A Cold Cut Crisis: Listeriosis, Maple Leaf Foods, and the Politics of Apology

Josh Greenberg
Carleton University

Charlene Elliott
University of Calgary

Abstract: In the summer of 2008, one of the worst cases of food contamination in Canadian history was confirmed when the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and Maple Leaf Foods issued a “health hazard alert” warning the public not to serve or consume Sure Slice brand cold cuts. This localized warning quickly spiralled into a major listeriosis epidemic. More than 200 Maple Leaf Foods products were recalled, but not in time to prevent 20 deaths, the illness of thousands more and a class action lawsuit. This article explores Maple Leaf’s crisis response strategy. Locating our analysis in relation to theorizing about the legitimacy problems that corporations and other powerful actors face in late modernity, it demonstrates that Maple Leaf’s apology was effective in terms of restoring consumer trust and confidence to the extent that it addressed the uncertainties and anxieties that are endemic to contemporary risk society; and, more broadly, it ‘worked’ by disrupting the distribution of risk and blame to other stakeholders.

Keywords: Crisis communication; Public relations; Listeriosis; Food safety; Apology

Résumé : Pendant l’été 2008, un des pires cas de contamination alimentaire de l’histoire canadienne a été confirmé quand l’Agence canadienne d’inspection des aliments et les Aliments Maple Leaf ont émis une alerte de risque pour la santé avertissant le public de ne pas servir ou consommer les viandes froides « Sure Slice ». Cet incident localisé a rapidement pris l’envergure d’une épidémie de listériose. Maple Leaf a dû rappeler plus de deux cents de ses produits, mais cette action est arrivée trop tard pour prévenir la mort de vingt personnes, la maladie de milliers d’autres et une action collective contre la compagnie. Dans cet article, nous explorons la stratégie menée par Maple Leaf pour contrer cette crise. Nous situons notre analyse dans le cadre de théories sur
les problèmes de légitimité éprouvés par les compagnies commerciales et autres dans la période actuelle de la modernité avancée. Nous démontrons ainsi que les excuses faites par Maple Leaf se sont avérées efficaces, car elles ont rétabli la confiance du public à leur égard dans la mesure où elles ont diminué les craintes et incertitudes qui caractérisent la société du risque contemporaine. Plus généralement, ces excuses ont réussi en interrompant la diffusion des risques et accusations vers d’autres parties prenantes.

Mots clés : Communication de crise; Relations publiques; Listériose; Sécurité alimentaire; Excuses

Introduction

On August 17, 2008, one of the worst cases of food contamination in Canadian history was confirmed when the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and Maple Leaf Foods, a major Canadian food processing company, issued a “health hazard alert” warning the public not to serve or consume Sure Slice brand roast beef and corned beef “because these products may be contaminated with Listeria monocytogenes” (CFIA, 2008). This localized warning quickly spiralled into “the worst epidemic of listeriosis in the world” (Attaran, MacDonald, Stanbrook, Sibbald, Flegel, Kale, & Hébert, 2008, p. 739). More than 200 Maple Leaf Foods products coming from the Bartor Road meat processing facility in Toronto were recalled. Twenty people died, many more became seriously ill, and the economic costs incurred by the company (through market losses and a class action lawsuit involving more than 5,000 complainants) exceeded $50 million.¹

The Maple Leaf Foods listeriosis outbreak is significant not only because of the health and economic impacts, but also because of how the company communicated in its response. In contrast to organizations that have confronted crisis situations by avoiding and displacing blame, or keeping silent and maintaining a low profile, Maple Leaf opted for a strategy of high visibility. Almost immediately following news of the first death, the company dispatched a camera crew to its office, where President and CEO Michael H. McCain recorded a statement that would later air on all major broadcast media and gain wide circulation on YouTube. After confirming that listeria had been found in some of the company’s products, McCain explained what listeria was, expressed concern for what had happened, and apologized to all whose lives had been affected. Importantly, he also affirmed that Maple Leaf was assuming full responsibility for the situation, rejecting accusations that the problem was the result of a failure in government policy or regulation. McCain’s apology was widely heralded in the mainstream media as honourable and a gutsy move—bloggers, PR practitioners, and industry analysts described it as a “bold, breathtaking communications play” (inter alia Veritas Communications, 2008). So effective was the company’s crisis response that it garnered McCain recognition as the top business newsmaker of 2008 by the Canadian Press (Owram, 2009).

