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# Food Safety and Corporate Public Relations: Image Repair and the Tesco Horse DNA Scandal

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## Abstract

*In December 2012, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland announced that beef sold by Tesco in the United Kingdom and Ireland tested positive for horse DNA. Media coverage of the scandal pointed to potentially grave implications—for Tesco, but also for related entities, particularly given the possibly emotive nature of the crisis. Applying Benoit's (1995, 2014a) image restoration typology, this article analyses Tesco's rhetorical choices in the days after the meat testing results were made public. The analysis suggests that Tesco's image repair efforts were, in general, consistent and thorough, employing strategies and tactics that match Benoit's recommendations and have solid track records of success. Three major implications emerged from the analysis: the importance of timeliness and using rhetoric of timeliness; the possibility of third-party minimisation attempts; and shifting the grounds away from health and toward transparency.*

## Introduction

### *Scandal*

In December 2012, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland announced that beef sold by Tesco in the UK and Ireland had tested positive for horse DNA. One burger tested at nearly 30% horsemeat (Satter, 2013). Rodriguez (2013) warned, “The collateral damage is enormous” (¶ 15), and “[t]he extent of reputational damage to Ireland's food industry...is incalculable” (¶ 15). Eamon O'Cuiv, opposition politician in Ireland, noted the potentially “damaging effect on the Irish agriculture sector if not dealt with quickly and comprehensively” (cited in Satter, 2013, ¶ 12).

Of course, Tesco itself also faced pointed criticism, and its image suffered (see Fletcher,

2013). Saunders, analyst with Conlumino, warned: “Over the longer term, people may just have a little bit of doubt over what Tesco are selling and question the ethics and values of the company, and that could be a real problem” (cited in Taylor, 2013, ¶ 8). YouGov's social media monitoring tool, SoMa, found negative comments about Tesco on Twitter rising from 19% on January 14 to 33% on January 16 (cited in Baker, 2013). Tesco's market value dropped after news of the scandal (Fletcher, 2013), even after signs that Tesco was rebounding from previous financial challenges (Baker, 2013). One meat factory closed after inspectors determined 9 out of 13 beef patties tested positive for horse DNA, and ten million patties were removed from grocery shelves (Rodriguez, 2013).

Post-scandal, actions and rhetoric were swift. The present analysis examines Tesco's rhetorical choices in the days after the meat testing results were made public. This analysis employs Benoit's (1995, 2014a) typology of image repair as an analytical tool to take a closer look at Tesco's rhetorical public relations decisions.

### *Image repair*

Benoit's (1995, 2014a) image repair typology—which incorporates and synthesises scholarship of image attacks (e.g., Ryan, 1982), image work (e.g., Goffman, 1955), and apologia (e.g., Ware & Linkugel, 1973), among other areas of study—provides a tool of analysis for rhetorical situations such as Tesco's horsemeat scandal. A typology-informed rhetorical analysis can clarify content through categorisation, and then provide a systematic way of identifying how the tactics and strategies of a rhetor attempting image repair work together or do not work together. Past research has successfully used Benoit's

typology in contexts of politics (Benoit, 2014b), public relations (Compton, 2014), sport (Compton & Compton, 2014), entertainment (Moody, 2011) and others.

Benoit's (1995, 2014a) typology identifies five strategies: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, mortification, and corrective action. Denial rejects responsibility for the act in question. A simple denial stops at rejecting the accusation; shifting the blame also offers another target for blame. Evading responsibility agrees that the act occurred but attempts exoneration for blame through tactics of provocation, defeasibility, claiming it was an accident, or arguing good intentions. Reducing offensiveness focuses attention on the act itself in an attempt to re-characterise it as something less odious; tactics include bolstering, minimisation, differentiation, transcendence, and attacking the accuser. Corrective action attempts to fix the problem or avoid future occurrences of the problem. Mortification is an expression of regret. (See Benoit, 1995, 2014a, for more nuanced treatments of the typology.)

