service report was later found to have been influenced by the faked images shown on local news stations. It seemed that these types of inaccurate social media updates and on-air reports from local news sources were not isolated incidents. “I heard there were body bags in the frozen food section of the A&P in Ortley Beach [New Jersey],” said Tim Donnelly,” (Jordan, 2013, para. 5). Angus Kress Gillespie, a Rutgers University American studies professor, explained,

They [erroneous social media reports] followed the pattern of classic urban legends...sharks in the streets have an element of shock, but the other thing is that they are on the edge of plausibility. They may or may not be true. (Jordan, 2013, para. 10)

Similarly, Atlantic City’s iconic boardwalk became the target of not only Sandy, but also the news media. Some [reports](#) indicated that the structure, which supports the city’s gambling mecca of multi-billion-dollar casinos, was no more. Liza Cartell, president of Atlantic City Alliance (ACA), an organization founded to enhance the city’s reputation, stated:

We had major broadcasters, standing in the middle of our streets parking themselves adjacent to areas where we did have a very old, dilapidated, condemned section of the boardwalk on the inlet side. And that was the film footage that was used for everyone. It had nothing to do with the iconic oceanfront Boardwalk. (Jacobs, 2013, para. 3-4)

Jeff Guaracino, ACA’s chief strategy and communications officer, added that some media reports confused Atlantic City’s famous Steel Pier with [more damaged amusement sites miles up the coast in Seaside Heights](#) (Wittkowski, 2013).

Nationwide polls conducted in the months following the storm illustrated both social and traditional media’s power to influence Americans’ perceptions about the devastation of Hurricane Sandy. A January 2013 poll (Wittkoswki, 2013; Jacobs, 2013) indicated that 25 percent of those surveyed nationwide believed the Atlantic City Boardwalk was completely destroyed. Even worse, 32 percent of Northeastern residents believed the same thing—the primary demographic for New Jersey’s tourism industry.

Those numbers were at least down from an earlier November poll that found 41 percent nationwide and 52 percent in the Northeast believing the iconic boardwalk was completely destroyed. However, Cartell noted that even with the improvements, “You’ve got a quarter of the nation and a third of the Northeast that think we still have issues...Those numbers still suck” (Wittkowski, 2013, para. 7).

Timothy O’Shea, the manager at a leading New Jersey shore community real estate company that manages summer rentals, said that in his areas, “We’re off 50, 55, 60 percent from last year in total” (Wulfhorst, 2013, para. 10) referring to summer rentals reserved by mid-April 2013. “People think that everything is devastated when in fact everything is not devastated,” he added, “There are pockets of devastation” (Wulfhorst, 2013, para. 11). Diane Wieland, Cape May County Department of Tourism director, commented, “People certainly thought that the entire Jersey Shore was destroyed” (Woods, 2013, para. 25). Wieland’s own surveys found that 24 percent of potential visitors were still concerned as late as May 2013 about Sandy’s damage.

The New Jersey League of Municipalities Director noted in an open letter to the state’s mayors in February 2012:

As we all know, the public perception is that most businesses along the New Jersey shore are significantly damaged or are not open for business. This affects even those businesses that survived the impact of Hurricane Sandy, because customers are not coming into the area. The impact is resulting in significant economic losses for businesses in the process of rebuilding as well as for those businesses already open. (Dressel, 2013, para. 2)

Clearly, New Jersey, with monumental recovery efforts underway from the actual damages from Sandy, still faced the long-term problems from false information and erroneous reports about its destruction as well as its road to recovery. An image restoration campaign that could counter the misperceptions and misrepresentations of Sandy needed to start immediately. Lori Pepenella, destination marketing coordinator for Long Beach Island, New Jersey, summed up the tourism concerns at the January 2013 Travel Show in New York’s Javits Center:

We want to make sure people don't overlook New Jersey this year. People want to know what's happening in New Jersey and we're here to say every story is different but it's rebuilding in such a short period. As businesses are investing and rebuilding, we're getting the message out that we're open right now. (Spoto, 2013, para. 5)

However, the opening day of the Jersey Shore tourism season was quickly approaching—in less than seven months from when the hurricane first made landfall in late October would be unofficial start of the summer of 2013, Memorial Day.

