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Article

How to Say Sorry on Social Media: A Framework for Effective Corporate Apologies

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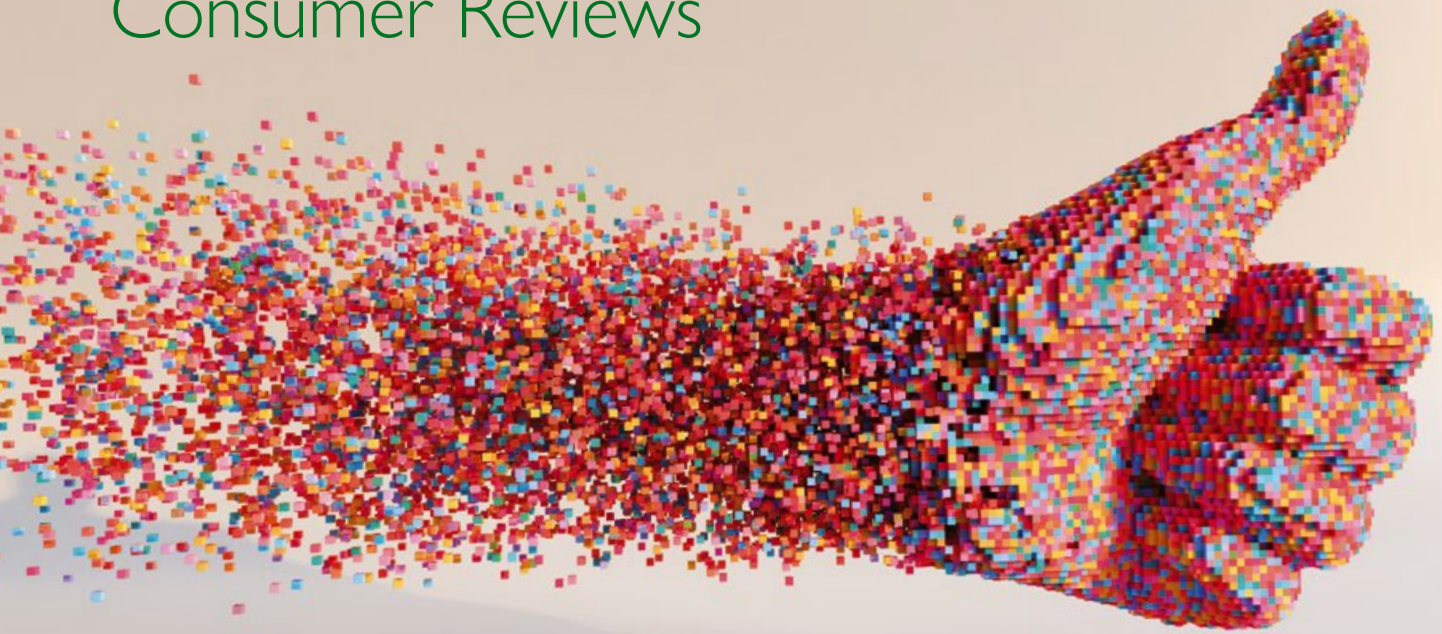
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Marketing Review St.Gallen

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How to Say Sorry on Social Media

A Framework for Effective Corporate Apologies

Today, news of corporate missteps travels at lightning speed, and inappropriate responses can quickly result in a PR disaster. This paper shows how companies can craft successful apologies on social media. Managers should utilize different components (e.g., taking responsibility) to create an apology that can quickly win back customers.

Prof. Dr. Juliane Staubach, Prof. Dr. Stefanie Wannow

The social media presence of organizations can help spread good news, build brand awareness, and improve customer relationships. But the speed and reach with which information travels across countries on social media also enables negative publicity to spread like a firestorm, with user-generated content from activists, enraged customers and competitors fanning the flames. For example, a sexist tweet by Burger King was shared more than 250,000 times and received over 46,000 comments in just a few hours before the company decided to delete it later that day (Simchayoff, 2021).

As in this case, a timely public apology is often required as a crisis intervention to restore trust in the company's reputation (Gistri et al., 2019). Based on a comprehensive literature review, Shao et al. (2022, p. 3422) define a corporate apology as "a firm's public statement in response to a past transgression that has since been well-publicized, which is expressed through a combination of *content*, *spokesperson*, *timing* and *delivery method* elements".