In this article we focus on Maple Leaf Foods’ crisis communication strategy, in particular the function of apologetic discourse. Whereas corporate apologies are normally designed to protect the company’s identity and help repair damaged
relations of trust, we argue that apology can also serve a strategic role of helping to mitigate the potential for political intervention. For Maple Leaf Foods—and for the food industry more widely—this is especially important at a time when food safety is very much a top-of-mind issue for Canadians. To advance this argument, we first present a theoretical framework that conceptualizes crisis communication as a strategy for managing the legitimacy problems that corporations and other powerful institutions face in a period of uncertainty and risk. Second, we outline the tenor and tone of McCain’s apology and introduce the concept of *conspicuous apologetics* as a way of theorizing about the importance of visibility to an organization that has been accused of (and admitted) serious wrongdoing. Maple Leaf’s response to the crisis, and the apology in particular, became the means to bridge the legitimacy gap that developed as a consequence of the listeriosis outbreak. We conclude the article by situating Maple Leaf’s conspicuous apology in relation to wider struggles around blame and responsibility. We suggest the apology was part of a broader strategy that involved looking to the past and the future simultaneously, recognizing the importance of both restoring consumer trust and confidence, and also mitigating the prospective possibilities of regulatory or legislative interference.

**Crisis and legitimacy problems in late modernity**

Crises represent critical moments in the life of an organization, times when an organization can rise to the occasion and assert its leadership, remain silent and outside the sphere of influence, or mis-communicate and mismanage its response. Crisis communication involves the attempt to control information and allay negative public reaction when sudden and dramatic change occurs in an organization’s environment that tarnishes its reputation and compromises its operational autonomy. Given that crises are linked to events with immediate, concrete impacts and meanings that tend to be visible and emotionally charged, corrective action can be organized and communicated in both localized and generalized ways, aimed at containing hostile emotional reactions (typically on the part of consumers) as well as the potential for political responses by government and other regulatory bodies. In this sense we argue that crisis communication is best seen as a strategy for managing the legitimacy problems that corporations and other powerful institutions face in a period marked increasingly by the presence of uncertainty and risk (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990; see also Luhmann, 1979, 1985).

Indeed, one of the features of contemporary social life is a “well-distributed awareness of risk” (Giddens, 1990, p. 125): many of the dangers and uncertainties we face are widely known, even if “accurate” (i.e., scientific) knowledge about them is less clear (Millar & Wynne, 1988; Sandman, 2002; Slovic, 1987). Concern about food safety has emerged as a major social and public policy issue over the past decade as awareness about health hazards relating to food production and processing (e.g., production of GM crops, the growth of “factory farms,” pesticide use, food additives, trans fats, etc.) has become more widespread (Miles, Brennan, Kuznesof, Ness, Ritson, & Frewer, 2004). Todt, Munoz, González, Ponce, and Estévez (2009) show that consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the political dynamics of food production and are becoming critical of regulatory processes surrounding food (particularly as they
relate to genetically modified organisms), perceiving governmental decisions to tilt in favour of industry interests. Concerns about food safety have been amplified by the way in which claims about the potential threats of new food production and processing techniques are contested and denied by private interests and by how these debates play out in media discourse (Durham, 2005; Miller, 2007; Miller & Reilly, 1995). Regardless of how reasonable or accurate these concerns may be, contradictory claims from corporations, government, and social activists about the levels of acceptable risk generate grist for the media mill and thus help to fuel confusion and mistrust, often leading citizens to conclude that the appeals of different claims-makers (corporations, governments, activists, et cetera) are probably based more on sectional self-interests than a broader notion of the public good.

In terms of corporate public relations, crises are important to the extent that their harmfulness can be translated into grievances (Knight & Greenberg, 2003). Grievances operate rhetorically as claims on an organization’s actions, resources, or plans that may impinge upon and interfere with organizational autonomy. The potential for grievances to encroach upon corporate decision-making tends to vary, however, depending on the relative strength and clout of different stakeholders. In most cases, the grievances of top investors will exercise greater influence than those of ordinary consumers, although consumer concerns can intensify to such a point that they become consonant with the concerns of the more powerful stakeholders. At risk here is not only the performance gap that can arise when management fails to live up to shareholder expectations or demands, but also the legitimacy gap that emerges when the interests or values of consumers, advocacy groups, or other actors within civil society diverge from the corporation’s goals and priorities. Whereas performance gaps arise when outcomes do not live up to shared expectations, legitimacy gaps arise when there are alternative or competing definitions about what those outcomes and the means to achieve them should be (Knight & Greenberg, 2003).

