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Adapting to a Health Crisis: A Case Study of a Real Estate Brokerage Team's
Crisis Communication and Management

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
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Abstract

The Covid-19 crisis was a foreign crisis to societies worldwide. Since its introduction in December 2019, businesses had to adapt to major societal changes, as new restrictions were implemented on societal functions worldwide. The real estate industry, in particular, experienced significant changes in the market, as well as their overall practices of business. This study will use qualitative research, specifically a case study approach, to study how the Lori Seavey Realty Team of North Attleboro Massachusetts, mitigated the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The significance of this thesis in the field of communications directly correlates to the Situational Crisis Communications Theory, which is used by business organizations to identify response strategies when a crisis arises. In this case, I will be focusing on the strategies used by the Lori Seavey Realty Team during the COVID-19 pandemic to determine if they were effective.

Keywords: Covid-19, Coronavirus, Crisis Communication, Real estate

Introduction

In December 2019, a novel coronavirus, now named SARS-CoV-2, caused a series of acute atypical respiratory diseases in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. The disease caused by this virus was termed COVID-19, according to the CDC. By January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the disease a global health emergency, and the United States was one of the top countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases. On March 11, 2020, WHO officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic (Ducharme, 2020). The current outbreak has had severe economic consequences across the globe, and it does not look like any country will be unaffected. This not only has consequences for the economy; all of society is affected, which has led to dramatic changes in how businesses act and consumers behave.

Industry experts internationally have raised concerns regarding the significant risk posed to the real estate sector by the unprecedented global pandemic of Covid-19 (Thomas, 2020). In order to survive these trying times, businesses such as real estate companies had to adapt to the new conditions they were presented. Many lenders, buyers and real estate agents were evaluating the threats and opportunities in their operations. Developers faced stoppages resulting from the impact and inherent risks of the stay-at-home policies on the built environment, and real estate chain (Glink & Tamkin, 2021). The real estate market became highly unpredictable, and it challenged the real estate sector to think out of the box to create smart, and safe solutions in order to continue their practices (Glink & Tamkin, 2021).

The purpose of this study is to analyze how the Lori Seavey Realty Team of North Attleboro, Massachusetts, mitigated the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of

the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Lori Seavey is consistently ranked as one of the top real estate agents in the area. She has cemented her reputation by continuously exceeding her clients' expectations. Her knowledge of the market, negotiating skills, and dedication to protecting her clients' biggest investment have driven her business and have made her one of the most referred agents in the area. Lori Seavey has also been recognized as a Boston Top 20 agent and has received the Five Star Professional Award and the Gold Medallion Award among others.

The Covid-19 virus was a never-before seen virus – a once-in-century health pandemic. Based on this situation, there was limited literature on the best strategies for businesses to utilize in order to mitigate this health crisis. The purpose of this writing is to help inform other real estate agencies and (small) businesses in general handle a health crisis as major as the Covid-19 virus was, as well as employ appropriate strategies that can help manage a crisis today or in the future.

The significance of this thesis in the field of communications directly correlates to the Situational Crisis Communications Theory, which is used by business organizations to identify response strategies when a crisis arises. In this case, I will be focusing on the strategies used by the Lori Seavey Realty Team when they were navigating their real estate processes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

In recent light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Massachusetts real estate industry has seen a healthy demand in the buyer's market encouraging a stronger start to 2021. "Covid-19 has impacted the real estate market mainly by causing sustainably fewer sellers to list their homes for sale." (Thomas, 2020, p. 1). In the real estate industry,

especially in Massachusetts, the success of sales relies on the functioning of supply and demand. When this balance of supply and demand is offset, there will be a disruption in sales.