Although corporate apologies are "high stake moves" according to Kellerman (2006, p. 74), there has been a dramatic increase in recent years (Cohen, 2020; Shao et al., 2022). It is not easy for organizations to achieve forgiveness through apologies. As social interactions, apologies must be "proportional" to the offense they are designed to remediate (Goffman 1971, p. 116) and tailored to the specific situation (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). Some appear sincere and heartfelt, others superficial and opportunistic (Staff, 2010). But what exactly constitutes a successful, good apology?

Managers can strategically design corporate communication to improve an apology. To this end, the four building blocks from the definition above are first presented in the following to provide the appropriate context for the main part of the study, which examines

the five content components of effective apology messages on social media (figure 1). Based on a literature review and case study analysis that includes expert judgement, recommendations are derived for responding quickly and effectively to crisis situations and looming social media firestorms.

Four Building Blocks of an Effective Apology

The **delivery method** describes the channel through which the apology is sent. Due to approximately 5 billion social media users worldwide (Statista, 2023), but also because many offenses, such as hurtful communications, occur directly on, or become public through, social media channels, companies usually choose to apologize on Twitter & Co. Due to the interactive, near-instantaneous nature of social media, the apology will immediately trigger direct comments and reposts from users. Companies with a loyal social media community are more likely to receive positive responses to apologies in times of corporate crisis (Lewicki et al., 2016). However, one-way channels, such as a traditional press release published on the website or a statement in an interview, as Ferrero used in 2022 in face of

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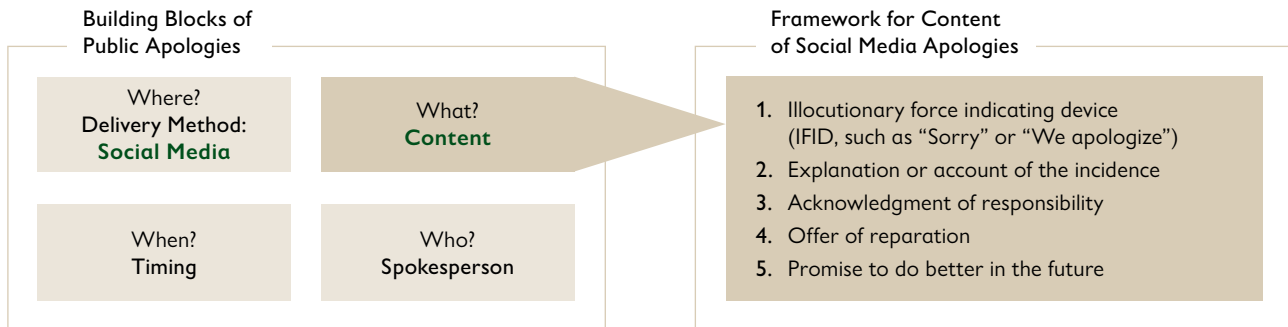
the salmonella scandal (Verbraucherzentrale Hamburg, 2022) might feel like a safer, more controllable choice.

Unlike value-related offenses, e.g. through discriminating communication, performance-related transgressions due to product or service failure can lead to more substantial material damage, personal injuries and liabilities (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). For such major offenses, Schweitzer et al. (2015) and Kellerman (2006) recommend more elaborate, personal apologies channels, such as press conferences and site visits, since they convey a more sincere sense of caring and can convey non-verbal, relational aspects of the message. If a company chooses multiple channels to apologize, the tonality may be adapted to the chosen social media channels while the basic content must be identical.

The *spokesperson* on social media is typically the social media team speaking on behalf of the organization. For (minor) communicative mistakes such as insensitive posts, companies often apologize without explicitly naming a senior executive. Schweitzer et al. (2015) and Kellerman (2006) agree that the more serious the offense, the more advisable it is to involve a senior leader as an official



Figure 1: Building Blocks and Content Components for Corporate Apologies on Social Media



Source: Own illustration.

spokesperson to demonstrate that the organization takes the issue seriously. A recent example is Fer Machado, who, as global head of marketing at Burger King in 2021, directly tweeted an apologetic statement on his personal Twitter account in response to the sexist post mentioned above (Machado, 2021). Recorded video apologies from senior leaders posted on social media can be a convincing way to express remorse and empathy through non-verbal cues (Schweitzer et al., 2015).

