

**#CROCKPOTISINNOCENT:
A Case Study Analysis of Crock-Pot's
Response to a Fictional Crisis**

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Overview

From natural disasters and disease outbreaks to acts of violence or malfeasance, there are a variety of crises that are generally classified as either intentional or unintentional (Ulmer, et al., 2019). As the lines between fact and fiction are increasingly blurred by audiences who develop parasocial relationships with fictional television characters whom they care about deeply (Gardner & Knowles, 2008; Russell et al., 2006), a potential third crisis classification may emerge for brands who become entangled with such characters: imagined.

Crock-Pot, a household name known for its eponymous slow cooker appliances, found itself at the center of a somewhat unusual reputational crisis based in fiction after it became an unwilling star in the sentimental family drama *This Is Us*. Despite having no real safety issues with its product, and through no fault of its own, Crock-Pot was thrust into a crisis in January 2018 after fans blamed it for the demise of the show's fictional patriarch, Jack Pearson, who died following a house fire caused by a faulty slow cooker. While *This Is Us* is known for triggering emotional responses among its fans (Chaney, 2017), neither NBC nor the showrunners predicted viewers' reactions to Jack's death. Due to these viewers' parasocial relationships with the character and to the association between Crock-Pot and slow cooker appliances, they lashed out against the company as though both the fire and the death were real (Foss, 2020).

To address this reputational crisis, Crock-Pot responded quickly and creatively with the #CROCKPOTISINNOCENT campaign, which employed image repair strategies. Although the brand considered suing NBC for damages (Pesce, 2018), it instead partnered with the network and with Milo Ventimiglia—the actor who portrayed Jack—to apologize to fans, correct the narrative, and turn negative attention into a promotional opportunity. The brand chose to address both the fictional fire and the character's death while repairing its image via a balance of

empathy and playful defensiveness. It would have been easy to dismiss the imaginary crisis and to focus solely on defending the brand's image, but Crock-Pot showed upset fans that it understood their concerns and legitimized their parasocial grief. In doing so, the company obtained a level of public dialogue otherwise unheard of in its 47-year history, thus resulting in increased sales and brand awareness.

The Issue

Following the fictional fire, fans questioned Crock-Pot's product safety and expressed concern that the company's products might start fires like the one in the show. They also expressed anger at Crock-Pot for its perceived role in Jack's death. They flocked to Twitter with the trending hashtag #ThisIsUs. Within hours, the hashtags #CROCKPOT, #ThisIsUs, and #ThisIsUsFans were trending negatively toward the brand (Hines, 2018). One fan tweeted, "I just threw my crock pot out the window #ThisIsUs" (Cogill, 2018). Another agreed with this approach, tweeting, "throw out your crockpot. it killed my beloved Jack" (Lee, 2018). Another fan tweeted, "I get married in less than 2 months and suddenly I feel the need to remove the crockpot from the registry. WE. DON'T. NEED. IT. #ThisIsUs" (Cortez, 2018). Some fans took the opportunity to mourn Jack, including one who tweeted, "Jack did not serve his country and fight in the war just to be taken out by a crockpot #ThisIsUs" (Claire, 2018). Others shared newfound paranoia about their Crock-Pots, tweeting, "running to my kitchen to unplug my crockpot even tho I haven't used it in weeks. Thanks #ThisIsUs" (Steed, 2018).

The show's popularity and the highly engaged nature of its large fanbase exacerbated the issue. In 2018, *This Is Us* was the country's highest-rated and most-watched broadcast drama (Mitovich, 2018). It prompted more than 21 million instances of social media engagement in its first two seasons (Berg, 2017). On the morning after the controversial episode, 618 news articles

were published about Crock-Pot's perceived role in the fictional tragedy (Edelman, n. d.).

Recognizing that the show had unintentionally created attention for the brand, *This Is Us* creator Dan Fogelman (2018) joined the conversation, tweeting, "Taking a moment to remind everyone that it was a 20 year old fictional crockpot with an already funky switch? Let's not just lump all those lovely hardworking crockpots together. #ThisIsUs." The social media conversations persisted, however. Within two days, stock for Newell Brands, the maker of Crock-Pot, dropped 24% (Ciolli, 2018).