For example, when there is a high demand of buyers and low supply of houses to choose from on the market, the sale of the property could result in a bidding war, a waived home inspection, or even an offer that was \$50,000 over the asking price of the home. Competitiveness becomes the only resort for buyers when there is a high demand and low supply of homes on the market (Heikman, 2021). When these circumstances are reversed, and there is a low demand for buyers and high supply of available properties on the market, these properties will have a difficult time being sold, making it a difficult position for sellers to be in. During the COVID-19 pandemic particularly, Massachusetts revealed that there was a high demand of buyers, with a low supply of available properties for sale. Additionally, there was a slight increase in the number of commercial properties that went up for sale, as local business owners had to close their businesses and could not afford to pay rent.

When working in a competitive field such as real estate, it becomes essential that agents stay ahead of the curve. Marketing becomes the key to success in real estate, in order to make yourself known in your area and also in the state or states in which you are licensed (Grant, 2020). The Lori Seavey Realty Team, in particular, uses a variety of marketing tools. The most valued and successful marketing tool is social media, and, Facebook, in particular.

The Lori Seavey Realty Team has utilized Facebook as the ultimate networking tool. It is used for posting content and information on MLS listings, “Monday Market

Minutes” that inform our community about the current market, marketing media that gives information on the Lori Seavey Realty Team, short video clips, and even a private group created specifically for any buyers working with the Lori Seavey Realty Team to view what will soon be on the market with us before anyone else. Networking is key (Thomas, 2020), and with successful networking and a positive experience with the Lori Seavey Realty Team, buyers and sellers will be more likely to recommend its team to family or friends.

Crisis management is a critical organizational function. Failure can result in serious harm to stakeholder, losses for an organization, or end its very existence (Coombs, 2007). When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the real estate market; there were many unpredictable situations. At first, many were unsure if the market was going to crash. Once it was clear that the market had avoided a major crash, agents began forming their own versions of crisis communication plans. For an agency, the plan can be first communicated from the broker to the salesperson.

A New Normal

A critical factor that affected the normal practices of real estate due to the pandemic was the rise of remote work. Recent studies show that 1 out of 4 Americans will work from home in 2021. That’s 25%. By comparison, only 5.2% of Americans worked from home in 2017 (Thomas, 2020). With this sudden shift to remote work, the Lori Seavey Realty Team witnessed a sudden boom in buyers moving from the city to more rural towns like North Attleboro, Massachusetts (Ducharme, 2020). The commercial real estate market has also undergone a sudden shift, as large corporations in

the city, particularly Boston, MA, have realized they do not essentially need an office space to complete work from.

The interesting pandemic sub-text is the acceleration factor—and how the places where Americans are moving in the midst of COVID-19 may finally be expressing a more fundamental preference for how they *really want to live* instead of where they *have to stay* because of their job location or where their kids go to school (Thomas, 2020). As the real estate market has continues to shift, the Lori Seavey Realty Team has noted this type of buyer behavior. As working from home becomes more common, buyers will finally be able to purchase a home that they *want* to live in, instead of purchasing a home that is out of *necessity* (Ducharme, 2020).

That being said, the Lori Seavey Realty Team has noticed buyers are now seeking a “forever home” more than ever before, because they do not have to worry about commuting to work and the location to work being a potential push to move again one day. Realtors must take note of this shift in buyer priorities and adjust their services to better fit the new behaviors and needs that buyers are presenting.

Adaptive Structuration Theory

Before identifying the situational crisis communication theory that was pursued by the Lori Seavey Realty Team during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important to highlight some common theories that were unintentionally applied to its communication plan in order to navigate their newly implemented business practices. The adaptive structuration theory states that mass media organizations determine what the general population considers newsworthy by deciding how much attention a news story receives

(Sedera & Zakaria, 2008). This theory was implemented by the Lori Seavey Realty team to approach new methods of communication in order to combat COVID-19 effectively. In this theory, groups and organizations create rules and resources, which are defined as structures. These structures form social systems, which develop a life of their own. The quality of the structure affects decision making, and decisions also affect the structure.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) suggests attributed responsibility is the key factor in explaining the reputations threat posed by crisis situations. A crisis is “a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat” (Coombs, 2007, p.164). SCCT hypothesizes that using prescribed response strategies will result in less attributed responsibility for crisis situations and better reputation for the organization than using non-prescribed response strategies (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Coombs, 2015; Ma & Zhan, 2016). This ultimately affects the way in which a stakeholder interacts with an organization.