Social media has shortened the *time* it takes for a transgression to become high profile, and researchers mostly agree on the importance of timely responses for successful apologies (Shao et al., 2022). Speed generally signals sincerity, control of the situation, and may contribute to de-escalating the situation. However, waiting gives companies more time to carefully decide whether and how to apologize (Bisel & Messersmith, 2012; Kellerman, 2006; Shao et al., 2022). Schweitzer et al. (2015) suggest a placeholder apology as an option, e.g. when companies need more time to investigate a large and complex problem from a legal perspective before issuing a more comprehensive apology.

Regarding the *content* component, most researchers recommend acknowledging

the offense and taking responsibility in a straightforward way (Bentley 2018; Cohen 2020; Schweitzer et al. 2015). The tone should be remorseful, and companies should express their willingness to change. In line with this, Lewicki et al. (2016) found that apologies are perceived as credible and adequate when they include an admission of responsibility for causing the breach of trust, while asking for forgiveness is less important from the consumer perspective.

Management Summary

Companies are increasingly apologizing after committing an offense, but under time pressure and in a crisis, many fail to deliver effective apologies. Using 12 benchmark cases and an expert survey, this paper provides a detailed framework for designing convincing apologies, focusing on the message content and the social media context. It identifies five content components that increase the likelihood of delivering a sincere, professional apology and earning forgiveness from customers.

The use of colloquial, dialogic language is common to foster relationships on social media (Johann et al., 2021). Apologies for personal grievances may even include emoticons to help convey relationship aspects in the message (Wang et al., 2023). Informal expressions such as "we really messed up" or "doing the right thing" can support a sense of authenticity when apologizing (Schweitzer et al., 2015). However, consumers expect brands to behave according to social norms in social media (Gretry et al., 2017) and serious offenses require an empathetic, sincere tonality (Bisel & Messersmith, 2012). Since social media content is usually shorter than, e.g., statements in press releases, the message needs to be particularly precise and unambiguous, while still containing enough emotional, unconditional words of remorse. The five content components that make up a convincing apology message are explained in more detail below.

Five Content Components

A public apology is a "performance in which every expression matters, and every word becomes part of the public record" (Kellerman, 2006, p. 74). Several researchers in the social sciences have

already addressed the aspects that make up a (good) apology (Goffman, 1971). Psychiatrist and apology expert Lazare (2005) insisted that apologies are not complete unless they acknowledge the offense and the organization's role in the offense, express remorse, provide an explanation, and make an effort to make amends. Biesel and Messersmith (2012) developed a similar framework that includes "a narrative account of the offense, voicing regret with an explicit apology-functioning speech act, promising forbearance, and offering reparations" (p. 430). Finally, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) identified similar components in a cross-cultural study. The following dimensions include all aspects mentioned above and are suitable for the transnational social media context of this study:

- (1) an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID, such as "I'm sorry," "We apologize," or "Excuse me"),
- (2) an explanation or account of the cause that led to the transgression,
- (3) an expression of the speaker's responsibility for the offense,
- (4) an offer of reparation,
- (5) and a promise to do better in the future.

The meaning of the various components must be understood in order to use them effectively.

When a typical, unambiguous "I am sorry"-like phrase (i.e., IFID) is used, it is intuitively clear who has hurt whom, and that the offender regrets this (Biesel & Messersmith, 2012; Goffmann, 1971; Scher & Darley, 1997). Short and precise, it seems well suited for social media apologies.

The second component involves explaining the circumstances that led to the mistake in order to make the whole process more understandable to the victim, less intentional and therefore less hurtful (Lazare, 2005). It also shows that the process leading to the offense has been analyzed,

Main Propositions

- 1 A corporate apology consists of the four building blocks *delivery method*, *content*, *spokesperson*, and *timing*.
- 2 Social media is a relevant channel for public apologies but not suitable in every situation.
- 3 Including five content components when crafting an apology message will increase the likelihood of a positive response.
- 4 These components are a short apology expression such as "I'm sorry", an explanation of the incidence, an acceptance of responsibility, an offer of reparation, and a promise to do better in the future.

which is understood to be a prerequisite for future improvement.