Case History

The Fictional Crisis

The backlash against Crock-Pot began after a two-part cliffhanger in which fans watched Jack die from complications related to smoke inhalation in the February 4, 2018, episode, titled "Super Bowl Sunday," after he rescued his family from a house fire caused by a faulty slow cooker in the January 23, 2018, episode, titled "That'll be the day." The cause of his death was a major plotline that had built anticipation over two seasons. Through alternative timelines depicted in the 2016 pilot episode, fans learned that the character's death would be untimely and unexpected. According to Nielsen Media Research, more than 32.7 million fans watched the "Super Bowl Sunday" episode (Porter, 2018), making it the highest-rated scripted entertainment telecast in a decade (Mitovich, 2018).

In these two episodes, Jack turns off an unbranded slow cooker before going to bed. A close-up shot of the appliance, which closely resembles a Crock-Pot, shows its switch malfunction and spark a kitchen fire while the family is asleep. In the following scene, set to dramatic music and spliced with flashbacks of family celebrations, the fire engulfs the home and destroys family memories, including marks on the wall noting children's heights and

photographs and mementos. When Jack is awakened by smoke, he rescues his family before escaping from the burning house. The character suffers only minor burns, but later dies at the hospital following a heart attack related to smoke inhalation.

The Response

To respond to the rapidly spiraling social media dialogue, Crock-Pot launched a Twitter account, @CrockPotCares, in the early morning hours of January 24, 2018. It commiserated with fans about the character's death, sharing that they were also "heartbroken" over Jack's death, and addressed their concerns about its product (Walanksy, 2018). That same day, Crock-Pot issued a media statement published by *The Washington Post* (Krystal, 2018) and *Time* (Bruner, 2018). The statement addressed the episode and fans' safety concerns, detailed the safety of Crock-Pot's products, and invited NBC to rectify the situation.

According to NBC's global chair of brand practice, Mark Renshaw, the network agreed to play a role in correcting the narrative, in part to avoid a lawsuit (Pesce, 2018). On February 3, 2018, *This Is Us* creators released a special promotional video featuring Ventimiglia in character as Jack. He spoke about family unity, served chili from a Crock-Pot, forgave the brand, and encouraged fans to do the same before declaring, via hashtag, #CROCKPOTISINNOCENT (NBC, 2018). The video was the first public apology by an actor in character in television history (Edelman, n. d.). It premiered on *The Today Show* and was shared on social media by Crock-Pot (2018c) and members of the *This Is Us* cast. NBC also aired the video as an advertisement during its broadcast of the Super Bowl on February 4, 2018. This video, which had an estimated advertising value of \$5 million, cost Crock-Pot nothing (Edeleman, n. d.). Over the following weeks, Ventimiglia participated in a "Crock-Pot apology tour" (Reilly, 2018), in which he lightheartedly defended the brand and consoled fans through media interviews. In the wake of

the crisis, the actor made appearances on NBC talk shows, including *The Ellen Show* (2018a) and *The Today Show* (2018).

Strategy and Implementation

Crock-Pot's response to the crisis with the #CROCKPOTISINNOCENT campaign was grounded in an understanding of the phenomenon of parasocial grief, in which fans grieve a fictional loss in ways that mirror a real loss, and was implemented using strategies outlined by image repair theory (Benoit, 1997). Foss (2020) asserted that the reaction to the death of Jack Pearson was magnified, even by parasocial standards, in part because of the character's heroic portrayal, the drawn-out nature of his death storyline, and fans' pre-existing behavior of connecting with one another on Twitter to share emotional responses to *This Is Us*.