According to this theory, there are three main clusters of crises: victim, accidental and preventable. Each cluster is assessed at its own level of reputational threat. Victim crises are determined to have minor reputational threat, accidental crises have a moderate reputational threat, and preventable crises have major reputational threat to the organization in crisis (Coombs, 2007).

A victim crisis results in a company being perceived as the victim of a crisis. An example of this type of crisis would be if a rumor started to go around that was blaming a company for something that they were actually not at fault for. (Coombs, 2007).

An accidental crisis refers to when an organization is at fault for a crisis that was unintentionally caused. The best example of this would be when a product produced by a company has a failure. An accidental crisis can cause unwavering damage to a company and its overall reputation if this crisis goes ignored or unaddressed. (Coombs, 2007).

A preventable crisis is usually intentional, meaning that a company intentionally takes a risk or is aware of the situation and ignores it, and it ends up resulting in a crisis. An example of this would be a company promising to raise funds for a local fundraiser, and then using the funds they raised to purchase something for the company instead. The crisis communication theory plays a critical role in this type of crisis, as the reputation of a company would hinder on their ability to respond and address their actions responsibly (Coombs, 2007).

Table 1 shown above represents the three main clusters represented in Coombs’s Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Based on this table, we are able to understand the victim, accidental, and preventable cluster’s strategies and crisis response tendencies.

Table 1. SCCT Clusters, Strategies, and Responses

Cluster	Strategies	Crisis Response
Victim	Deny Attack the accuser Scapegoat	Denial (Denying of any wrongdoing or involvement)
Accidental	Excuse Justification	Diminishment (offering excuses, justification of what happened)
Preventable	Compensation Apology	Rebuilding (compensation of victims, offering apologies, taking full responsibility)

NOTE: Adapted from “Protecting organizational reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory, 2007, Corporate Reputation Review, vol 10, issue 3, pp. 163-176. Copyright 2007 by Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.

SCCT Strategies

In the victim cluster, corporations should use the Deny strategy (Coombs, 2007). The strategy of denial seeks to establish a crisis frame while attempting to remove any connection between an organization and a crisis. (Coombs, 2007). For example, in a crisis that is caused by a rumor, an organization will deny that rumor. If stakeholders or the media accept the frame of denial stating there is no crisis, then there will be no reputational harm to the organization.

In the accidental cluster, corporations should use the diminishing strategy. (Coombs, 2007). Diminishing strategies argue that the organization lacked control over the crisis. When an organization lessens its connection to the crisis, then the reputational threat to the organization will be reduced. (Coombs, 2007). Diminishing strategies are most effective when an organization is reinforcing its existing crisis frames.

In the preventable cluster, corporations should use the rebuilding strategy. (Coombs, 2007). Rebuilding strategies act as the main avenue for generating new reputational assets for an organization. This strategy attempts to improve an organization's reputation by offering compensation or other aids to their victims. (Coombs, 2007). Rebuild strategies are used for crises that present a severe reputational threat to an organization such as a crisis that was done intentionally or accidentally.

The research questions for this case study are:

RQ1: What SCCT strategies did Lori Seavey Realty Team use in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: Were the strategies used by Lori Seavey Realty Team effective?

Methods

For my case study, I chose a qualitative approach, because my data collection is based on real-life experience. Qualitative research is the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting non-numerical data, such as language. Qualitative research can be used to understand how an individual subjectively perceives and gives meaning to their social reality (Amareesan, 2019). The data that I plan on analyzing includes articles written on the real estate market in Massachusetts during Covid-19, records of the Lori Seavey Realty Team stating how many homes they sold in 2019 versus 2020 when Covid began to effect the economy and specifically the real estate market, and communicative marketing media posts pertaining to the state of the market done by the Lori Seavey Realty Team over the past year (known as Monday Market Minutes).