While Sandy's devastation was unmatched in the state's history, it was not the only "superstorm" in living memory. A massive Nor'easter hit New Jersey in 1962, reshaping much of the coastline. Since that storm, debates over the efficacy of using, some contend abusing, the state's coastal regions have waged. Lewis Goldshore, a New Jersey attorney specializing in environmental land use and municipal law, noted:

In the years after the 1962 storm, New Jersey responded seriously, but not seriously enough. The state devoted additional attention to improved standards for new construction, beach replenishment and other coastal engineering project, protection and the creation of dunes and coastal regulation. Some of these achieved a degree of success, while others yielded only questionable results. The Legislature needs to establish a high-level panel, representative of a cross-section of the various interests, to review the issues and formulate recommendations to address the problems. (Goldshore, 2012, para. 6-8)

The issues of infrastructure improvements, legislative proposals, and political actions are not within the scope of this study; however, the multibillion-dollar interest of the state's shore communities' tourism industry is—an interest that inevitably influences all of these preceding issues in some way. Massive improvement and reconstruction efforts at tourism-focused areas started shortly after, or at the same time, as efforts focusing on restoring essential services to all New Jersey communities hit hardest by Sandy. These efforts continue today. However, the efforts specifically aimed at restoring the Jersey Shore's tourism industry and its reputation needed to be planned, implemented, and evaluated without the benefit of exhaustive data and longitudinal coastal use studies and

analyses. Billions of dollars of essential money needed by millions of people was at stake here and now. A statement from the New Jersey State League of Municipalities summed up the situation:

Tourism is a major component toward the viability of the coastal areas. The dollars gained help reduce the real estate taxes to residents and businesses. Hundreds of jobs are created from the increased summertime business created from people visiting the beaches and boardwalks. The Governor has expressed a challenge to get the Jersey Shore back up and running by Memorial Day, the beginning of the increased revenue season. (Dressel, 2013, para. 3)

As early as March the state's leadership had earmarked \$25 million specifically for a tourism campaign to promote those areas hit hardest by the hurricane. The campaign also focused on the consuming habits of tourists and New Jerseyans who continued to patronize those businesses that were still operational after the storm. In a speech at the annual New Jersey Conference on Tourism in March, Governor Christie explained the marketing recovery efforts set to begin in less than a month:

I'm happy that we're able to say today that we're going to let the nation and our international markets see that New Jersey knows how to handle this type of crisis, as we've done already...We've got to continue looking into the future and to continue...to encourage our citizens and folks who come here to visit and enjoy our state, that our comeback is sure and certain, and that it's progressing in a way that can make everybody proud...So today is the basis for a great starting point. (Racioppi, 2013, para. 5-7)

The summer of 2013 kicked off at the Jersey Shore on Memorial Day with speeches from local and national leaders, nationally televised events like the Guinness World Record longest-ribbon cutting stretching nearly 1.5 miles between boardwalks, and most-importantly, an air of optimism. Even a visit from England's Prince Harry, who commented that New Jersey's recovery, "[shows] fantastic American spirit" (GovChristie, 2013) illustrated the growth the region experienced in just over seven months. New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Bob Martin added, "Water quality is excellent. Our beaches, boardwalks and businesses are open and ready. We're looking forward to a great season, one that will show the nation how resilient our communities and our

people truly are...the Jersey Shore is open” (“Christie Administration Outlines,” 2013, para. 2).