Serious instances of harm, such as the deaths and mass illness that can result from outbreaks of contaminated food, threaten legitimacy not only in the immediate sense of culpability and sanctioning (i.e., legal liability), but also by creating an opportunity in which wider concerns about business practices or policy can be raised (Knight & Roper, 2009). As we will illustrate below, such questions and concerns relate to the complex notion of “ownership” pertaining to the chain of causality leading up to harmful events and the distribution of responsibility for them. At what point in the “food chain” did the problems arise, and which actors are to blame? In this sense, crises are about much more than the presence of “objective” circumstances that indicate something may be wrong—they are fundamentally about the “social relations of definition” (Beck, 1992) through which meanings about putative problem conditions arise. In the case of the listeriosis outbreak, different social actors intervened as claims-makers in the emerging discourse in an effort to establish the dominant frame of impact and implications: they sought to determine what was wrong, who was to blame, and who should be held accountable.
Trust, confidence, and faceless commitments

Luhmann’s (1985) distinction between cognitive and normative expectations provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding how corporations respond to crisis situations (Holmström, 2003; Knight & Roper, 2009). Luhmann argues that when an organization finds itself in a situation that presents a range of possible alternative courses of action, norms are required to specify expectations and coordinate behaviours. He identifies cognitive expectations as those based upon scientific reasoning (e.g., best evidence–based practices), in which expectations can be legitimately changed or dropped if the reality turns out to be different than what was initially anticipated. For example, if subsequent testing in Maple Leaf’s Bartor Road processing plant showed levels of exposure to be far below the scientifically agreed upon threshold of acceptable risk, then we should no longer expect the company to suspend business from the plant where the outbreak occurred. “Cognitive thinking,” Knight & Roper argue, “is open to learning based on a more or less dispassionate assessment of problematic events; it is oriented to finding solutions and improving performance rather than finding fault” (2009, n.p.). Normative expectations, in contrast, always attempt to gloss over and, where possible, to ignore disappointment. When we say that harms disrupt or contravene expectations, we are talking not in cognitive but normative terms, because harms are “assumed to be illegitimate and in need of the kind of explanation that concerns questions of validity and justification . . . Normative thinking is about judging others, settling accounts, exposing where blame lies, and denouncing illegitimate conduct and those responsible for it” (Knight & Roper, 2009, n.p.).

Crisis management thus involves a process whereby the organization utilizes different communicative techniques to realign its identity and reputation with the normative expectation of consumers and other stakeholders. In other words, it is all about the re-establishment of trust. Giddens (1990) argues that in an increasingly complex and differentiated world, trust is more rare, more uncertain, and thus more valuable; because risk is endemic to everyday life, social, political, and economic relations are always tenuous and therefore subject to processes of problematization. For Giddens, “trust is related to absence in time and in space . . . [It] always carries the connotation of reliability in the face of contingent outcomes, whether these concern the actions of individuals or the operation of systems” (1990, pp. 33-35).

In many ways, the problem of trust, and the response strategies developed and applied by organizations to address the fragility or absence of trust, are oriented toward restoring consumer confidence. Seligman (1997) argues that trust is always personal, whereas confidence is institutional—while we can trust individuals, we can only ever have confidence in institutions. For Giddens (1990), trust is a type of confidence that necessitates two kinds of commitments: “facework commitments” are more commonly found in traditional societies—they are maintained and expressed through physical co-presence between individuals who know one another and whose ability to navigate a world fraught with dangers and risks depends on mutual trust and understanding. “Faceless commitments,” in contrast, are a product of the differentiation and complexity of social life that
is a key feature of late modernity. As interpersonal relations of trust become more contingent, Giddens argues, we increasingly invest faceless commitments into abstract systems: “[F]aith is sustained in the workings of knowledge of which the lay person is largely ignorant” (1990, p. 88). To illustrate, we may not know why the peppers, apples, or tomatoes we buy from our grocery stores remain so brightly coloured year round, yet we have confidence in the grocer, the food producer, and the regulator to ensure that the products we are purchasing will be safe. Our trust in the abstract system of food production takes the form of a faceless commitment.