Yin (2000) suggests that with case study research, researchers can analyze a single case or data point, which examines a phenomenon (i.e. Lori Seavey Realty's crisis communication and response) in a real-life context (i.e., during the COVID-19 pandemic). Case studies allow for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Richards et al., 2017).

Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis can be used in either an inductive or a deductive way. Both inductive and deductive content analysis processes involve three main phases: preparation, organization, and reporting of results. Satu, (2019). In my research, I implemented a qualitative content analysis to analyze the Lori Seavey Realty Team's response to the Covid-19 crisis.

In the preparation phase of content analysis, research consists of collecting suitable data for content analysis, making sense of the data, and selecting the unit of analysis. Satu, (2019). In this case the data I collected included the Lori Seavey Realty Team's website and corporate materials shared with their public audiences, company records of the Lori Seavey Realty Team stating how many homes they sold in 2019 versus 2020, and social media posts done by the Lori Seavey Realty Team over the past year (such as Monday Market Minutes).

The organization phase involves categorization matrix development, whereby all the data are reviewed for content and coded for correspondence to or exemplification of the identified categories. Satu, (2019). In this case, I would categorize all the data I collected to analyze the Lori Seavey Realty Team, to make an effective content analysis approach.

In the reporting phase, results are described by the content of the categories describing the phenomenon using a selected approach (either deductive or inductive). Satu, (2019). In this case, my analysis on the Lori Seavey Realty Team was deductive, because I used the situational crisis communication theory and the adaptive structuration theory to help develop my research.

Participant Observation

The participant observation method is implemented when a sociologist becomes a part of the group they are studying in order to collect data and understand a social phenomenon or problem. (Clements, 2018). During participant observation, the researcher works to play two separate roles at the same time: subjective participant and objective observer. In most cases, the group is aware that the sociologist is studying them.

I used the participant observation method in order to better understand the practices implemented by the Lori Seavey Realty Team to combat Covid-19. Since I was serving as an intern with this team, a I was able to be a subjective and objective observer, giving me a better perspective on how this organization managed a crisis.

Data Collection

Yin (2000) suggests that a case study “depends on the use of—and ability to integrate in converging fashion—information from multiple sources of evidence. The facts and conclusions for the case study will be built around the consistency of data from these sources, and these facts and conclusions” (p. 93). This study analyzed multiple data points such as the Lori Seavey Realty Team’s website and corporate materials shared with their public audiences as well as documentation retained by the company. For example, I analyzed records of the Lori Seavey Realty Team stating how many homes they sold in 2019 versus 2020 when Covid began to effect the economy and specifically the real estate market, and communicative marketing media posts pertaining to the state of the market done by the Lori Seavey Realty Team over the past year (known as Monday Market Minutes).

Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed deductively and inductively to identify SCCT strategies in each individual piece of material and across items that Lori Seavey Realty team used to address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings: The Case

This study discussed operating real estate sales during a pandemic, in particular, how to operate open houses, listing meetings, and the brokerage as a whole. The Lori

Seavey Realty Team remained involved in their sales by implementing safe measures of practice such as virtual open house tours, virtual listing meetings, operating out of the Keller Williams Elite office, implementing contactless sign-in sheets for open houses by using a barcode scanning device, allowing only six people in at a time at an open house, and sanitizing hands and surfaces to ensure the ultimate safety of the property and their clients.

In order to carry out my research, I will implement the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Adaptive Structuration Theory to analyze this case study. In this case, I specifically recognize that the Lori Seavey Realty Team belongs in the victim cluster. In a victim cluster as the previous chapter explains business or an overall company suffers from a crisis that could ultimately not be avoided. In this case, the crisis was the Covid-19 pandemic, which affected all aspects of our lives, and impacted the real estate market drastically as the economy experienced a crash when the pandemic first broke out.

