

ABSTRACT

The Public Apology as a Reputational Paradox

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Growing numbers of organisations offer public apologies for corporate misbehaviour and the consequences of crisis events, trusting that a full apology can help to repair a damaged corporate reputation. Public apologies however are problematic: organisations offer apologies for the sake of their reputation, yet a poor apology further damages that reputation. This leads to a reputational paradox whereby organisations are damned if they do apologise, and damned if they don't.

Despite the development of numerous communications strategies and an agreement that 'every word matters', there is little research into the linguistic realisation of the corporate apology. Drawing on previous research of public apologies, public relations and corporate communications, this study examines the language of the corporate apology.

The data comprises forty-nine apologies, issued between 2004 and 2012, collected from the national press and from corporate websites. These ranged from complete apologies to shorter apologetic utterances. The analysis focused on identifying common linguistic patterns, including the form and frequency of the apology, voice and agency. The study concludes that the realisation of corporate apologies as rhetorical defence strategies further distances the organisation from its customers, and militates against relationship repair and reputation protection.

Key words: Reputation, corporate communication, crises, public apologies, language, rhetoric