The following expression of responsibility should make it clear that the company acknowledges its mistake and regrets the material and emotional harm it has caused (Biesel & Messersmith, 2012; Lazare, 2005). The language should be remorseful to reflect the pain and criticism from the offended party. Superficial, incomplete apologies place the emphasis only on having "hurt people's feelings" without taking responsibility for one's own behavior that led to the offense (Shao et al., 2022). With this shortcut, it often seems as if the real problem is the (over)sensitivity of (some) people concerned, as with Lidl's apology in 2019. Their advertisement on Facebook had shown bagels and donuts, i.e. pastries with a hole, accompanied by the slogan "A hole is a hole", which is a misogynistic saying that reduces women to orifices. The retailer still only apologized for having hurt feelings (Stokowski, 2019).

The fourth component, the offer of reparation, may mean financial compensation for the victims. However, it can also be a symbolic gesture or a promise of remedial action offered as a form of compensation, such as fixing the problem and rebuilding the relationship (Bentley,

2018; Lazare, 2005; Scher & Darley, 1997). Measures to prevent a similar mistake in the future include revising policies, conducting investigations, immediately firing an employee, or removing an offensive post. The wording of this component in particular has to be proportional to the seriousness and nature of the offense (Cohen, 2020; Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Goffman, 1971).

The last component is the explicit promise to refrain from the transgression in the future. The company clearly expresses that it will prevent a repetition of the mistake (Scher & Darley, 1997). By showing what exactly it intends to change (reparation), the company can make this commitment to improve in the future more credible (Bentley, 2018), e.g.: "We immediately implemented an improved monitoring system that will prevent a recurrence of such an error in the future."

Probably not all of these components are of equal importance. Research indicates that out of the five components, the admission of responsibility might be essential, as victims are more likely to be satisfied by an apology if this component was included in it (Lewicki et al., 2016). Lee and Chung (2012) and Chung and Lee (2022) also found that public anger

decreased significantly more when an organizational apology contained active language directly taking responsibility for the offense than when apologies contained more passive language in which they simply offer concern or when they contained only sympathy about the situation. An explanation why the offense happened and an offer of reparation are also essential (Lewicki et al., 2016). However, existing research on apologies in social media and the relative importance of the components in general is still limited.

Analysis of Selected Corporate Apologies

To ensure external validity of the proposed framework, a qualitative study was conducted. In a first step, eleven recent apologies from 2021 and 2022 were selected and evaluated according to the five content components of an effective apology. All apologies were issued immediately after the offense (timing) using a written statement on social media channels (delivery) from the company accounts without explicitly naming a spokesperson to increase comparability. The five cases from Europe and six cases from India focus exclusively on discriminatory communications that occurred or became public on social media.

All of the Indian cases arose against the same background, which is highly emotional and contentious in this region: Pakistani affiliates expressing their loyalty to Kashmiri separatists. This increases the comparability of the Indian apologies, but limits the transferability to other situations. The European cases are more diverse, covering issues such as sexism and racism. A further apology from a fictitious brand was created to test whether integrating all five components, but with only short, standard phrases, is sufficient for a positive assessment.

The twelve apologies were coded by three persons to ensure intercoder reliability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Initially, binary coding (i.e., "component included" and "component missing") was applied. However, during the coding process a third code "yes, but not sufficiently" was added to describe components that were included, but only in an implicit, very limited or vague manner. Table 1 gives an overview of the cases and the researchers' ratings.

Furthermore, an expert assessment was used to test our hypothesis that apologies which include a higher number of content components are more effective. The sample consisted of 30 experts, i.e., academics and practitioners with substantial

professional experience in marketing, communication, and crisis management. They rated the apologies based on the criteria of sincerity, trustworthiness, and overall satisfaction on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating full agreement.

Perceived sincerity and trustworthiness were found to be crucial determinants of responses to corporate apologies, such as reconciliation (Brinke & Adams, 2015; Lewicki et al., 2016; Tomlinson et al., 2004). If consumers perceive an apology as sincere, they will evaluate it in a more positive way. The resulting satisfaction is another crucial driver of downstream consumer reactions such as repurchase intention (e.g., Wirtz & Mattila, 2004). The same is true for our last criterion, consumer forgiveness, which is enhanced by an appropriate apology and, in turn, prevents consumer avoidance and revenge while fostering constructive behaviors (Joireman et al., 2016). Therefore, the experts also indicated to what extent they believed consumers have forgiven the company following the apology and were given the opportunity to add comments. In addition, an overall score was calculated based on the average of these four criteria, with 1 being the best.