However, it also took millions of dollars and months of effort to convince the nation that the state’s crowing jewel, the Shore, was in fact open for business on that Memorial Day. New Jersey Sea Grant Consortium Executive Director Claire Antonucci noted,

This year, because of Sandy-related challenges experienced by so many Jersey Shore communities, it’s even more important to provide the public with a clear and accurate overview of the condition of New Jersey’s beaches and coastal resources. (“Christie Administration Outlines,” 2013, para. 4)

One those information campaign efforts was the “Show Your Love for the Shore” campaign aimed at internal planning among state leaders to promote the Jersey Shore from within the state. Those groups included:

- State Business Administration’s (SBA) NJ District Office;
- NJ State Coordinating Office;
- FEMA External Affairs at the NJ Joint Field Office—Private Sector;
- SBA’s Office of Disaster Assistance at the NJ Joint Field Office;
- NJ Division of State, Division of Travel and Tourism;
- NJ Business Action Center;
- NJ Restaurant Association;
- NJ State Chamber of Commerce; and
- NJ League of Municipalities (Dressel, 2013).

Another initiative, “Restore the Shore,” was an effort to both organize and publicize the post-Sandy relief efforts. The initiative netted Christie a Points of Light Award, for “...working with governments, businesses,

nonprofit and faith groups to respond quickly to the disaster, and for engaging thousands of volunteers in the effort” (“Sandy Efforts,” 2013, para. 4). The “Restore the Shore” organization also sold New Jersey-based products and clothing with New Jersey monikers. Other efforts by the 501(c)(3) organization included automobile raffles, special events, telethons, and other funding programs aimed at providing much-needed financial relief to those affected, as well as marketing recovery efforts.

However, the largest and most well-funded image restoration-based initiative was the [“Stronger Than The Storm” campaign](#) (“About,” n.d.). Through a \$4 million nationwide television campaign featuring a dedicated theme song and the image of Governor Christie quite prominently, the four-year program’s mission is aimed at reversing misconceptions about the Jersey Shore’s condition and its readiness for tourists to a nation unsure about visiting the Garden State (see Figure 1). [Commercials](#) ended with Christie proclaiming, “We’re stronger than the



Figure 1. *Stronger Than The Storm* television commercial, featuring Governor Christie. Click the screen shot to [view the video on YouTube](#) (Source: New Jersey Going Strong YouTube channel).

storm and open for everyone” (New Jersey Going Strong, 2013). The first year’s commercials began airing shortly before Memorial Day and stopped around Labor Day, 2013. “Stronger Than The Storm” describes itself as:

Stronger than the Storm is a comprehensive consumer campaign developed to raise awareness of the Jersey Shore’s recovery from Superstorm Sandy in an effort to support tourism and local businesses. The campaign encourages New Jerseyans and potential visitors to come to the Jersey Shore and support local businesses, as they are ready and have reopened their doors. (New Jersey Going Strong, 2013)

Managed by the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, and with support from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, “...the campaign highlights the region’s ongoing recovery and preparedness for the summer 2013 tourist season” (“About,” n.d.).

In addition to its marketing efforts, the organization also provides housing assistance, grants and loans, promotion kits tailored to individual shore towns, and an online store where New Jersey Stronger Than The Storm 2013: Follow, Share and Support #STTS t-shirts, hats, beach bags, and more can be purchased. Travel recommendations, rental information, and updated events calendars also provide visitors to the website with tourism-related materials. The organization also developed Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Tumblr accounts through which continuous updates and promotions were released throughout the spring and summer of 2013.

However, the restoration campaign was not without its critics. One year after Sandy made landfall, some New Jerseyans who were most-affected by the storm point to the campaign as an insult. “I hear all these Jersey ‘Stronger than the Storm’ commercials and it really pisses me off, it’s insulting. Christie will spend \$20 million on a Sandy commercial and here I am waiting. I can’t get any help,” said Elena Pagonis, 41, whose Keansburg, New Jersey, home was wrecked in the storm (Curry, 2013, para. 5). Much of the criticism associated with the \$4 million commercials comes from New Jersey residents who still face tremendous recovery efforts through equally daunting government red tape attached to the relief dollars slated for them.