Despite the apparent “blind faith” we place in expert systems, Giddens notes that our lack of knowledge and understanding about the complex configurations of social life inevitably creates grounds for skepticism, caution, and processes of problematization (see also Beck, 1992). Experts may enjoy a special kind of power and influence over knowledge and understanding in modern societies, but this is always precarious and subject to change when crises arise. Giddens describes these critical moments as “access points” in which the confidence in abstract systems can be rendered vulnerable or eroded altogether. “Attitudes of trust, or lack of trust,” he argues, “are liable to be strongly influenced by experiences at access points . . . The fact that access points are places of tension between lay skepticism and professional expertise makes them acknowledged sources of vulnerability” (1990, pp. 90-91). We argue that the listeriosis outbreak is a good example of an access point where the tensions between lay skepticism and expert knowledge are brought to the surface.

The persistence of faceless commitments suggests that corporate appeals to our desire for basic trust will be required to ensure we do not live in a continuous state of heightened anxiety. This helps to explain why in crisis situations, corporations will often appeal directly to the normative expectations of consumers rather than to just their cognitive expectations for accurate and reliable information. This tactic may arguably amount to little more than a simulation of a facework commitment (efforts to construct a personal connection between the organization and the anxious consumer), yet when communicated effectively, even simulated facework (performed contrition, acknowledged guilt, and acceptance of responsibility) can overcome the problems that arise in societies marked by the ubiquity of faceless commitments.

**Corporate apologia and conspicuous apologetics**

In his study of apology, Hearit argues that “one of the oldest compulsions of the human condition” is the “need to extricate oneself from unfavourable circumstance” (1995, p. 2). In Plato’s defence of Socrates (*Apology*) and the Apostle Paul’s defence of the gospel (Philippians 1:7, 16), an apologia involved the delivery of a formal speech in reply to a specific set of charges. More commonly today, the term “apology” refers to a plea for forgiveness that involves defensible speech, but which can also imply admissions of guilt or wrongdoing—it may contain elements of defence or explanation, but it is oriented toward absolution as much as justification.

In early analyses of organizational responses to crisis, scholars focused on the use of apologia as a strategy for reputational defence in the face of intense
criticism. Examining high-profile examples of politicians who were forced to defend their actions (e.g., Adlai Stevenson, Richard Nixon, Ted Kennedy, et al.), Ware and Linkugel (1973) draw on *apologia* strategies to understand how damaged professional reputations can be salvaged. They argue that crises threaten reputations and that actors could use apologia to defend and restore their reputations. Walter Cronkite’s famous accusation of price gouging and creative profiteering by Mobil Oil and other big petroleum companies led Mobil (which perceived itself to be unfairly targeted by Cronkite) to launch a multi-million dollar PR campaign. This campaign featured a combination of denial and attack by claiming not only that the CBS report was inaccurate and misleading, but also claiming that the news network refused to provide viewers full information about how gas prices were calculated. In a two-page advertisement placed in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, and several other major U.S. daily newspapers, Mobil denied the charges against it and expressed “regret” that the biggest casualty in the affair was “the public’s understanding of important issues” (Dionisopolous & Vibbert, 1988, p. 245). Knight and Greenberg (2002) show how in the face of mounting public criticism about its use of sweatshop labour, the global footwear and apparel company Nike initially denied charges against it by stating it had been unfairly targeted by activists who had an axe to grind and who were relying on incomplete and inaccurate information. Nike then attempted to displace blame by scapegoating other actors (i.e., subcontractors in developing countries), operating within its commodity chains (see also Boje, 1999).

In contrast to Mobil’s claims of unfair targeting and Nike’s strategy of denial and displacement, Maple Leaf Foods’ response to the listeriosis crisis was immediate and highly visible. Company President and CEO Michael H. McCain apologized in press conferences, in newspaper and television advertisements, and on the corporate website. A TV spot featured a concerned McCain, who explained:

> When listeria was discovered in the product, we launched immediate recalls to get it off the shelf, then we shut the plant down. Tragically our products have been linked to illnesses and loss of life. To Canadians who are ill and to the families who have lost loved ones, I offer my deepest sympathies. Words cannot begin to express our sadness for your pain . . .

> But this week, our best efforts failed and we are deeply sorry. This is the toughest situation we have faced in 100 years as a company. We know this has shaken your confidence in us; I commit to you that our actions are guided by putting your interests first (Maple Leaf Foods, 2008).