Based on parasocial relationship theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), parasocial grief expressed on social media about the deaths of fictional characters has become a topic of increasing interest. In a study exploring a fan-driven Facebook memorial page commemorating the character Lawrence Kutner following his death on the medical drama *House, M. D.*, DeGroot and Leith (2015) found that although social media can play a role in community grieving, it can also contribute to potential confusion about reality and fiction. Following the fictional death of *Game of Thrones* character Jon Snow, fans' Twitter reactions mirrored the stages of Kubler-Ross grief cycle (Daniel & Westerman, 2017). In a study of fan reactions to the death of the *Grey's Anatomy* character Derek Shepherd, Kretz (2020) found that emotional responses, especially among female fans, were more extreme following the death of a romanticized male protagonist.

Image repair theory, also known as image restoration theory, was introduced by William Benoit to suggest specific strategies that individuals, companies, or organizations can use to restore their image following reputational damage (Benoit, 1997). Scholarship around image

repair theory has frequently examined its use by public figures, including celebrities (Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Len-Ríos et al., 2015; Moody, 2011), politicians (Benoit, 2017; Benoit, 2014b; Benoit, 2007), and athletes (Benoit & Hanczor, 2009; Brazeal, 2008; Hambrick et al., 2013), whom have leveraged parasocial relationships with the public as part of their crises responses.

Through various studies, Benoit (2014a, 2000, 1997) developed an image repair typology consisting of five main categories: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Crock-Pot used a mix of strategies, including tactics grounded in denial, reducing offensiveness, and mortification.

Denial

Much of Crock-Pot's crisis response included strategies based on the denial of any perceived or presumed product safety risks. The brand assured fans that the fictional fire was improbable by detailing Crock-Pot's rigorous product safety testing and by explaining the statistical unlikelihood of the events depicted in *This Is Us*. Benoit (1997) outlined how denial can include both outright denial and attempts to shift the blame onto another entity. Crock-Pot used direct denial in its media statement about the fictional fire. To highlight the brand's safety testing, it claimed, "For nearly 50 years and with over 100 million Crock-Pots sold, we have never received any consumer complaints similar to the fictional events portrayed in last night's episode. In fact, the safety and design of our product renders this type of event nearly impossible" (Krystal, 2018, para. 5). Crock-Pot went on to detail its appliances' low current, low wattage, self-regulating capacity, and flame-resistant nature as well as the rigorous internal testing on power line voltage and switches that the company conducts via a rotary knob endurance test, a rotary knob force test, and a flame burning test (Krystal, 2018). Furthermore, Crock-Pot identified *Consumer Report* findings that slow cookers are seldom the cause of house

fires and that the events depicted in *This Is Us* were “highly unlikely” (Farrell, 2018, para. 2). The brand also responded to customers’ concerns on Twitter, empathetically acknowledging their “heartbreak” over the episode, offering to answer any questions, and pointing to Crock-Pot’s “rigorous safety testing” (Crock-Pot, 2018a).

The brand also made attempts to shift the blame (Benoit, 1997) for both the reputational and fictional crises. In its media statement, Crock-Pot subtly called out NBC, saying, “Our hope is that the team at NBC’s *This Is Us* will help us in spreading factual information regarding our product’s safety. While we know their primary mission is to entertain - something they have continued to excel in - we also feel they have a responsibility to inform” (Krystal, 2018, para. 7). Through this statement, Crock-Pot reminded fans that the network had put it in this situation against its will and that the episode was, in fact, fictional. In media interviews, Ventimiglia attempted to shift the blame for Jack’s death onto several other situational factors. After differentiating between a “slow cooker” and the Crock-Pot brand, he told Ellen DeGeneres that Jack’s death was attributed to cardiac arrest, not the fire (*The Ellen Show*, 2018a). The actor continued to shift the blame in interviews, reminding Megyn Kelly (*The Today Show*, 2018) that the slow cooker was not at fault for the fire because the family had failed to replace the batteries in their smoke detectors.

Reducing Offensiveness

Crock-Pot also used strategies intended to reduce the offensiveness of the crisis. These strategies included bolstering, transcendence, and compensation (Benoit, 1997). Attempts at bolstering (Benoit, 1997) were present in Crock-Pot’s promotional video, which positioned the brand as “the original slow cooker” and as an agent of unity for families and friends (NBC,

2018). Further bolstering the brand, Ventimiglia stated in his interview with Ellen DeGeneres that “I own a Crock-Pot. I love Crock-Pots” (*The Ellen Show*, 2018a).