Of the five European apologies, two include all content components. These are

Table 1a: Corporate Apologies and Content Components Included in Europe

Company (Channel)	Offense	Apology-Message	Content Components
Jung von Matt Donau (LinkedIn)	In 2022, Burger King Austria issued a special burger under the name of "Pride Whopper" and was accused of "pinkwashing". Their communication agency Jung von Matt apologized on their own LinkedIn channel – interestingly, Burger King Austria did not.	"The Pride Whopper is part of our client's engagement as official partner with Vienna Pride. The work also includes an influencer campaign with proud members of the Austria LGBTQ community. We at JvM Donau are proud of our queer community within our agency. Unfortunately, we still messed up and didn't check well enough with community members on different interpretations of the Pride Whopper. That's on us. The intended message on the Pride Whopper was to spread equal love and equal rights. Our strongest concern is if we offended members of the LGBTQ Community with this campaign. If this is the case, we truly apologize. We've learned our lesson and will include experts on communicating with the LGBTQ community for future work as promoting equal love and equal rights will still be a priority to us. "	Components completely included

Table 1a: Corporate Apologies and Content Components Included in Europe (continuation)

Company (Channel)	Offense	Apology-Message	Content Components
Burger King UK (Twitter)	“Women belong in the kitchen”, Burger King posted on their Twitter account, intending to draw attention to their new scholarship initiative to increase the number of women becoming a professional chef. The follow-up tweet was apparently too late and insufficient to remedy the post.	“We hear you. We got our initial tweet wrong and we are sorry . Our aim was to draw attention to the fact that only 20% of professional chefs in UK kitchens are women and to help change that by awarding culinary scholarships. We will do better next time. ” Same day, later: “We decided to delete the original tweet after our apology . It was brought to our attention that there were abusive comments in the thread and we don’t want to leave the space open for that.”	Components partially included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Taking responsibility” not sufficiently addressed • “Offer of repair” delayed
Marriot Bonvoy (Twitter)	Gil Ofarim accused a staff member of a hotel of antisemitism in a video. It went viral and many celebrities and politicians condemned the staff member right away without hearing out this man’s side. Weeks later, it became clear that not all allegations had been true.	“We were shocked and saddened to see this video , and we’re deeply sorry for Gil Ofarim’s experience. We condemn antisemitism and discrimination in any form and commit to taking learnings to help us deliver a welcoming experience for all. ”	Components partially included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Taking responsibility” not sufficiently addressed • “Explanation of situation” missing
Ravensburger (Instagram)	The publishing house Ravensburger planned to publish a new series of books telling an adventure journey in the style of old Winnetou movies from the 1960s. Many users criticized the use of the term “Indian” and the stereotypical portrayal of indigenous peoples of the Americas, which was perceived as racist. They also accused the company of making money from these stories without adequately educating people about the great injustices against indigenous peoples.	We have been following the many negative feedbacks about our book: “Der junge Häuptling Winnetou” and we have decided today to stop the delivery of the titles and to take them out of our program . We thank you for your criticism. Your feedback has clearly shown us that we have hurt the feelings of others with the Winnetou titles. That was never our intention and it is not compatible with our Ravensburger values. We expressly apologise for this. Our editors deal intensively with topics such as diversity or cultural appropriation. The colleagues discuss the consequences for the future program and revise our existing range title by title. They also consult external consultants and use “sensitivity readers” who critically examine our titles to see if they deal with sensitive topics in the right way. Unfortunately, we did not succeed in doing all this with the Winnetou titles. We would not make the decision to publish the titles in the same way again. We made a mistake at the time and we can assure you: We are learning from it!	Components completely included
KFC Germany (App/Twitter/press release)	In 2022, KFC sent a push message through their app: “Commemorating the Reichsprogromnacht – Treat yourself to more tender cheese with crispy chicken – now at KF Cheese”. Users posted the message and responded with a shitstorm on Twitter. Shortly after that, the app users received an apology.	App: “ Sorry, we have made a mistake. Due to an error in the system, we sent an incorrect and inappropriate message via our app. We are very sorry for this. We will review our internal processes to ensure this does not happen again. Please accept our apologies for this error.”	Components not sufficiently included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “IFID” and “promise of forbearance” completely given • All other components not sufficiently addressed
Fictitious brand (Instagram and Facebook)	Brand posts a very insensitive picture that belittles women and undermines their self-esteem by suggesting they are overweight and old and need to exercise to look better.	“ We are sorry! We unfortunately thought the post was funny and didn’t check well enough with a more diverse audience on different interpretations and feelings regarding its message. We hear you. We deeply regret posting this inappropriate and sexist message and that we have hurt your feelings. We deleted it and want to learn from this. The social media post selection process and content planning will be changed so that all contributions will be more closely scrutinized for potential misjudgments. We want our future posts to measure up to our high standards of fairness and respect and will do better! ”	Components completely included