Executive director of the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey, Staci Berger, testified before the Joint Senate and Assembly Environment Committee concerning the plight of recovering shore homeowners. “I haven’t seen one billboard or ad that tells people exactly how they can be stronger than the storm...So many people still don’t know where to go for help” (Urgo, 2013, para. 2). A spokesperson for Christie, Michael Drewniak, told the Associated Press that the “Stronger Than the Storm” message is part of an ad campaign geared at dispelling the idea that New Jersey was not ready for its lucrative Shore tourism season. Drewniak said, “[the ads] were about tourism - a \$38 billion part of our economy, half at the Shore - and hardly a suggestion that everything is OK for everyone” (Urgo, 2013, para. 15, 16). Brigid Harrison, a Montclair University political science professor noted, “There is no doubt that Governor Christie is New Jersey’s most recognizable commodity. I don’t know if watching the Christies frolicking on the beach will get people to come to the shore” (Celock, 2013, para. 15).

To add insult to injury, all seemed to be going perfectly for New Jersey’s tourism industry prior to Sandy. Record tourism revenues surpassed the state’s previous best year by half a billion dollars—the best numbers since before the 2008 recession (“Christie Administration Announces,” 2014). However, the massive destruction of the Jersey Shore in late October 2012 immediately tempered these numbers. Governor Christie commented:

While these numbers [2012 revenues] are encouraging, we still face the challenges of the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy...that’s why the recovery plan includes...\$25 million for an aggressive marketing effort to let potential visitors know that the Jersey Shore will be open for business this summer. (“Christie Administration Announces,” 2014, para. 2)

Joseph Seneca, a Rutgers University economist, commented on the effort, “It’s hard to spend a lot of money well. It’s hard to spend a lot of money quickly. And it’s very hard to spend a lot of money quickly, and well” (Morley, 2013, para. 13).

Chris Christie noted:

We knew that this summer was not going to be like the summer of 2012; I said that right from the beginning. There’s no doubt

that business was going to be down all over the Jersey shore [sic] because a lot of people, having seen the extraordinary devastation, didn't believe we'd be able to be up and running in time for summer. They turned out to be wrong, and I think we'll get them back next year. But it's a lot better than people in November and December thought it was going to be. (Parry, 2013, para. 7)

Many communities were forced to complete up to two years' worth of infrastructure repairs in 7 months, and those areas hardest-hit did feel the effects of Sandy on their 2013 summer tourism numbers. FEMA reported that Sandy caused nearly \$64 million in business loss (Hemlin, 2013a). Even though a May 2013 AAA poll showed that 80 percent of New Jersey and Philadelphia-area residents said their summer beach trips to the Jersey Shore would not be impacted by Sandy (Gurian, 2013), by Labor Day tourism revenues were down in some shore towns by as much as 40 percent from the previous year (Hamilton, 2013). However, some towns like Long Branch, New Jersey, just 30 miles north of the hardest hit of all shore towns, Seaside Heights, saw record-high tourism numbers. Another major indicator of tourist numbers is beach tag sales, required at many New Jersey beaches. Asbury Park saw its beach tags sales decline by 16 percent. Conversely, in Ship Bottom, New Jersey, another shore town, its mayor commented, "I never could have imagined that in one year, we progressed as far as we did" (Lai, 2013, para. 8). Results from the 2013 summer season were also divided between north and south, with most southern shore towns reporting few drops in revenues and many reporting record-high numbers. Two reasons explain this. First, the southern half of the state did not feel as much damage from Sandy as did the north. Secondly, many visitors to the northern half of the state come from New York and Connecticut, which also felt the brunt of the storm, and who themselves needed to make repairs. Additionally, because many of these tourists reserve their vacation homes in January and February, few could have imagined that their favorite shore towns would be ready for business in a few short months. Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Center, noted, "There is no single factor that kept people away from the Jersey Shore this year. A combination of unpredictable weather and assumptions about business closures seems to have depressed the number of potential day-trippers" (Quinn, 2013, para. 5).