The Toronto-based PR firm Veritas Communications called McCain’s decision to accept responsibility—without equivocation—a “bold, breathtaking communications play” (Veritas Communications, 2008). McCain’s emotional public apology was premised entirely on accountability, irrespective of the financial costs to his company. As media coverage informed readers that total direct costs of the recall were estimated at $25 to $30 million, and class action lawsuits (involving more than 5,000 complainants) were being set in motion, McCain firmly announced, “[c]ertainly knowing there’s a desire to assign blame, I want to reit-
erate that the buck stops right here” (quoted in Shaw, 2008, p. 15). McCain’s con-
trition, it should be noted, is consistent with what Hearit and Brown (2004) de-
scribe as an act of self-mortification, a communicative move that is not unusual in corporate crisis response (see also Hearit, 2006; Tavuchis, 1991). Rather than denying culpability or transferring blame to other actors, Maple Leaf accepted its guilt and sought forgiveness, arguing that while its standards of prac-
tice had been breached, this was not representative of the corporation’s identity or its standards of business practice.

McCain’s conspicuous apologetics thus became the means to bridge the legitimacy gap that developed as a consequence of the listeriosis outbreak. Moral responsibility irrespective of cost, McCain demonstrated, was the only frame through which to deal with transgressions of food safety and public trust. Yet the very reason this conspicuous apologetics succeeded was because McCain’s apol-
ogy was not generally viewed as a PR strategy. It had nothing to do with the performance gap that would doubtless colour shareholder expectations; it was the legitimacy gap that mattered.

Quite contrary to the labelling of McCain’s response as a “communications play,” McCain’s apology worked precisely because there appeared to be no “play” in motion—just sympathy, regret, and a promise to do better. Folkes and Whang (2003) argue that corporations deal with their own harm-doing by putting “the spin” on action and generating accounts. Accounts “explain an offense to an audience by justifying it, excusing it, refusing to accept responsibility for it, or conceding to having committed it” (p. 79). Maple Leaf Foods’ account, however, sought no justification, excuse, refusal, or concession. Part of the conspicuous apologetics was that the account was strictly that of accountability. “Collectively, we just tried to figure out what was the ‘right thing to do’ in the middle of this terrible sit-
uation,” McCain explained to the Globe and Mail. “It really isn’t about a compli-
cated strategy. We have a highly principled set of values in our company, and they guided us throughout, including putting consumers first and being clear and accepting responsibility” (“Maple Leaf CEO McCain Took Your Questions,” 2008). McCain’s response illustrates what Karl Meyer classifies as the highest, and least common, act of contrition, “the bareheaded bow,” in which the “lords of power bow their heads” in a gesture that is far removed from the typical rhetoric of “mistakes were made” or the search for scapegoats (Meyer, 2004, p. 110)—both of which tend to characterize modern forms of contrition and atonement.

McCain’s accountability, his bareheaded bow, was embraced “with pretty much universal praise” (Veritas Communications, 2008) by the mainstream media, PR industry observers, and within the blogosphere. Marketing magazine praised Maple Leaf’s apology as “the new textbook example of crisis manage-
ment” (Brent, 2008, p. 6), and communication management professor Terry Flynn labelled the response “authentic crisis leadership”—a highly charged phrase that suggests crisis responses are somehow “less” authentic and less about “leadership” than spin (Flynn, 2009). In the press, the National Post ran an article titled “On Road to Recovery: Maple Leaf Lauded for Genuine Empathy in Managing Crisis” (Shaw, 2008), while on August 28, 2008, the CBC posted a story online, “How Maple Leaf Foods Is Handling the Listeria Outbreak,” that
applauded Maple Leaf’s response to the crisis, placing it in contrast to the August 10, 2008, Sunrise Propane plant explosion in North York, Ontario, a disaster in which the company sought to minimize its visibility in order to avoid “create[ing] problems for themselves later if there are legal proceedings” (“How Maple Leaf,” 2008). Peter Lapinskie, a reporter with the Daily Observer in Pembroke, Ontario, characterized McCain’s “candour” as a “refreshing” performance, when “his contemporaries would have scurried behind spin doctors and legal eagles” (quoted in Owram, 2008). The blogosphere also contained nods of support. BarfBlog, a blog focused on “musings about food safety,” observed on August 24, 2008, that despite the “harsh words” of certain critics, “McCain and Maple Leaf deserve praise for their risk communication efforts” (Powell, 2008). Dave Fleet, a Toronto-based communications professional, stated on his blog that even in the face of so much death, “from a crisis communications perspective, it’s difficult to see where Maple Leaf Foods has put a foot wrong” (Fleet, 2008). And Bernard Gauthier’s blog on PR and persuasion also observed the “powerful” nature of the corporate apology, observing: “This is a campaign about people, loved ones and deep and sincere sympathy—gutsy language that too many organizations shy away from” (Gauthier, 2008).