Coding: IFID – explanation/account of the cause – expression of responsibility – offer of reparation – promise to do better in the future

Sources: Börsenblatt, 2022; Burger King Austria, 2022; The Hindustan Times, 2022; The Indian Express, 2022; Jung von Matt Donau, 2022; Jungblut, 2022; Machado, 2021; Marriot Bonvoy Assist, 2021; Molina, 2021; Rößler, 2022; Der Spiegel, 2022; Vinaykumar, 2022a, b.

Table 1b: Corporate Apologies and Content Components Included in India

Company (Channel)	Offense	Apology-Message	Content Components
KFC India		"We deeply apologize for a post that was published on some KFC social media channels outside the country . We honor and respect India, and remain steadfast in our commitment to serving all Indians with pride."	Components not sufficiently included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only "IFID" fully included • "Taking responsibility" insufficient • Three other components missing
Domino's India	On Pakistan's Kashmir Solidarity Day in February, several large international brands	"This is the country we have called our home for the last 25 years, and we stand here to protect its legacy forever. We respect and honour everything the country has to offer: Domino's India is committed to the Indian market, having called it home for more than 25 years, and the utmost respect for the people, culture and spirit of nationalism of the country. We regret and apologize for the unsolicited social media post on Domino's social media handles outside the country . As a brand, we honor and respect India and remain deeply committed to serving our customers and communities with humility, gratitude and pride."	Components not sufficiently included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only "IFID" fully included • "Explanation of situation" and "Taking responsibility" not sufficiently addressed • Two other components missing
Suzuki India	posted support for the Kashmiri separatists in India through their local Facebook profiles or other social media channels. Indians responded with intense calls for boycotts, making the brands involved trending topics on social media for days, although many of the original	"Suzuki Motor Corporations aims to be a company trusted and counted upon by all throughout the world, through its products, services, ethical business conduct and social responsibility efforts towards Sustainable Development Goals. As corporate policy, we do not align with any political or religious inclination in any part of the world. Such communication from our dealers or business associates on these topics represents neither our company position nor authorized by us . We deeply regret the hurt to sentiments that such insensitive communication has caused . It will be our constant endeavor to advise our business associates to comply strictly to our company policy in this regard ."	Components not sufficiently included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only "explanation of situation" fully given • "IFID" missing • Three other components not sufficiently addressed
Kia India	posts were quickly removed. Even politicians joined the call for a comprehensive apology, forcing Hyundai to apologize a second time.	"Kia is a proudly diverse and inclusive organization, committed to leading advanced sustainable mobility in more than 190 markets around the world. Kia India has taken note of unauthorized social media posts made by an independently-owned dealer based outside of the country, using the dealer's own accounts . We have since taken strict measures to avoid such misuse of KIA brand identity and have put in place the processes to prevent a recurrence . Kia has a clear policy of not engaging in political and cultural matters. Our focus continues to be delivering market-leading products and services to our valued customers in India. We deeply regret the offense caused by this unofficial social media activity ."	Components fully included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only "Taking responsibility" not sufficiently addressed • Four other components fully given
Hyundai India		First apology: "Hyundai Motor India has been committed to the Indian market for more than 25 years now and we stand firmly in our strong ethos of respecting nationalism. The unsolicited social media post linking Hyundai Motor India is offending our unparalleled commitment and service to this great country. India is second home to the Hyundai brand and we have zero tolerance policy towards insensitive communication and we strongly condemn any such view. As part of our commitment to India, we will continue our efforts towards the betterment of the country as well as the citizens." Second apology two days later: "As a business policy, Hyundai Motor Company does not comment on political or religious issues in any specific region. Therefore, it is clearly against Hyundai Motor's policy, that the independently-owned distributor in Pakistan made unauthorized Kashmir-related social media posts from their own accounts . Once the situation was brought to our attention, we made the distributor acutely aware of the inappropriateness of the action. We have since taken measures to ensure the distributor, who misused the Hyundai brand identity, has removed the social media posts and we have put in place processes to prevent a future recurrence. Our subsidiary, Hyundai Motor India, is not associated with the distributor in Pakistan, and we strongly reject the distributor's unauthorized non-business related social media activity . Hyundai Motor company has been investing in India for many decades and remains strongly committed to Indian customers. We deeply regret any offense caused to the people of India by this unofficial social media activity ."	Components not sufficiently included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Explanation of situation" not sufficiently addressed • Four other components missing Components fully included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only "Taking responsibility" not sufficiently addressed • Four other components fully given

