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**MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL IMPRESSIONS IN  
CRISIS SITUATIONS: EXXON CORPORATION AND  
THE EXXON VALDEZ OIL SPILL**

Kathleen J. Tierney  
Gary R. Webb

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**Kathleen J. Tierney**

**Gary R. Webb**

**Disaster Research Center**

**Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice**

**University of Delaware**

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## Managing Organizational Impressions in Crisis Situations:

### Exxon Corporation and the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill

#### Abstract

Like individuals, organizations engage in impression management; occasionally they also must cope with stigma arising from their mistakes. We apply these ideas to public performances made by representatives of the Exxon corporation following the disastrous Exxon Valdez oil spill. Using a grounded theory approach, we identify four types of "image salvaging" strategies Exxon representatives used in these performances: competence enhancement; information control; personalization; and redefinition of the event. Use of a dramaturgical framework helps explain how organizations achieve and maintain legitimacy in an institutional environment. At the same time, institutional theory sheds light on why some performances--namely those of highly institutionalized actors like corporations--are more effective than others.

#### Introduction

On Good Friday of 1989, the Exxon Valdez oil tanker ran aground at Bligh Reef in Alaska's Prince William sound, dumping eleven million gallons of oil into its pristine water. The oil spill, which would ultimately become the costliest environmental catastrophe in U. S. history, riveted the nation and became the focal point for a heated debate about the risks posed by oil transportation. The Exxon Corporation, which was responsible for

the accident, was widely denounced for its inept response and mismanagement of the clean-up. As Exxon and other emergency responders scrambled to ameliorate the environmental damage caused by the spill, Exxon representatives staged a series of public press conferences. In this paper, we argue that the press conferences, ostensibly conducted to provide factual information and to make corporate executives accessible to the media, can more appropriately be viewed as "performances" (Goffman, 1959). Using the extensive verbatim record produced in these encounters, we show that, not unlike individuals who are faced with managing and overcoming spoiled identities, Exxon used the public meetings as one vehicle for rehabilitating its spoiled organizational image.

The analysis presented here, which employs grounded theory techniques, draws heavily upon the work of Goffman (1959: 1963), but it differs from that work in two important ways. First, Goffman's concepts of impression management and stigma, originally developed to shed light on individual behavior, are applied here to the image-work done by an organization. Second, unlike the majority of the situations analyzed by Goffman, the performer-audience interactions considered here were undertaken in the absence of a working consensus; rather than accepting and facilitating Exxon's image-salvaging efforts, other press conference participants invariably contested the framing strategies used by organizational representatives.

The first section of the paper describes the oil spill and Exxon's response, emphasizing the ways in which its ineffective

handling of the accident jeopardized its organizational image. Next, we discuss this case in light of the literature on individual and organizational impression management. We then show how the data were analyzed and present a classification of the strategies Exxon used to rehabilitate its image.

### The Oil Spill

Just after midnight on March 24, 1989, the Exxon Valdez oil tanker ran into a reef in Alaska's Prince William Sound, dumping some 240,000 barrels (11 million gallons) of oil. When the tanker ran aground, an unlicensed third mate was at the controls. A subsequent investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board revealed that the captain of the ship, in his cabin at the time the ship hit the reef, had a blood alcohol content level that exceeded legal limits. In the summer of 1994, a Federal court jury determined that Exxon was reckless for permitting a captain with a know history of alcoholism to command a supertanker.

The spill impacted some 1,200 miles of coastline and ultimately killed tens of thousands of birds, nearly one thousand sea otters, and a number of seals, whales, and sea lions (Picou, Dill, Dyer, and Curry, 1992). The clean-up costs associated with the spill exceeded \$2 billion, and lawsuits seeking billions more in damages were filed. A Federal court ultimately ordered Exxon to pay \$5 billion in punitive damages.

The spill was also disastrous for commercial fishing, Alaska's second-largest industry. Local fisherman, seriously concerned about their economic prospects, were present and very vocal at all

the press conferences held in the days following the spill. They also sued Exxon, and in August of 1994 the corporation was ordered by a Federal court to pay \$286.8 million in compensatory damages for losses fisherman suffered as a result the spill.