Crock-Pot also employed the image repair strategy of compensation, in which an organization provides payment or another form of gratuity after a crisis (Benoit, 1997). It combined this strategy with further bolstering when, during Ventimiglia’s appearance on *The Ellen Show* (2018b), it gave every member of the studio audience free products. This occurred after DeGeneres shared her love of the Crock-Pot brand, stating, “I love Crock-Pots. I grew up with a Crock-Pot ... Crock-Pots make delicious meals, and they’re always safe, and I want you and your families to enjoy amazing meals for years to come” (*The Ellen Show*, 2018b). Crock-Pot also sent free products to fans who had participated in the early Twitter dialogue about the brand (Crock-Pot, 2018b).

Another key strategy that Crock-Pot employed was transcendence, through which the brand placed the fictional crisis in a more positive context (Benoit, 1997) by identifying it with fire safety awareness. Ventimiglia’s interview on *The Today Show* (2018) used this strategy when he reminded viewers to change the batteries in their smoke detectors by saying, “This has been an opportunity, a reminder for families ... it’s just like Jack to put a little positivity out into the world.” Ventimiglia also announced that the fictional tragedy had prompted him (*The Today Show*, 2018) to become the new spokesperson for a fire safety partnership with Duracell (*Business Wire*, 2018).

Mortification

Finally, Crock-Pot employed a mortification strategy by apologizing to fans and asking for their forgiveness (Benoit, 2014). This strategy is most apparent in NBC’s promotional video, which became a Super Bowl ad. It features Ventimiglia on the set of *This Is Us*, where he asks

fans to “take a deep breath, find the ability to forgive, and remind ourselves that there is no difference so great that we can’t overcome it” (NBC, 2018). After asking for forgiveness, the actor ladles himself a bowl of chili from a branded Crock-Pot before screen shows the company’s logo and the hashtag #CROCKPOTISINNOCENT, implying that even Jack could forgive the brand.

Resolution

Born of necessity and executed with urgency, the #CROCKPOTISINNOCENT campaign became an opportunity for the brand to “unwittingly reinvent the humble Crock-Pot” (Krishna, 2018, para. 1). One month after the crisis, Crock-Pot reported that quarterly sales had increased by more than \$300,000, with year-over-year sales increasing by 3.1% (Pesce, 2018; Shorty Awards, 2019). Beyond addressing the immediate crisis, the Crock-Pot (n.d.) Twitter account continues to connect users, provide customer service, and share recipes, thereby allowing the brand to engage with both current and potential customers on social media. In the three weeks following the fictional death of Jack Pearson, Crock-Pot earned more than 3.7 billion impressions from television coverage of its crisis response, it was featured in more than 20,000 online news articles, and it received more than 796,600 social media mentions (Edeleman, n. d.).

Perhaps most significantly, the campaign quelled conversations around product safety and turned some customers into social media brand advocates. Hashtags accompanying #CROCKPOTISINNOCENT and #crockpot transitioned from #ThisIsUs to broader audiences, including #KeepOnCrocking and #whatsfordinner (Crock-Pot, n.d.). Users posted photos of their favorite Crock-Pot recipes, including one person who tweeted, “Crock-Pot is guilty of only one thing: helping me make delicious queso. #CrockPotIsInnocent #KeepOnCrocking” (Anderson, 2018). Other users went so far as to apologize to Crock-Pot for their misdirected anger, tweeting,

“Sorry I jumped to conclusions and blamed you for what was not your fault. I should have known I could trust you, what with all the delicious meals you’ve provided me. Sorry again #CrockPotIsInnocent #thisisus” (Thomps, 2018), and “my crock pot and I have put our differences aside. It’s making a warm soup to cry into as an early apology for tonight’s #ThisIsUs #CrockPotIsInnocent” (Tay, 2018). Another user simply expressed brand loyalty, tweeting, “We still love our #crockpot. Always #CrockPotIsInnocent” (Im, 2018).