One other study has offered a rhetorical analysis of Tesco's rhetoric related to the horsemeat incident. Gjelsvik's (2014) Master's thesis examines Tesco press releases, with specific attention to pathos, logos, and ethos, as well as an examination of evidence of transparency, and compares Tesco's efforts to BP's efforts after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Gjelsvik concludes that Tesco's press releases highlighted more transparency, post-crisis. Other scholars have studied image repair in the context of food safety issues, including Schwann and salmonella (Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider, 1998), Jack in the Box and E. coli (Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995), and Cadbury and salmonella (Carroll, 2009).

This present study uses Benoit's (1995, 2014a) image repair typology to take an in-depth look at specific strategies and tactics employed in Tesco's post-crisis rhetoric. The author repeatedly read published responses from Tesco as well as published reactions to its rhetoric and identified strategies and tactics from Benoit's (1995, 2014a) image repair typology, with special attention to the unique challenges and opportunities arising from the discovery of such a unique contaminant.

## Analysis

### *Tesco's Response: Tim Smith*

Tesco's first apology appeared as a statement posted on Tesco's web page ([www.tescopl.com](http://www.tescopl.com)) on Tuesday, January 15, and then was carried in multiple media reports. Tesco also used social media outlets to distribute its statement (Baker, 2013). The statement was attributed to Tim Smith, Group Technical Director. From the first line of the statement, and even the first word, Tesco framed its response as timely: "Today we were informed..." (Smith, 2013, ¶ 1). After sharing the Food Safety Authority of Ireland's finding that Tesco beef products tested positive for horse DNA, Tesco emphasised its timely actions: "We immediately withdrew from sale all products from the supplier in question" (Smith, 2013, ¶ 2). The line served at least three main image repair functions. First, the actions were framed as timely ("immediately"). Second, Tesco asserted corrective action—the products have been withdrawn. Third, Tesco shifted attention (and perhaps blame) to the supplier.

Tesco's statement then took on a tone of assertiveness: "We will not tolerate any compromise in the quality of the food we sell" (Smith, 2013, ¶ 2). This statement likely functioned as a bolstering effort, raising perceptions of Tesco, emphasising its commitment to food quality, and suggesting a deliberate, focused approach to problem-solving.

Also of note are the strategies and tactics that Tesco explicitly rejected. Consider, for example, the stated rejection of minimisation, a tactic of reducing offensiveness (Benoit, 1995, 2014a): "The presence of illegal meat in our products is extremely serious" (Smith, 2013, ¶ 2). Tesco continued: "Our customers have the right to expect that food they buy is produced to the highest standards" (Smith, 2013, ¶ 2). Such lines emphasised that Tesco considered the incident serious (Baker, 2013).

And yet, Tesco's rejection of minimisation was not so simple. In the next paragraph, Tesco introduced a strategy that appeared to function as minimisation. The concluding paragraph stated: "The relevant authorities have said that

these findings pose no risk to public health” (Smith, 2013, ¶ 3). It is important to note, however, that this minimisation attempt was attributed to a third-party—the “relevant authorities.” This way, Tesco was able to claim a stated rejection of minimisation (“extremely serious”) but also claim minimisation (“the relevant authorities have said...”).

Tesco’s statement also included rhetoric of mortification. It observed that “many of our customers will be concerned by this news” (Smith, 2013, ¶ 3), and, consequently, that the company “apologise[s] sincerely for any distress” (Smith, 2013, ¶ 3). This is an important distinction: Tesco apologised, but not for the contamination explicitly. Instead, it apologised for “any distress” at hearing the news. Note, too, that this apology came immediately after the line claiming that authorities found “no risk to public health.” Tesco’s statement ended with a note about its customer service team, “standing by to answer any questions customers may have” (Smith, 2013, ¶ 3).

#### *Tesco’s Response: Philip Clarke*

An entry attributed to Philip Clarke, then Tesco Chief Executive Officer, titled “Trust,” was posted to the Tesco website on January 16. In some ways, image repair strategies paralleled those of Smith’s message from the previous day. In other ways, we find differences—some stark, and some surprising.

The first line noted, “Tesco is a food retailer, first and foremost: providing safe, nutritious food is the core of what we do” (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 1). Initially, this might appear to be a curious strategy. Instead of distancing itself from the basis of the scandal, the first line reminded readers that the violation went against the “core” of Tesco.