While the spill itself threatened to discredit Exxon's public image, the delayed and confused emergency response only compounded the organization's problems. Subsequent studies have documented the lack of intra- and interorganizational coordination that characterized the response (Clarke, 1990; Gramling and Freudenburg, 1990; Harrald, Marcus, and Wallace, 1990; Harrald, Cohn, and Wallace, 1992). Although on paper there were five contingency plans in place to deal with such an event, the initial response was ineffective and critical resources were unavailable. The Federal, state, and corporate response networks that evolved after the spill did not conform to any of the organizational structures anticipated in their contingency plans, and it took over three weeks for a functioning decision-making organization to develop. Because of the lack of coordination among responding agencies, a 72-hour window of opportunity in the immediate wake of the spill, during which effective mechanical removal of the oil from the surface of the water might have been possible, was missed. A storm developed Sunday night, ruling out use of mechanical techniques. Another window of opportunity presented itself for about a week after that storm, but again, lack of coordination caused that opportunity to pass, and less than 5% of the spilled oil was contained, burned, or dispersed during that period.

At the time the spill occurred, the only barge available for transporting booms to block the spread of oil was in drydock for repairs, and boom equipment was stored in a warehouse where it was mixed with other gear. By the time the equipment became available, booming the spill was futile. Only 4,000 gallons of oil dispersant were stored in Valdez on the day of the accident, not nearly enough to handle a large spill.

The record suggests that even under the best of circumstances it is unlikely that Exxon would have been able to avert the catastrophe, since it is virtually impossible to recover oil spilled in marine accidents. Clarke (1990: 65) characterizes the emergency response period following the Exxon spill as "a drama in which the main characters played out their roles according to the script for an elaborate charade--the pretense that a major oil spill can be controlled." Clarke argues that plans for handling a major oil spill like the one that occurred in the Port of Valdez were essentially "fantasy documents" used by organizations to create the impression that they are in control of what are essentially uncontrollable situations.

Clearly, the oil spill was a potential financial and public relations catastrophe for Exxon. In the wake of the spill, Exxon faced major governmental probes, the possibility of billions of dollars in civil lawsuits, boycotts and protests by people outraged by the environmental damage caused by the spill, and the potential for a cascade of other negative consequences, including stock market losses and stricter regulation of the oil transport

industry. To avert or contain these undesirable outcomes, along with responding to the spill Exxon would also have to move expeditiously to begin rehabilitating a tainted organizational image.

#### Organizational Management of Spoiled Identity

Goffman (1959; 1963) has described and analyzed the ways in which individuals cope with spoiled identities and manage impressions to foster a favorable image of themselves among various audiences. Part of this process involves the development of performances that neutralize or overcome two types of stigmatizing information, which Goffman termed discrediting and discreditable. Discrediting information is immediately apparent to others and is dealt with through tension management strategies that downplay the significance of noticeable stigma. Discreditable information, on the other hand, is potentially harmful but not immediately apparent to others. The threat of exposure is typically handled through information control that prevents audience members from acquiring the damaging information.

Although Goffman's work was fundamentally concerned with how individuals manage spoiled identities (often in particular organizational contexts), his concepts and strategies can also be applied to the behavior of organizations, since organizational entities, like individuals, have images to maintain. Major corporations like Exxon have long considered it important to be perceived as "good citizens;" image-building activities such as corporate philanthropy, foundation sponsorship, and arts patronage

in the U. S. date back at least to the time of the Robber Barons. Modern corporate entities routinely engage in a range of self-promoting activities, launching elaborate advertising and public relations campaigns, sponsoring major art exhibits and media events, and linking their names with important cultural and sporting events. By cultivating positive images, major corporations seek to produce a reservoir of good will that can be drawn upon to further organizational goals and counteract potential threats to corporate autonomy and profits. New subfields like issues management and corporate crisis communication have emerged because of the importance of image for corporate operations (Heath and Nelson, 1986; Gottschalk, 1993.)

Recently, researchers have begun to explicitly apply the impression management framework to organizational behavior. For example, Morgan, Frost, and Pondy argue that (1983: 20)

Organizations are preeminently involved with the business of impression management, in relation to the general public, other corporations, consumers, employees, government and other significant actors capable of influencing their well being.