Nonetheless, optimism still reigned supreme among many shore-based business owners. Maggie O'Neill, a real estate agent in Ship Bottom, commented, "If you asked us nine months ago whether we were even going to have a season this year, we would have been hard-pressed to give you an answer" ("New Jersey Shore," 2013, para. 14). Ann Delaney, another real estate agent in Cape May County, added, "It wasn't a banner year, but it certainly wasn't terrible, either" ("New Jersey Shore," 2013, para. 20). Cyndy Friedland of Oceanside Realty in Long Beach Island, New Jersey (LBI), noted, "The summer started very slow, but once people heard LBI was alive and well, it picked up. Considering where we were last October, I think we did very well at 60 percent" (De Poto, 2013, para. 29-30). For the Jersey Shore to have fully recovered, nearly everything connected with the summer season would have to turn out perfectly. That did not happen.

Several secondary issues also affected Shore tourism revenues in 2013. Non-primary residential homes, which make up the majority of available rental properties, were excluded from the government's \$16 billion aid package resulting in fewer vacation homes available to tourists. Clearly, if these tourists could not secure their summer rentals, they would simply find other locations to spend their vacations, such as The Pocono Mountains. As of August 26, 2013, only 51 of 360 grant applications had been approved by the New Jersey Economic Development Authority leaving many business owners on their own to find the money to open in time for summer. June 2013 was the wettest summer month in New Jersey on record. July 2013 was a close second. In addition, three out of four rental property owners did not lower their prices, and the remaining increased them from the year before, primarily to offset losses and slow payments from insurance companies and government aid programs.

Jersey Shore Convention and Visitor Bureau President Charles Hilton noted that campaigns like the "Open for Business" initiative underway in 42 states and 13 countries did help, and that those towns that used the campaign did better than those without it (Hemlin, 2013b). Homeaway, a company that tracks online rentals of property at the Jersey Shore indicated an overall increase among potential renters' interest in the shore towns. Its president, Jon Gray, noted, "It's encouraging to see a silver lining" (De Poto, 2013, para. 15). However, Murray noted that his study following the summer season showed, "...the biggest drop-off from

intentions to actually showing up” referencing pre-summer poll numbers. In February, 71 percent of respondents overall and 74 percent of New Jersey residents stated they would visit the Shore (Moss, 2013, para. 16). However, some of those early numbers did not pan out. A September 2013 Monmouth University/*Asbury Park Press* poll of 783 New Jersey adults found 38 percent of New Jersey residents stated they spent less time at the Shore in 2013 than they normally would; 31 percent of Shore county residents stated they have not fully recovered yet; 58 percent of New Jersey residents did visit the Shore in 2013 (“Fewer,” 2013). About 48 percent of them only visited the South Jersey beaches; 29 percent overall stayed overnight; 22 percent of respondents stated that the unusually wet summer was a major factor in keeping them away from the Jersey Shore in 2013; 23 percent said it was a minor factor (“Fewer,” 2013). Nearly 50 percent of respondents stated that they expected some businesses would not be open; 25 percent of them stated it was a major reason for not visiting the Shore in 2013 (“Fewer,” 2013).

Murray added:

I thought that despite everything, that people would at least make the effort to make one trip down the Shore to show their civic pride. But we started to see an evaporation of this kind of post-Sandy camaraderie that we had seen in the initial months. In April we started to see numbers drop off in terms of people feeling that they were all in it together. By the time the summer came people said, ‘I’d like to go down the Shore, but, eh.’ (Moss, 2013, para. 17)

Given the unprecedented destruction that Sandy left behind, most notably its devastation to New Jersey’s most economically important areas in terms of tourism, the fact that the Jersey Shore was able to restore any tourism season is impressive. To recover to pre-Sandy levels would be impossible given the level of damage (it was after all a “one-in-700-year” storm) given the extent of the damage in the most-densely populated state in the union, the bureaucratic red tape in allocating recovery aid, the widespread misconceptions about damage, and the worst summer weather on record. It was indeed a perfect storm in every sense for New Jersey’s shore economy.