After recapping the incident—and in the process, calling it “a critical issue” (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 2) as well as referring to it as “horse meat” (¶ 1) and not “horse DNA” (Smith, 2013, ¶ 2)—the blog entry emphasised the lack of a public health risk. “I cannot repeat enough: this is not a safety issue” (¶ 3). Clarke’s blog referred to third-party confirmation from “[t]he food safety authorities in London and Dublin”

(¶ 3). This approach served as minimisation, and narrowed the scope of the image attack.

Next was an acknowledgement that, despite a lack of health risk, the findings were serious. “However as a food retailer, customers must have confidence in the products we offer. As a customer, you need to know that the food you buy and consume is what it says it is” (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 4). With these lines, the opening line had a new context. Tesco’s mistake was not so much a threat to its central mission—“providing safe, nutritious food” (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 1)—because the horsemeat posed no health risk. It was safe. However, the mistake was an issue of what consumers knew when they were buying the products. The frame seemed to shift from issues of safety to issues of transparency.

Clarke’s blog then explicated the standard of Tesco’s offense: trust. “Trust is hard won and easily lost. Our customers trust us that, if something goes wrong, Tesco will go above and beyond what is merely necessary to look after customers and will do the right thing, immediately and wholeheartedly” (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 5). This strategy matched up with the tactic of bolstering as a way of reducing the offensiveness of the act. It also served as a precursor to a more specific corrective action appeal. We also find a consistent theme emerging—that of the speed with which Tesco responded.

We did not hesitate to withdraw the products identified as containing horsemeat. Nor did we hesitate withdrawing all the products made by the same producer—26 frozen burger lines. We acted immediately and we told our customers about it through all the channels we could—in stores, on email, on social media, on television, in the news, and, in tomorrow’s papers, with a full page advertisement. (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 6)

Several phrases framed the actions as swift: “We did not hesitate...,” “Nor did we hesitate...,” and “We acted immediately...”.

The blog returned to a strategy of bolstering, framing the strategies of Tesco as a sort of admirable reluctant testimony:

It will never be comfortable telling as many people as we can that our products have fallen short, that we are investigating how that happened and will show them what we find. It is not comfortable, but it is absolutely necessary. We don't help anyone by hiding and hoping. (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 7)

The blog entry's concluding paragraph contained a volley of image repair strategies and tactics. First, statements identified with consumers, which likely served as bolstering: "If some of our customers are angry, so are we" (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 8). Then, there was a shift of blame: "We expect our suppliers to deliver to a standard, and to meet basic food traceability rules" (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 8). Next was a rejection of shifting blame: "But our customers shop with Tesco, not our suppliers, so you won't find us hiding behind suppliers" (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 8). Statements then seemed to further accept Tesco's responsibility: "It's our job to ensure they are meeting our high standards" (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 8). The blog entry ended with another outline of corrective action: "The first step to rebuilding trust is honesty and transparency, and that is why we will continue to tell our customers everything we know and everything we are doing to stop anything like this happening again" (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 8).

#### *Tesco's Response: Full-Page Advertisement*

Another Tesco apology appeared as a full-page advertisement. (A link to the text of this advertisement was also tweeted on Wednesday, January 16, at 19:15.) The apology mirrored many of the earlier rhetorical strategies. The headline, "We apologise," framed the message as one of mortification. The next line acknowledged that the goal of the apology message is not so much to inform of the scandal but to apologise for it: "You have probably read or heard that we have had a serious problem with three frozen beef burger products that we sell in stores in the UK and Ireland" ("An apology," 2013, line 1). Besides acknowledging that the news is out on this issue, we find two additional strategic, subtle moves in this first line. First, the verb tense, "have had," suggested that the incident is in the

past. Second, as with Smith's message, Tesco acknowledged how serious the incident is—"a serious problem..." A key difference between the full-page ad and the earlier public relations messages emerged in the second line. Smith's message repeatedly referred to "horse DNA" (Smith, 2013, ¶ 2). The tweeted apology called it "horsemeat" ("An apology," 2013, line 2).