Similarly, Giacalone and Beard (1994: 625) note that

...individuals as well as organizations present themselves in ways that are consistent with the impressions they seek to achieve (e.g., highlight their strengths and virtues) and distance themselves from

events, attributes, and people that are antithetical to those images.

While acknowledging the importance of impression management, the bulk of this literature offers little clarification on how organizations accomplish this task. Most existing research has applied the impression management framework to understanding individual behavior within organizations, focusing, for example, on employees' use of verbal and nonverbal displays to manage impressions in the workplace (Gardner and Martinko, 1988; Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 1989; Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 1991) and on employee relations in multicultural settings (Rosenfeld, Giacalone, and Riordan, 1994). A few studies have explicitly addressed organizational efforts to manage the impressions conveyed to outside publics, suggesting for example that organizations use letters to shareholders and annual reports to shape corporate images (Russ, 1991); that they attempt to attribute unfavorable outcomes to external, uncontrollable causes and favorable outcomes to internal, stable causes (Staw, McKechnie, and Puffer, 1983); and that they attempt to depict managers as in control of past events (Salancik and Meindl, 1984).

Within this group, a handful of studies have focused specifically on organizational impression management during crisis situations. Allen and Caillouet (1994), analyzing the impression management efforts of a corporation involved in controversies over its environmental record, found that the company consistently used particular communication strategies, such as ingratiation,

denouncement, and justification, in statements directed at various stakeholders, such as government agencies, competitors, the media, and the general public. Certain groups (e.g., regulators) were targeted more than others, and different communicative strategies were used with different stakeholders. Sutton and Callahan (1987) looked at how high-level managers in four firms dealt with the stigma and spoiled image that accompanies corporate bankruptcy. Five stigma-management strategies were identified: attempting to conceal the bankruptcy; defining, or persuading audiences that the bankruptcy is not the discrediting occurrence it seems to be; denying responsibility; accepting responsibility; and withdrawing. Elsbach and Sutton (1992) studied how social movement organizations that regularly used disruptive and illegitimate tactics employed various organizational and communicative strategies to shape impressions and gain legitimacy and support for their goals.

Using a similar approach, we applied Goffman's concepts of techniques of impression management and spoiled identities to the Exxon oil spill case, focusing on the specific strategies Exxon used to convey a positive image of the organization following the accident. That event required Exxon representatives to deal with both discrediting and discreditable information. On the one hand, the oil spill itself was obvious to an enormous national and worldwide audience, requiring Exxon officials to devise tension management strategies that would minimize the discrediting consequences of the spill. On the other hand, while the root causes of the spill were not immediately known, news of the

captain's absence from the bridge and of his drinking problems was widely disseminated, and the findings of the NTSB investigation, discreditable information, would likely further stigmatize Exxon. Exxon also had to find ways of neutralizing the potential damaging consequences of its apparent inability to respond expeditiously and effectively to the growing crisis.

#### Data and Methods

One of Exxon's major strategies for coping with threats to its image involved appearances at press conferences in Valdez immediately following the spill. Exxon was generally represented either by Frank Iarossi, the President of Exxon Shipping, or by the manager of the Exxon corporate office in Anchorage. These two individuals (particularly Mr. Iarossi, who spoke more frequently) functioned as Exxon's principal "service specialists," Goffman's term for persons who specialize in the construction, repair, and maintenance of performances. The fact that Exxon chose to be represented by relatively high-ranking officials underscores the importance of these press conferences as a strategy for rehabilitating Exxon's image in the eyes of the public.<sup>1</sup>

Starting the day after the oil spill occurred, daily press conferences were held, sometimes two per day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, for approximately two weeks. The press conferences were attended not only by representatives of the media, but by many other groups, including government officials, local fishermen, townspeople, and representatives of environmental groups. The audience was far from passive, and, as we discuss in

more detail later in the paper, the presence of these diverse groups often made for a very contentious atmosphere.

Typically, one or both of the service specialists would begin the conference by providing an update for attendees. They would then take questions from the audience; these question-and-answer sessions resulted in confrontational exchanges (see discussion below). Over time, the press conferences became routinized, with the Exxon representatives often beginning their performances in the style of television talk-show hosts, with statements like "Welcome to day fifteen."