Remarkably, by March 2014, the official 2013 tourism numbers were in, and they amazed everyone. Revenues actually surpassed the record-high

numbers from 2012. Lieutenant Governor Kim Guadagno stated, “If there ever was a time to lower expectations in the industry, it was this year. We had the best year we ever had (in 2012), and then we had Sandy” (Khemlani, 2014, para. 3). The state’s tourism revenues reached \$40.4 billion in 2013. Guadagno said,

I never want to forget that it wasn’t just the Jersey Shore that was hurt by the storm, but we were all open for business and it was important for all of us to get the message out. And we did it collectively. (Khemlani, 2014, para 20)

That message was New Jersey’s collective image restoration effort—the campaigns, actions, and initiatives on all levels through social/new as well as traditional media targeted to specific audiences with specific dialogues for each of them.

Discussion

Given the monumental challenges facing New Jersey’s tourism industry following Hurricane Sandy, the state’s efforts to restore some level of the summer tourism was hugely successful. Given the fact that so much of the public felt that the entire state’s coastline was destroyed because of either implicit or even explicit faulty reports of Sandy’s devastation, no one can deny that the state’s image restoration campaign faced substantial challenges. The state’s use of social media outlets such Facebook and Twitter enabled officials to communicate the realities of Sandy’s effects in real time to a public without the means to find out what was going on through traditional media outlets such as television. Even though social media also turned out to be an additional problem for the state because of fake and misleading postings, it did provide New Jersey officials a means to speak to their many audiences during a very dire time. Given the growing pervasiveness of smartphone technology, New Jersey’s use of social media demonstrates its value to organizations needing to communicate to its stakeholders when traditional communication outlets are not available. Moreover, new media allows its users to bypass traditional media and communicate directly to its audiences, and this value was demonstrated clearly during and after Sandy hit New Jersey.

This, however, is not to say that New Jersey officials did everything perfectly. Many New Jersey residents still feel abandoned and antagonized

by the bureaucracies responsible for helping them. New Jersey, as well as the federal government, must understand and address the concerns of their long-term constituents, not just the ones who spend money from May to September.

New Jersey faced tremendous obstacles to its recovery, and no one could expect it to recover to its pre-Sandy days in just a few months. Between November 2012 and May 2013, the state's image restoration efforts enabled it to clear up confusion about the true level of destruction to its most-important tourism asset—the Jersey Shore. The state's marketing efforts, both large and small, is an ongoing effort. The “Stronger Than The Storm” campaign is a four-year initiative. Despite the \$25 million price tag attached to these efforts, their outcomes are substantiating this investment. No one can expect such a complex challenge, such as recovering from the worst storm in a state's history, to happen overnight. The fact that the state could even have a summer tourism season at its battered and washed-out beaches illustrates that the perseverance and dedication of New Jersey's citizens and leaders is its most-valuable asset. The fact that 2013 tourism figures reached record-highs further shows the value and effectiveness of New Jersey's initiatives. The challenge was to let the rest of the world know that the Jersey Shore was open for business, and through its image restoration campaigns, use of social media, and focused leadership, the state of New Jersey was able to meet this great challenge. Given the fact that these types of storms are expected to become more commonplace, it is critical that the lessons from Hurricane Sandy be remembered.

Conclusion

While Benoit's Image Restoration Theory may seem best suited to analyzing manmade crises such as product tampering or malfeasance, it is also useful in studying natural disaster recovery. Recovery from natural disasters is dependent on restoration initiatives, and Image Restoration Theory provides a means to interpreting the thought processes that go into developing recovery initiatives, as well as helping to understand the reasons why these initiatives were successful or not.