The #CROCKPOTISINNOCENT campaign was widely recognized for its creativity. *Ad Age* praised the brand for its “calm, patient and good-humored” response (Wohl, 2018). In addition to media buzz (Bradley, 2018; Snierson, 2018), the campaign won several industry awards, including a Shorty Award for real-time response (2019), the Cannes Lions Award for digital and social media real-time response (Friedrick, 2018), and a Clio Award for crisis management (Newell Brands, 2018).

Lessons

Crisis Perception

When developing image repair theory, Benoit (1997, p. 178) offered the critical observation that, in defining a crisis, an organization must acknowledge that the “key question is not if the act was in fact offensive, but whether the act is believed by the relevant audience(s) to be heinous.” He added that “perception is more important than reality” (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). More recent crisis communication research (Gigliotti, 2020) has furthered the understanding that crises are shaped significantly by audience perceptions, which do not necessarily reflect an organization’s understanding of the same situation. Recent scholarship around social media hoaxes (Veil et al., 2012) has supported Crock-Pot’s strategy of addressing a crisis grounded in fiction tactics similar to those that are typically reserved for real crises. In the context of

scholarship suggesting that the death of a fictional character can prompt real grief among fans (Daniel & Westerman, 2017), it is clear that Crock-Pot understood that any kind of perceived crisis among its audience was legitimate and worthy of response.

Flexibility of Theoretical Application

Crock-Pot was creative and flexible in applying crisis communication best practices, adapting tactics and tone for the circumstances of its somewhat unusual crisis. The image repair tactics of mortification and reducing offensiveness respond to the fans' attribution of responsibility for the crisis to Crock-Pot (Coombs, 2007). The brand's willingness to address, and even to apologize for, a crisis that it did not actually cause exemplify a commitment to its audience. Crock-Pot also employed denial tactics, which align with Coombs' (2007) recommendations for how brands should respond to a crisis for which they are not responsible. In apologizing and reducing the offensiveness of the crisis, Crock-Pot employed a lighthearted, almost comedic, tone. In denying responsibility for the crisis and defending its products' safety, however, the brand was serious and direct. This mix of strategies and the juxtaposition of delivery styles showed that Crock-Pot understood the nuanced nature of its crisis.

Collaboration

By partnering with NBC rather than pursuing litigation, Crock-Pot strategically expanded its own resources to address the crisis, thus overcoming a limited set of resources that Benoit (1997) and Frandesen and Johansen (2016) cited as a common barrier to effective image repair. Adopting a collaborative approach also enabled Crock-Pot to reach a wider audience on more channels (Ulmer et al., 2019). Working with Ventimiglia as an unofficial spokesperson leveraged the parasocial relationship that fans held with his character (Foss, 2020). The campaign

exemplifies how effective crisis response should take advantage of existing stakeholder relationships and be a collaborative effort by all affected organizations (Ulmer, et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Through the #CROCKPOTISINNOCENT campaign, Crock-Pot reacted with urgency and empathy (Ulmer et al., 2019) to correct a false narrative and endear itself to an audience using humor and compassion. The campaign exemplifies how a brand can effectively turn a crisis into an opportunity by understanding an audience's concerns, even when these concerns may be unfounded or entirely fictional. It also highlights the importance of flexibility and the benefits of collaboration in crisis response.

In its response, Crock-Pot not only legitimized fans' parasocial grief, but it worked to create a parasocial connection of its own with them by presenting itself as a living entity that shared in their emotional distress. While the brand was responding to protect its reputation, it took on the persona of a family member or friend offering condolences, rather than a company simply seeking to salvage business. By personifying itself, the brand embraced the fictional roots of its reputational crisis and apologized for events that never occurred – to great success.

This case offers a convergence of several phenomena that have yet to be thoroughly explored, including parasocial grief and brand personification, product misplacement and generic trademarks, and a brand's response to an imagined crisis. Finally, this case study provides insight for other brands that may find themselves grappling with similar situations, including Peloton, that has struggled with a reputational crisis steaming from the death of a *Sex and the City* character who used one of the company's stationary bicycles (Paz, 2021).

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