Coding: IFID – explanation/account of the cause – expression of responsibility – offer of reparation – promise to do better in the future

Sources: Börsenblatt, 2022; Burger King Austria, 2022; The Hindustan Times, 2022; The Indian Express, 2022; Jung von Matt Donau, 2022; Jungblut, 2022; Machado, 2021; Marriot Bonvoy Assist, 2021; Molina, 2021; Röfler, 2022; Der Spiegel, 2022; Vinaykumar, 2022a, b.

the apologies from Jung von Matt Donau and Ravensburger. The first tweet from Burger King UK lacked the offer of repair and the aspect of taking full responsibility. This was partially remedied in the second tweet. The apologies from Marriot Bonvoy and KFC Germany are even more incomplete. While the former makes no attempt to explain the situation and only vaguely accepts responsibility, the latter completely fails to include the three components of clear explanation, acceptance of responsibility and offer of reparation. This is particularly unfortunate in the case of KFC, as the incidence requiring an apology was very serious. Comparing the frequency of the components included, all apologies contained the IFID component while only three brands explained the situation in a convincing way.

Of the apologies in India, two were evaluated as nearly complete. Both Kia

and Hyundai India (in its second tweet) merely failed to take sufficient responsibility for the controversial incident in otherwise well-worded apologies. However, Hyundai's first tweet can hardly be categorized as an apology at all, as it does not even contain the IFID component; no wonder it was widely criticized by the Indian government, organizations, and users (Aditi Shah, 2022; The Hindustan Times, 2022). Overall, the components "explanation of situation", "offer of reparation", and "promise that it won't

Including five content components when crafting an apology message will increase the likelihood of a positive response.

happen again" are least utilized in the Indian apologies. This may be due to the specific nature of the incident, which was not directly committed by the Indian subsidiaries of the respective companies.

The expert assessments (see table 2) were largely consistent with the component-based evaluation. Of the apologies aimed at a European audience, the complete apologies – Ravensburger, Jung von Matt and the fictitious one – were rated best. However, the ratings of the fictitious case were not as positive. This might be explained by a more serious offense, but also by the use of standard formulations. The other two apologies are longer and more personal. Their detailed and implicit references to sincerity, empathy and trustworthiness create a different tonality that can influence the overall judgement of an apology, e.g. through the relational aspect of a message alongside the pure facts.

Table 2: Expert Assessment of the Corporate Apologies

Corporate apologies (sorted from best to worst*)	Mean values					Content Component Evaluation**
	Sincerity	Trust- worthiness	Satisfaction	Forgiveness	Overall	
Ravensburger	1.8	2.0	2.4	2.2	2.1	+
Jung von Matt Donau	1.8	2.0	2.6	2.1	2.1	+
Unknown/fictitious brand	2.5	2.4	3.1	3.2	2.8	+
Marriot Bonvoy	2.9	3.3	3.6	3.6	3.3	o
Burger King UK	3.3	3.1	4.2	4.1	3.7	o
KFC Germany	5.3	5.5	5.9	5.6	5.6	o
Hyundai India (2nd apology)	2.3	2.7	2.8	2.6	2.6	+
Kia India	2.9	2.9	3.4	3.3	3.1	+
Domino's India	2.9	3.1	3.5	3.4	3.4	-
Suzuki	3.3	3.2	3.7	3.5	3.4	-
Hyundai India (1st apology)	3.5	3.5	3.9	3.7	3.6	-
KFC India	4.0	4.3	4.8	4.6	4.4	-

Notes:

* Based on overall assessment (mean value of the four criteria).