Image restoration is goal centered (Clark & Delia, 1979). The two primary goals of New Jersey's response to Hurricane Sandy were immediate aid to

its citizens followed by long-term strategies aimed at recovering its tourism revenues. To accomplish the latter, New Jersey's leaders embarked on efforts relating to reducing the severity of the storm in the minds of Americans who were often being misled into thinking that New Jersey's shoreline was irrevocably destroyed. This coincides with Benoit's (1995) category of reducing offensiveness of the damage. The actual implementation of this strategy fell into the subcategories of bolstering the state's image as well as minimizing the credibility and believability of the misreports of the storm damage.

During Sandy's landfall social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook were abuzz with faked stories and edited photos of the storm's ferocity, allegedly showing the "truth" through purported firsthand accounts and visual evidence. Benoit (1997) highlights the importance of the public relations fundamental that "perception is reality" when discussing image restoration strategies. When people are without the traditional, more-trustworthy news outlets, they look for news wherever they can find it. For the first time on such a scale as this, those affected by Hurricane Sandy used their smart device technologies and social media to receive information and updates. Both New Jersey as well as national government offices utilized this opportunity to "speak" directly to those affected, offering up-to-the-minute information and messages of hope and determination. The combination of useful news combined with emotional support enabled these leaders to connect to their constituents on personal and effective levels. The immediate aid was not in the form of food or medicine, but rather emotional support and factual information in which New Jersey citizens were in desperate need. An additional benefit was that these leaders could illustrate their sincerity through the traditional media's news stories of this social media use—in a sense, bolstering their image, which certainly did not hurt come reelection time. While the usefulness of social media during a natural disaster helped many, it also presented additional problems for New Jersey's recovery efforts.

Because to many "perception is reality," both true as well as false information disseminated via social media during Sandy was believed equally as "reality." Images of sharks swimming in flooded New Jersey highways and stories of bodies stored in supermarket freezers sparked a fury of fear mongering and sensationalism, which ultimately left New Jersey leaders with the added problem of dealing with lies and deception.

Did You Know?

In the days following Hurricane Sandy's landfall and just days from the 2013 presidential election, the storm presented a unique opportunity for both the Christie and Obama Administrations to illustrate the potential of non-partisan cooperation. However, while some hailed the partnership, some critics went so far as to say it cost Republican challenger Mitt Romney the presidency.

In what *USA Today* called the "newest political odd couple," both Christie and Obama met and [agreed to work together when they both surveyed Sandy's damage for the first time](#) days following the storm, despite Christie's support for Obama's challenger Romney just weeks beforehand (Jackson, 2012, para. 1).

Christie, a normally outspoken critic of Obama's policies, praised his leadership during Hurricane Sandy, saying the president 'sprang into action immediately,' and has exhibited 'concern and compassion' for the residents of New Jersey. 'It's been a great working relationship,' said Christie. (Jackson, 2012, para. 4-5)

Obama noted, "I want to let you know that your governor is working overtime" (Jackson, 2012, para. 8). Six months following the storm, Christie added, "I have a 95 percent level of disagreement with Barack Obama...we saw suffering together...everything the president promised me they'd do, they've done" ("Christie: Obama," 2013, para. 8-9) On Memorial Day 2013, the unofficial start of summer, Obama, calling Governor Christie "Chris," [invoked the federally funded marketing plan in his speech](#), which was aired nationwide.

You are stronger than the storm. After all you've dealt with, after all you've been through, the Jersey Shore is back and it is open for business, and they want all Americans to know that they're ready to welcome you here. (Portnoy, 2013, para. 7)

Even though these stories were completely false, the oftentimes ridiculousness of them of them actually lent believability to them. During times of fear, stories, which would never be believed during normal times, become realistic—akin to the idea that something so absurd must be true (Fearn-Banks, 2011). Additionally, because of their sensational nature,

mainstream and credible news sources also reported them as fact, lending an additional layer of believability to them. Often, people believe the first thing they see or hear as reality, and even when those stories and images are exposed as fake, people may not care or pay attention to the truth once they already have their beliefs set (Benoit, 1997). For New Jersey's leaders, an added responsibility of reducing the damage of these fake stories became an all too real problem.