Covid-19 in the victim crisis sector, poses a minor reputational threat to the Lori Seavey Realty Team in terms of the success and livelihood of their business. A potential reputational threat that should be noted however, is the potential loss of clients and business due to the state of the market caused by Covid-19. The reputational threat would include the potential crashing of the market or people not wanting to purchase homes due to their health concerns. This would ultimately cause the loss of clients for the Lori Seavey Realty Team, resulting in the loss of business, which determines the livelihood of their organization overall.

Covid-19 has affected our lives in more ways than one, but for the real estate market, it was most notably affected by the new “stay-at-home culture” that had been implemented. Even with many of these restrictions currently being lifted, there has still been a tendency among many people to remain close to home, and only venture out for necessities. The Lori Seavey Realty Team used the Adaptive Structuration Theory to implement CDC guidelines for COVID-19 into the everyday practices and procedures of this team.

In terms of real estate, the stay-at-home culture ultimately effected buyer’s comfort levels, as they became less likely to schedule property tours, and also less likely to attend open houses. There was a specific emphasis on client safety, so the team focused on the creation of rules for events such as open houses and listing appointments. These new rules outlined procedures that would take place to ensure all clients had a safe, pleasant experience working with the Lori Seavey Realty Team. For open houses, no more than ten people were allowed in a single-family home at a time, and for smaller properties such as condos, no more than five were allowed in at a time. The team also included contactless sign-in sheets to their new list of procedures, requiring buyers to sign into open houses by scanning a barcode with their phone camera.

In order to prioritize the newly implemented standards held by buyers we must prepare them to be competitive buyers in this intense market. Currently, all houses that were sold by the Lori Seavey Realty Team had the home inspection waived and sold anywhere between \$25,000-\$60,000 over asking price. Additionally, none of the buyers had any contingencies. For buyers finally in a position to purchase a forever dream home due to a new lifestyle change in the pandemic, we advise them to consider all

requirements to home buying currently. These requirements include looking at homes \$100,000 less than what they are pre-approved for to prepare to bid close to what they would be preapproved for, prepare to waive the home inspection, pay well over asking as mentioned before, have zero contingencies, and prepare to be looking for a few months as inventory is currently very low.

Based on the strategic framework conveyed by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, the Lori Seavey Realty Team was able to employ a successful communicative business plan to adapt to newly implemented guidelines that resulted from the crisis. These strategies related to the victim cluster of SCCT.

As mentioned in the SCCT section of this report, a victim crisis is one that can result from a business being a victim of a natural disaster, or even a rumor. This type of crisis results in a minor reputational threat to the business, because this is typically one that is unavoidable (Amaresan, 2019). In this case, the Covid-19 crisis was one that the Lori Seavey Realty Team could not avoid. Under this crisis, the Lori Seavey Realty Team used a bolstering strategy. A bolstering strategy is one that is used typically during a victim crisis, and it allows for the business to produce a response to the implied crisis (Amaresan, 2019). In this case, the Lori Seavey Realty Team created a response to the Covid-19 crisis through social media that provided the newly implemented guidelines they created in order to keep their clients and each home safe. These guidelines included requiring the use of masks at all times, touchless sign-in to keep track of groups at open houses, virtual home tours and open houses, hand sanitizing upon entering a home, and limiting the number of groups in an open house to two groups at a time.

The bolstering strategy is also another strategy utilized in order for a business to position an organization as asset to its stakeholder (Amaresan, 2019). In this case, Lori Seavey Realty Team acknowledged the importance of keeping all of their clients safe, as the main priority of their business is to always protect their clients. It was critical for the Lori Seavey Realty Team to acknowledge the crisis and also take preventative and responsible measures in order to assure the safety of their practices, because safety became the number one concern of all their clients. This reassurance allowed for the team to continue their business practices safely, as their business was still able to continue steadily.