What all of this media coverage revealed was that McCain’s social display of contrition could work to defuse hostility directed at the company due to its demonstration of more noble values—ethics, accountability, and responsibility. Maple Leaf may have failed, but its reputation (and thus its corporate identity, its brand value) seemed relatively secure. In a CBC Radio interview in September 2008, Heather Forbes from Maple Leaf’s Consumer Affairs department explained that a hotline set up to address consumer queries and concerns “received more than 47,000 calls within the two-week span, including many calls of support” (quoted in Cooper, 2008, p. 7). This support was also echoed on the CBC website, where many reader postings (relating to coverage of the crisis) showed empathy and support for the company. For instance, Catherine F. wrote (August 28, 2008), in a post that was representative:

Don’t you just love those who love to hate corporations, no matter how good a corporate citizen they have been . . . Maple leaf [sic] is a strong well run company, this is the first time they have had a problem in 100 years. Get off your high horses, for god sakes . . . this could happen anywhere.

Similarly, Allan Yeates wrote:

To all the posters who (as usual) are over-reacting calm down! . . . Accidents, mishaps and the like happen in EVERY human enterprise!!! Mr. McCain has done the right thing accepting responsibility for what has occurred and has taken the necessary steps to remedy the problems at the facility . . . I have no problem eating Maple Leaf products . . .

Certainly not all the posts were supportive. However, many did voice support. Indeed, three separate national surveys of 4,600 Canadians (conducted between August 2008 and January 2009) revealed that Canadians who viewed the Maple
Leaf “apologies” had a substantially higher “good opinion ranking” (74%) than those who did not (63%) (Flynn, 2009). Interestingly, this “good opinion ranking” stemming from McCain’s conspicuous apologetics had an unintended consequence—namely, the tendency to not want to affix sole responsibility on the company. If blame was to be laid, and there was certainly a desire to do so, it was to be directed elsewhere.

We have suggested that conspicuous apologetics presents a “new” communication strategy, which stands apart from standard PR responses to crises. Yet being visible and acknowledging responsibility and regret is not an atypical crisis communication response (Hearit, 2006). So what makes Maple Leaf’s conspicuous apologetics new or different? The core difference, we argue, has to do with speed, accountability without equivocation, transparency, adherence to higher principles (beyond and regardless of money), and the complete negation of power relations, as embodied in the concept of the bareheaded bow. Unlike Nike’s initial denial and its (long after the fact) admission that “mistakes were made” or Mobil Oil’s attempt to spread blame—and unlike the largely “faceless” companies responsible for the E. coli-contaminated spinach, cheese, hamburgers, et cetera—McCain and Maple Leaf were front and centre, claiming sole ownership of the problem and its repercussions.

Transparency meant there was no attempt to put a “spin” on the event; McCain’s personal, emotional apology made the bareheaded bow that of a person and not a corporation. He did not witness the tragedy from behind a shiny desk in a corporate boardroom; McCain’s television spots showed him in the company lobby or in what appeared to be his home, and always in the garb of the common man (pressed blue shirts, not power suits), demonstrating that McCain was not performing power in his apology. As previously noted, Seligman (1997) argues that trust is always personal, while confidence is institutional (i.e., we can trust individuals but can only have confidence in institutions). The public response to the apology was based, largely, on the personal response to McCain. This personal trust allowed for the rebuilding of confidence in Maple Leaf food products.

Conspicuous apologetics, of course, also pivots on conspicuousness. The apology is not of the “blink and you missed it” variety. It requires visibility across various platforms and also extends across time, with frequent, regular updates. Branding expert Ted Matthews was quoted in Marketing magazine as “being impressed with the company’s newspaper-to-YouTube-to-TV approach. I’m not sure I remember someone doing television commercials and [responding] as quickly as they have . . .” (quoted in Brent, 2008, p. 6). The company also had a consumer hotline, arranged for countless interviews with McCain, and invited television news teams into the processing plant (after closing it down), illustrating where and how the outbreak occurred, and how the machines in question were completely dismantled. As such, speed, accountability without equivocation, transparency, adherence to higher principles, and a bareheaded bow by the person at the “top”—along with conspicuousness across platforms and over time—makes the conspicuous apologetic what it is.