Attack the Accuser is a subcategory of Benoit's (1995) reduction of offensiveness. Clearly, New Jersey was dealing with a crisis of perception stemming from misleading social media posts. The state's leaders immediately embarked on efforts aimed at discrediting and exposing the fake and deceptive posts on sites such as Facebook and Twitter, which were designed to excite and scare the public. Given the unprecedented social media numbers associated with Hurricane Sandy, these efforts were integral to the long-term goal of bolstering the Jersey Shore's image as a 2013 summer destination of choice. The longer New Jersey's leaders waited to respond and refute these posts, the worse the damage would be from them (Marra, 1998). Immediate and repeated responses aimed at discrediting, while also clarifying the realities from perceptions, helped the state's leadership to counter the wave of image-damaging social media posts. This two-way model of communication illustrates the power of social media use during a natural disaster (Paul, 2001). While not 100 percent successful—given the millions of posts to respond to—their efforts did nonetheless help lay the foundation for the state's long-term image restoration initiatives.

Messages must be tailored to be successful (Benoit, 1997). Accordingly, New Jersey did not seek a "one-size-fits-all" persuasive communication campaign. The multimillion-dollar "Stronger Than The Storm" campaign connected New Jersey's somewhat "in-your-face" image with a determined and unwavering attitude that its beaches would be open for business just months after Sandy. The campaign began around Memorial Day 2013 and concluded after Labor Day, coinciding with the summer tourist season at the Jersey Shore. Aired primarily in the Northeastern United States, the commercials targeted the population who most often visit New Jersey's beaches—filled with images of renewal, relaxation, and reassurance that the shore towns they loved would be open and ready for them once again.

Benoit's Image Restoration Theory (1995) illustrates how New Jersey was able to restore its image as a major tourism destination even in face of so much adversity—both real and perceived. Even though natural disasters like hurricanes are basically no one person's fault, the responsibility of recovering and restoring does fall to those charged with leading these efforts. For New Jersey, this responsibility was huge. Without its billion-dollar tourism industry, which was perilously close to devastation from Sandy and its fallout, New Jersey might have faced irrevocable financial ruin. The fact that the state saw record-high 2013 tourism revenues is testament that image restoration practices using today's means of instantaneous communication plays a major role in today's natural disaster crisis recovery.

Discussion Questions

1. Like Sandy, [Hurricane Katrina destroyed much of New Orleans' tourist hotspots](#). The city had an equally daunting task of rebuilding its communities while also trying to restore its tourism economy, as well as trying to work with the federal government. Compare and contrast New Orleans' post-Katrina recovery with New Jersey's post-Sandy efforts. Why did New Orleans receive so much criticism for its efforts compared to New Jersey? What do you believe will be Sandy's legacy for natural disaster recovery compared to Katrina?
2. Many states are prepared for these types of crises recovery because of the frequency of specific disasters in them. Florida is one such state. Following the BP oil rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, the state needed to dispel rumors and misinformation about the oil leak's effects on the Florida shoreline, a haven for many tourists. Florida set up its own social media website, [Florida Live](#). How could New Jersey have used a similar tool such as this? Consider the factors unique to Hurricane Sandy when developing your own "Jersey Live" website.
3. Party affiliations and partisan decision-making often lead many politicians to work for their respective party rather than their constituents. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie did just the opposite by teaming up with opposition party leader Barack Obama. Given the fact that Sandy made landfall just days before the 2013 presidential election, do you believe the Christie-Obama "team" influenced

Obama's bid for reelection? What do you believe are the implications for this type of camaraderie among opposing political party leaders? Who are the winners and losers with these types of relationships? Explain.

4. While Sandy offered New Jersey a great opportunity to use social media to address erroneous reports and rumors, it also offered users the platforms to post fake reports and Photoshopped pictures of Sandy's destruction. How can organizations use social media to communicate effectively and efficiently with its stakeholders while also combating the fake postings that may negate these efforts?

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