

Image Repair Case Discussion Guide

Use this guide to help you ask students some probing questions about whatever case you've chosen to discuss. There is more here than you likely need, so feel free to adjust these based on your own interests and those of your students.

Questions About Context

1. What happened?

- What are the key facts of the case?
- What is the speaker accused of doing?
- How egregious does it seem on the surface?
- Is there any initial dispute in the mainstream media or social media about whether the person actually committed the harm?
- How does the offense compare to others in recent memory? Is it something unique or something we see often?

2. Why is this an image problem?

- What aspect of the person's reputation is threatened?
- Is their character or behavior being questioned or both?
- What societal values have been violated?
- What does the person stand to lose as a result of a damaged image?

3. Before hearing the response, what would audiences expect the offender might say?

- Would you expect an apology if you were the offended party?
- Would you expect corrective action or would words be enough?
- What would a 'good' response look like?
- Are there any situational constraints on the speaker that would prevent them from using certain strategies (such as someone caught on video not being able to use denial)?
- How do you gauge authenticity when someone attempts to repair image?

Questions About the Image Repair Strategies

4. Which of Benoit's image repair strategies do you see?

- Is the speaker denying responsibility? Shifting blame? Minimizing the offense? Offering corrective action? Taking direct responsibility?

5. Which strategies are NOT used?

- Is there a strategy you expected to hear and didn't?
- Why might the speaker have avoided it?
- Would using that strategy have helped or hurt?

6. Which strategy seems most important to the speaker?

- Which strategy receives the most attention?
- Why do you think the speaker emphasized it?
- Does it seem to fit the situation?

Questions About the Effectiveness of the Image Repair

7. How persuasive is the response?

- Would you believe it? Why or why not?
- Which parts seem strongest? Which parts seem weakest?
- Are there any strategies that seem to conflict, such as saying "I'm so sorry for the harm I've caused (mortification)" and "What I did wasn't really that bad (minimization)"?
- Do the nonverbal cues (facial expressions, eye behavior, body movement, vocal tone) enhance or detract from the persuasiveness of the image repair?

8. Does the response fit the offense?

- Does the response appear too defensive?
- Is it too aggressive in pushing the audience to forgive them?
- Is it too little, too late?
- Does it seem proportional to the type of offense?
- Does the speaker use language that is too soft, such as calling a tragic accident a "mistake" or "misstep"?

9. What evidence is offered?

- Does proof or evidence seem appropriate in this case?
- Does the speaker provide proof/evidence to support claims?
- Does the speaker rely mostly on emotion?
- Do they rely on credibility?
- Are they omitting important facts or elements of the case?

10. What emotions is the speaker trying to create in the audience? What emotions is the speaker exhibiting during the image repair?

- Sympathy? Trust? Anger? Hope? Forgiveness? Impatience? Indifference? Apathy?

Questions About the Audience

11. Who is the primary audience?

- Customers? Voters? Employees? Fans? The media? A legal party? A family member? Stockholders?
- Does the offender seem to be ignoring an important audience or focusing too much on one audience at the expense of another?

12. Would different audiences react differently?

- Who is most likely to accept the response? Who is least likely?

13. What assumptions does the speaker make about the audience?

- What beliefs are taken for granted by the speaker?
- What audience values are being appealed to?
- What audience expectations are assumed by the speaker?

Questions About the “Fit” of the Theory

14. Is the Image Repair Theory useful for understanding this case?

- Which strategies fit best with the theory?
- Are there strategies that overlap, making it hard to figure out how to label them?
- Are there strategies being used that don't quite fit with the theory?

General Reflection Questions

15. If you were the communication consultant, what would you change about the offender's response?

- What strategies would you remove?
- What strategies would you add?
- Would you change anything about the tone, channel for disseminating the *apologia*, the timing of it, or the audiences targeted?

16. What's are the biggest lessons from this case culturally, politically, socially?

- Do we learn anything about expectations for people in positions of leadership/power?

- Do we learn anything about celebrity culture and how fans respond to failure from their idols?
- Do you think image can actually be repaired or is the damage likely to follow people around forever?
- Is the public becoming numb to certain kinds of offenses, thereby changing their expectations for image repair?
- Are there any ethical considerations when offering image repair? Should someone admit responsibility for something they didn't do? Should they always admit responsibility for something they did do? Should offenders write their own statements or rely on professionals to write them?
- Is social media changing the landscape of public apologies?
- Can someone successfully repair their image without apologizing or does mortification always have to be present?
- Can an apology fail even if it is sincere? Conversely, can a terrible apology succeed? Why?
- What ultimately determines whether image repair succeeds—the message, the tone, the audience, or the actions that follow?