“The buck stops . . .” where? Blame and the politics of apology

An interesting corollary emerged as a consequence of McCain’s conspicuous
apologetics: because no time or energy was required to make Maple Leaf accept responsibility; because McCain’s claim to accountability was absolute and unmitigated; and because the apology was purportedly about principles and people (not profit), the company’s treatment of the tragedy was seemingly beyond reproach. No energy was required to force the company into accepting responsibility because it assumed it fully. Sympathy directed toward the company, however, meant there was a parallel string of accusations of “who else was to blame.” Unions representing meat inspectors and other critics claimed that the outbreak resulted from government cutbacks to meat inspection services; senior politicians from opposition parties blamed the government for aggressively pursuing a deregulation agenda under pressure from industry; and industry analysts debated whether food processing today places consumers in harm’s way more than it did in the past. Without question, the abundance of finger pointing was heightened due to the fact that the crisis occurred in the midst of the 2008 federal election campaign, and opposition parties used the crisis as a vehicle to point to failures in political leadership and the government’s apparent agenda to transfer increased power over meat inspection from the state to industry.

Aware that public relations problems come into mediated existence only when some individual or group “makes an issue” (Hearit, 2006, p. 6) of the difficulty, Maple Leaf Foods’ press conference immediately after the outbreak had McCain declaring that his company’s best efforts had failed, not the regulators or the Canadian food safety system. As we have argued above, Maple Leaf’s response was fundamentally about managing the immediacy of a legitimacy crisis that required a re-establishment of consumer trust. In this sense, the apology was geared toward assuaging concerns within civil society—but, we argue, it was also a strategy that allowed the company to anticipate the problems it may face elsewhere and later on, notably within the state and market. McCain’s bold assertion that “the buck stops here” was thus not only an act of contrition for the benefit of consumers (how it was framed by the company, mainstream media, and bloggers); crucially, it was also a nod to a government whose legislative and regulatory capacity was being scrutinized, and to its major market stakeholders (e.g., McDonald’s, Costco, Loblaws, et cetera), whose own corporate identities and reputations were placed at risk by association. Addressing the prospective actions of the state and market stakeholders was an especially high priority given that influential critics (including the prestigious Canadian Medical Association Journal) were all blaming the Conservative government’s recent changes to how processed meat products are monitored—changes that gave corporations like Maple Leaf Foods a much wider berth of control and autonomy over its operations (Attaran et al., 2008).

There is no question that the listeriosis outbreak was a tragedy for the individuals and families affected by serious illness and loss of life; but it was also a crisis for the company and the industry itself. Yet, from the perspective of corporate communication, organizational crises are not intrinsically negative forces but can actually lead to positive outcomes (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). As a unique period in the history of an organization, a crisis is both a period of danger and a time of strategic transformation (Hay, 2002). Yet crisis periods are just
this—periods that must be acknowledged and from which organizations must seek transition for business to resume and reputation to recover. In their work, t’Hart and Boin (2001) refer to this period as “the crisis after the crisis”—it is the moment when the crisis moves from what happened in the organization to what may happen to the organization.

This aftermath period thus becomes a time when the crisis event can be re-framed as a more general issue for concern and amelioration among multiple parties that can absolve the offending organization of sole responsibility (see Knight & Greenberg, 2003). Jacques (2009) describes this process as entailing a shift away from crisis to issues management, although he is clear in arguing that the relationship between crises and issues is rarely linear but cyclical. Where crisis management is the attempt to control information and allay negative public reaction when sudden and dramatic change occurs in an organization’s environment, issues management entails the pre-emptive attempt to control the public policy process in a way that minimizes interference in corporate structure and functioning by outside actors (e.g., Heath, 1988). In other words, issues management is about maximizing autonomy and the ability to act in an environment that consists of multiple parties (regulators, consumers, competitors, et al.) who have differential claims on the corporation’s conduct. We argue that Maple Leaf Foods’ decision to accept full responsibility for the listeriosis outbreak and to absolve other actors of blame represents a desire to not only “do the right thing,” but also, in strategic terms, to preserve its autonomy in the marketplace. Thus, rather than pointing to others as evidence that the problem might be systemic rather than particularistic, Maple Leaf pointed to itself and called on critics to do the same. At least rhetorically, Maple Leaf chose to approach the need for resolution from the perspective of internal decision-making rather than through processes that would likely become subject to the dynamics of organizational politics (i.e., of negotiation and compromise).