** Based on coding by the researchers (see table 1):

+ = components fully included/addressed (4.5–5 points); o = partially included/addressed (3.5–4.0 points); - = not sufficiently included/addressed (< 3.5);

1 point was given for each component; 0.5 points for non-sufficient or delayed content components.

Source: Own illustration.

Lessons Learned

- 1 When companies decide to apologize, they should consider the four building blocks and adapt them to the level of transgression and the target group.
- 2 Incorporating the five content components into the message will improve the quality of the corporate apology.
- 3 A poor apology statement will make the situation worse and backfire on social media.
- 4 Responding quickly with an adequate response is important for crisis management.
- 5 The apology should not just use standard phrases but should be specific and personal to make it more authentic.

This suggests that truly convincing crisis communication goes beyond the yes/no verification of content components.

KFC Germany received by far the worst rating. Its apology was perceived much worse than the other incomplete apologies from Marriott and Burger King UK. Looking at the open comments, the main reason for this difference appears to be the very severe context in the case of KFC, as expressed in the following comments: “Complete lack of comprehension of the magnitude”, “Given the massive emotional potential of the original message, the word ‘error’ is a significant mismatch and rather underlines missing sincerity than something else” and “(...) it seems more like they chose the cheapest excuse for a really bad mistake”. Burger King UK’s apology was also rated rather poorly. Some of our experts considered the apology too short and criticized it

for blaming the customers for having misunderstood the tweet.

Of the apologies in India, Hyundai India’s second tweet received the best rating by the experts, being the most complete apology next to Kia India’s, which was rated second best. In line with our expectations, KFC India’s tweet by was perceived poorly. “This apology seems forced and does not show any regret” and “Sounds like the basic PR apology without addressing the issue and what it means to the customers” were comments made by two experts. Interestingly, opinions were quite heterogeneous, with some experts liking its short length and others expressing the opposite.

What Managers Should Bear in Mind

It can be concluded that the inclusion of all five content components contributes substantially to the effectiveness of an apology: The best-rated apologies contained the highest number of components, and vice versa. Additionally, the tonality or language style of the apologies was found to be important. Indian apologies are written in a more formal, solemn tone, which may appear less heartfelt to European ears. This is also reflected in the quite heterogeneous expert ratings.

It also seems to be more challenging to write a (short) good apology for a very serious and sensitive incidence. For example, the “Pride-Whopper” is certainly perceived by most as a less severe offense than using the Reichspogromnacht for a commercial message. This is why the incomplete apology of KFC Germany was particularly criticized.

It also has to be noted that our study focused on cases of verbal discrimination and insensitive or inappropriate communication only. Crisis response strategies for more serious offenses, such as personal injury, might be different,

and companies will need to weigh the cost-benefit ratio and the possible wording of an apology even more carefully against legal consequences.

Furthermore, different consumer groups are likely to have different views on the severity of an offense and on what constitutes a good apology. Therefore, all five content components as well as the other three building blocks, i.e., method of delivery, timing, and spokesperson, must be tailored to the specific situation. All four building blocks of an apology must fit together in order to be truly authentic and convincing.

Apologies can be considered “a double-edged sword” (Shao et al., 2022, p. 3436): In terms of strategic or economic motivations, findings on whether an organization should apologize or offer other forms of image repair are varied and contradictory (Bisel & Messersmith, 2012), offering potential for future studies (Shao et al., 2022). Companies need to consider that, on the one hand, any expression of responsibility may increase public attention to the offense and perceived blame, decrease consumer trust in the company,

Social media is a relevant channel for public apologies but not suitable in every situation.

or even be used against the organization in legal proceedings (Agapiou & Cheung, 2017; Kellerman, 2006). On the other hand, authentic apologies can have multiple positive outcomes, such as reducing anger, restoring trust, and promoting consumer forgiveness (Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018; Shao et al., 2022). One thing is clear: poorly delivered apologies backfire and can even make a crisis worse. So when managers decide to apologize, they need to know how. ■

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