Tesco's apology also reiterated a third-party confirmation of no health risk: "While the FSAI has said that the products pose no risk to public health, we appreciate that, like us, our customers will find this absolutely unacceptable" ("An apology," 2013, line 3). Here, Tesco took a collective perspective with consumers.

After providing more detailed information about which products were involved in the incident, Tesco emphasised its corrective action efforts of pulling the products in question. This apology took corrective action one step further, providing an explanation for how consumers could return the affected products. Later, Tesco also provided information about how to contact the company with questions ("An apology," 2013, line 8). Then, Tesco reiterated its apology: "We and our supplier have let you down and we apologise" ("An apology," 2013, line 7). We do not find evidence of shifting blame, as Tesco collectively apologised for its error and for its supplier.

Corrective action can involve more than fixing an existing problem; corrective action can also involve commitments to preventing future occurrences. Tesco is in line with this expanded view of corrective action when it noted: "So here's our promise. We will find out exactly what happened and, when we do, we'll come back and tell you. And we will work harder than ever with all our suppliers to make sure this never happens again" ("An apology," 2013, lines 9-10).

#### *A Secondary Scandal: The Tweet*

Late Thursday night, Tesco sent a tweet that read, "It's sleepy time so we're off to hit the hay!" (cited in Blake, 2013). Tesco apologised and claimed that the tweet was scheduled prior to the scandal (Blake, 2013). "I'm terribly sorry," the response tweet said to each person who complained. "That tweet was scheduled

before we knew of the current situation. We'd never intend to make light of it" (cited in Blake, 2013, ¶ 11). On Friday, a Tesco spokesperson said, "Our customer service team have apologised directly to any customers who were upset by our pre-programmed tweet" (cited in Blake, 2013, ¶ 13).

The tweet is a good reminder of the importance of companies to consider inadvertent escalation of public relations crises. Tesco was forward-thinking enough to re-edit a television advertisement set to begin airing later in January—one that was to feature a horse (cited in Blake, 2013). But Rodriguez (2013) asserted that the apology for the tweet was not timely enough: "Tesco quickly apologised but a tad late, given the damage to its already battered image" (¶ 12). Worstall (2013) points out that Tesco's apology seemed to acknowledge that its use of Twitter is "just another bureaucratic task that must be scheduled" (¶ 8).

### **Reactions to Tesco's Image Repair Efforts**

Many of Tesco's critics took to social media to express their disappointment and anger. Baker (2013) noted that "Tesco's Facebook page is being besieged by comments from angry consumers..." including one who posted, "I'm sad that Tesco my trusty local store is selling horse meat disguised as burgers!" (¶ 4-5). Tesco continued to receive criticism on social media during its image repair efforts. Another Facebook poster, cited by Baker (2013), explicitly rejected Tesco's third-party supported assertion that the horse meat was not a health risk.

But not everyone was unmoved by Tesco's efforts. Tesco received some third-party image boosting efforts. Singer Paul McCartney, during a radio interview, asserted: "It won't be the supermarkets who are responsible. They will have put in place every safeguard they can find. It will be a supplier—someone who said: 'Go on: whack in a bit of that [horse meat], mate. They'll never know'" (cited in Stones, 2013, ¶ 2-3).

Many experts were also impressed. Citing retail analysts, *The Guardian* called Clarke's message "part of a textbook response to the

scandal that could yet see the company avoid long-term damage to its reputation..." (Taylor, 2013, ¶ 3). Neil Saunders, retail analyst with Conlumino, said:

I don't think they have put a step wrong so far. Obviously they would have preferred this didn't happen but it has and they have admitted what has happened, they have informed the public and they haven't hidden anything. They have withdrawn all the products and they have promised to keep people updated...it has been a very responsible reaction. (cited in Taylor, 2013, ¶ 4)

Saunders, a retail analyst with Conlumino, notes, "People may still have concerns over food in the meat and the ready meals sections, but the company's actions mean that people will be able to trust Tesco's response and they will see the company has having been open and frank" (cited in Taylor, ¶ 5).