Conclusion

A review of the crisis management literature illustrates a proliferation of corporate crises and apologies in recent decades. Although the nature of events at the heart of crises and the responses to them vary, there is no question that more corporations are finding themselves in situations where they are forced to react to problems of their own making or to defend themselves from the criticisms levied by others (Hearit, 2006).

When a corporation (or indeed any formal organization) is alleged to have committed wrongdoing, they face a fairly limited range of possible responses. They can claim they did not do it; they can argue that somebody else did it; or they can accept responsibility and acknowledge their role and seek forgiveness. Most corporations accused of such violations typically adopt either the first or second response in order to defend their identities and reputations from what they perceive to be an unforgiving and unforgetting media and public. Even when corporate actors acknowledge responsibility, they often express only “regret” that events have occurred and led to disappointments without fully accepting blame, let alone admitting fault and promising redress. A sincere apology, however, must do more than just articulate concern that wrongdoing has been committed—
it must also communicate an understanding of the event’s impacts and promise to make things right again. To “stand naked and guilty before the offended party” (Hearit, 2006, p. 31) introduces great risk because a confirmation of guilt is always going to be reputation damaging. Yet in terms of communication and the requirements to manage crisis, it is a step that must be taken if the guilty party is to salvage its reputation and restore trust.

In the face of the worst outbreak of listeriosis in the world, and the biggest crisis to ever confront Maple Leaf Foods, CEO Michael McCain demonstrated in his public statements and promises on behalf of his company a “proper regard for the process of correction” (Goffman, 1971, p. 100): he unflinchingly accepted responsibility for the outbreak, apologized sincerely to his customers, and expressed a commitment to set things right. His apology illustrates how communication can generate widespread support even after an error with tragic consequences has occurred. The conspicuous apologetics that we theorize in this paper is different from other rhetorical expressions of redress (in which blame is denied, hidden, or diffused over multiple parties—or where the apology comes months, years, decades, or centuries after the fact). It shows that apology is a symbolic and ritualistic act of contrition designed to repair damaged relations of trust and to realign the identity of the organization with the normative expectations of its stakeholders (Hearit, 2006; Knight & Roper, 2009; Tavuchis, 1991).

The food industry today is deeply implicated in the global economy. Globalization has precipitated a “world risk society” (Beck, 1992) in which latent functions and unintended by-products rebound onto the system that gave rise to them in the form of crises whose situational uniqueness cannot be ensured in either a practical or discursive sense (Knight & Greenberg, 2003). The upshot of this is that the event that is at the heart of a crisis becomes subject to a struggle over whether it is a typical or atypical condition of the social system. The focus of crisis communication strategies, and the use of apology (whether delivered with sincerity or to advance instrumental interests), is on repairing and restoring corporate reputation in the face of the public, and deflecting or defusing demands for legal or legislative sanctions. As we have argued above, the Maple Leaf Foods strategy succeeded (at least in the short term) because the apology enabled the company to meet the normative expectations of consumers and to deflect causal blame away from other actors whose power and interests enabled them to potentially claw back the company’s operational autonomy and impact its market position. Nevertheless, these are very long-term issues that will always be subject to further processes of problematization—it remains to be seen whether Maple Leaf Foods’ strategy succeeded beyond the point of rhetorical action.

Acknowledgments
The authors thank Graham Knight, Kim Sawchuk, Barbara Reynolds, and the reviewers appointed by the Journal for their feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

Notes
1. The alert also threatened to set off a potential political crisis for the ruling Conservative Party as the outbreak occurred in the midst of a federal election campaign during which time the minister responsible was accused of acting in poor taste when he joked that the outbreak might cause the government to die “a death by a thousand cold cuts.” See, for example, “Minister Faces Calls for Resignation” (2008).
2. Cronkite’s report focused on Mobil although it also discussed the questionable practices of other corporations. In response, Mobil focused its apologetic on CBS Evening News, although nearly every major newspaper and broadcaster in the country reported the same story.

3. Although Nike would later accept responsibility for righting the wrongs of its labour practices, it never fully acknowledged its culpability or accepted blame for the violations that had occurred (see Knight & Greenberg, 2002).

4. Dave Fleet is a senior consultant with the communications firm Thornley Fallis; Bernard Gauthier is CEO of Delta Media, an Ottawa-based public relations agency. Both blogs are regularly read by public relations professionals, journalists, and PR industry observers.

References


Maple Leaf CEO. McCain took your questions. [online]. URL: [http://business.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20081201.rmdiscussion] [December 2, 2008].