Corrective action is a process of communicating with the employee to improve unacceptable behavior or performance after other methods such as coaching, and performance appraisal have not been successful. If the employee has not made an improvement or if the behavior/unsatisfactory performance persist, corrective action may be appropriate. (Cornell, 2020). The Lori Seavey Realty Team utilized corrective action to adjust their communication plan to create a relative, proactive communication plan that would adapt to the new guidelines implemented by Covid-19. This new communicative plan included the use of Monday Market Minutes – an informational overview posted every Monday by the Lori Seavey Realty Team, to update their clients on the state of the market during the pandemic.

Through this analysis, the study determined the Lori Seavey Realty Team implemented new methods of practice in response to the Covid-19 crisis, such as touch-less sign-in methods, increased use of social media platforms to pursue virtual house tours, and increased safety protocols to ensure client safety at all times.

Discussion

This study confirms that this crisis was a victim crisis, because Covid-19 was an uncontrollable, naturally created virus. The Lori Seavey Realty Team was one of many business organizations effected by the pandemic and it's major impact. Although this crisis changed the trajectory of how many businesses practiced on a day-to-day business, the Lori Seavey Realty Team used the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the Adaptive Structuration Theory to effectively combat the challenge they were faced with. Since this crisis was a victim crisis, it ultimately posed minor reputational threat to the Lori Seavey Realty Team, as they did not cause this crisis to occur. The Lori Seavey Realty Team was able to successfully implement new safety measures and practices in order to safely practice real estate and take care of their client's biggest purchase.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyze how the Lori Seavey Realty Team of North Attleboro, Massachusetts, mitigated the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The Lori Seavey Realty Team used a branch of the Situational Communication Crisis called victim crisis in order to analyze their business performance during the pandemic. In a victim crisis as the previous chapter explains business or an overall company suffers from a crisis that could ultimately not be avoided. In this case, the crisis was the Covid-19 pandemic, which affected all aspects of our lives, and impacted the real estate market drastically as the economy experienced a crash when the pandemic first broke out. After the initial crash of the economy, the real estate market then suddenly experienced a boom. The Lori Seavey Realty Team experienced this boom more expansively, as the team noticed large increase

in buyers coming from areas around the city of Boston to a smaller more rural town like North Attleboro, with low inventory on the market. During the pandemic, the Lori Seavey Realty Team also implemented new, safe practices such as touch-less sign-ins at open houses with the use of QR codes, lower amounts of groups allowed in an open house at a time, virtual tours and listing meetings, and increased sanitization measures to keep everyone safe and healthy.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation is that the findings of this research cannot be generalized to all realty firms in Massachusetts or across the nation. The findings are true for this realty firm, at this time, in this context. However, the findings in this study point to best practices that realty firms can employ during a major health crisis. Those practices are listed in the Implications for Practice section below.

Future research could conduct a quantitative survey research of a large sample of realtors across the state, northeast, or the nation to determine what strategies realtors implemented to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic. These findings could possibly be generalized to a broader audience of realty firms.

Implications for Practice

Based on this case study, the following best practices are recommended for realty firms and other public-facing businesses to consider to successfully manage a business during a major health crisis:

- Implement touch-less technology using QR codes: For example, the Lori Seavey Realty Team utilized QR codes at open houses for their sign-in method.

- Send weekly updates: For example, the Lori Seavey Realty Team implemented an informational post known as Monday Market Minutes, that would give weekly updates every Monday on the state of the market during Covid-19.
- Effectively communicate your business's plans to mitigate a crisis: For example, the Lori Seavey Realty Team posted a video on social media on what steps they would be taking to implement safe real estate practices during the pandemic.
- Be active on social media: For example, the Lori Seavey Realty Team used social media platforms such as Facebook to perform virtual house tours for their clients.
- Implement the use of bolstering: For example, during these trying times, the Lori Seavey Realty Team used bolstering in attempt to boost their business positively. They did this by creating social media content that highlighted the success of their business and how the real estate business was still very active, even during a global pandemic.

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