Others' rhetorical responses were swift, too. Simon Coveney, Agriculture Minister in Ireland, placed blame on the meat processor using an additive "falsely labeled, or somebody made a mistake, or somebody was behaving recklessly" (cited in Satter, 2013, ¶ 3). Coveney also noted: "A mistake has been made here, it has been flagged by our system as it should have been, and we will take the appropriate action to ensure it doesn't happen again" (cited in Satter, 2013, ¶ 4). Peter Kendall, National Farmers Union president, said: "The events of the past few days have severely undermined confidence in the UK food industry. Farmers are rightly angry that the integrity of stringent UK-farmed products is being comprised by using cheaper imported alternatives" (cited in Stones, 2013, ¶ 14).

One analyst deemed it "one of those five-minute scandals," noting that "Tesco remains one of the best UK supermarket retailers" (cited in "Horse meat woes," 2013, ¶ 8). Worstall (2013), writing for *Forbes*, also called it "a small scandal at present" (¶ 2). Saunders, analyst for Conlumino, noted that if the contamination were an accident, Tesco could weather the storm. The danger to Tesco's image, Saunders noted, was if the horsemeat

contamination was caused by efforts to save money (Taylor, 2013).

Empirical indicators also point to Tesco's successful rehabilitation of its image. The polling firm YouGov (UK), which tracks word-of-mouth about brands, or "buzz," found that while word-of-mouth about Tesco took a negative turn during the weeks following the scandal, by April, Tesco's "buzz" was almost fully recovered (Dobrin, 2013). Even more good news for Tesco was that while its composite index score of six image attributes did fall, the fall was moderate (Dobrin, 2013). Citing additional research by YouGov and Sky News, Dobrin (2013) also points out that most people (81%) did not change their shopping behaviors with Tesco after the scandal. In terms of buzz, image, and shopping behavior, Tesco seems to have had success through its image work. On the other hand, using sales as a metric paints a less clear picture. In June 2013, under a headline reading, "Tesco sales tumble on horsemeat scandal," a report indicates falling sales in 9 of Tesco's 11 global markets, including the UK (Neate & Moulds, 2013). Tesco's CEO acknowledged that the horsemeat scandal was part of the problem, but also pointed to the more pronounced drops in non-food sales (Neate & Moulds, 2013).

### Discussion

Three major implications emerge from this analysis: the importance of timeliness and using rhetoric of timeliness; the possibility of third-party minimisation attempts; and shifting the grounds away from health and toward transparency. Tesco's responses were timely, and it framed them as such: "We did not hesitate..." "Nor did we hesitate..." and "We acted immediately..." (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 6). Such actions—and the rhetoric describing such actions—probably served a bolstering effect, emphasising the speed at which Tesco responded.

Minimisation was a challenging tactic for Tesco. People were upset about the presence of horsemeat, even if the horsemeat posed little to no threat. Tesco was careful, then, about how it argued minimisation. On the one hand, it acknowledged that the problem was very

serious; on the other, it emphasised that health experts saw no threat to customers' health. The minimisation arguments, then, were third-party efforts.

What reconciles this contradiction of minimisation is our third implication: Tesco's shift from health to transparency (see also Gjelsvik, 2014). It was a thoughtful and likely effective move, as the image repair efforts themselves serve to respond to the new accusation. That is, if the ground is successfully shifted from health to transparency, Tesco's detailed messages of how it would respond to the event helped to counter concerns about a lack of transparency. Its rhetoric of image repair became a sort of corrective action.

It is curious, if not necessarily significant, that Tesco and its representatives used three terms to describe the contaminant in its beef products: "horse DNA" (e.g., Smith, 2013, ¶ 2), "horsemeat" ("An apology," 2013, line 2), and "horse meat" (e.g., Clarke, 2013, ¶ 1). Indeed, one of the blog posts used two different variations in a single piece of writing: "horsemeat" (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 6) and "horse meat" (Clarke, 2013, ¶ 1). Future research should take a closer look at whether such subtle variations in verbiage affect image repair efforts.

In summary, Tesco's image repair efforts were, in general, consistent and thorough, employing strategies and tactics that have solid track records of success (Benoit, 1995, 2014a). This analysis points to the importance of timely, detailed responses to health- and food-related scandals, which can be emotionally evocative situations. This analysis also reflects how Twitter (and other social media) play important roles in public messaging and should be consistent with other communication efforts.

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