We obtained and transcribed tapes of 19 press conferences that Exxon held during the oil spill crisis. While other documentary material, such as the transcripts of the Congressional hearings that were later held, were also available, we chose to focus this analysis only on the press conference transcripts for several reasons. First, these public performances were the first and thus the most important opportunity Exxon had for controlling damage to its organizational image. If Exxon could be perceived as doing everything it could to ameliorate the negative effects of the spill--and equally importantly, if the corporation could be seen as competent and in control of events--then it might possibly avert future negative consequences, such as additional unwanted regulation of its activities. Second, other research (Martinko, 1991; Heath and Nelson, 1986; Russ, 1991) suggests that crisis situations provide important opportunities for observing impression management, because at those times audiences are most attentive.

Obviously, the public at large was most attuned to events in Alaska while emergency operations were still ongoing and the national media were there in numbers to cover the spill. Finally, settings like Congressional hearings are more formally staged, controlled events that demand greater cooperation between audiences and performers, while the press conferences discussed here reveal how the organization sought to manage impressions in situations over which it had relatively little control.

The transcript data were coded using techniques similar to those outlined in discussions of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The transcripts were first read to obtain an idea of what organizational representatives were trying to convey about Exxon and its management of the spill during the press conferences. At this point, it immediately became clear that in addition to providing factual information on what the organization was doing to manage the spill, the Exxon representatives were also struggling to present their organization in a positive light and to deflect further criticism. As coding progressed, it became apparent that while Exxon's goal was always to salvage its image in the face of discrediting and discreditable information, these attempts did not always assume the same form.

In the course of the coding process, we identified a core category underlying this activity, which we term organizational image-salvaging. Image-salvaging consists of efforts undertaken to convey positive impressions to the public and reduce stigma

resulting from organizational conduct that is perceived as improper. Associated with this core category were a series of subcategories, or specific image-salvaging strategies, which the service specialists employed in different contexts. These strategies included competence enhancement, information control, personalization of the event, and redefinition of the event. In the section that follows, we discuss in detail how these strategies were used and the reactions they generated among press conference attendees.

#### Image-Salvaging in the Exxon Oil Spill Crisis

Competence Enhancement. Early in the emergency, in order to convey an image of competence and offset the growing impression that Exxon was not responding effectively to the spill, the service specialists stressed the organization's adaptability, confidence, and superior safety record:

...We are gaining confidence by the hour...We are constantly adjusting to upsets and disappointments, equipment breakdowns, much higher winds than we anticipated, total shut down of helicopter operations. We've become a pretty hard bunch and we are adapting quickly to changes and circumstances. More importantly, in spite of all this, we believe we are gaining on some very critical aspects of this problem...we are addressing it with all the determination that we can.

In attempting to amplify perceptions of its competence, Exxon also portrayed itself as a corporation with an outstanding safety

record that was experiencing a short run of bad luck:

...So for about the past seventeen years we haven't had an incident like this. Unfortunately, this is the second one we've handled this month...so we've had seventeen good years, but this has not been our best month.

To further enhance the impression of competence, Exxon also tried in various ways to demonstrate that it was in control of the spill; on the second day of the incident, for example, the corporate representative stated, "Today is going to be a very important day for us in our struggle to control this situation." The ability to mobilize rapidly specialized equipment and clean-up experts was key to achieving this control. At the first press conference, the President of Exxon shipping assured the public that:

Exxon is mobilizing all of the resources available to mitigate the impact from this incident...we have mobilized experts from all over the U.S. and the UK...we were mobilizing by 6:30 in the morning everything we could get out hands on...we were going full out...I mean they were up and moving fast...

Later, Frank Iarossi described the equipment:

As of last night we had 67 cargo flight arrive in Alaska and they have brought in 1,750 tons of equipment. That is 3.5 million pounds of response equipment. We have 18 aircraft contracted to us, operating primarily out of the Valdez airport. We've deployed over 160,000 feet of boom and we have an additional 120,000 feet en route to Alaska.

The officials' use of positive, active language suggesting competence and control was crucial to Exxon's image-salvaging efforts. Although the organizational confusion and lack of communication that characterized the response were beginning to be well documented, Exxon defined its role in the response almost in heroic terms. In reply to an audience members' questions regarding the apparent organizational confusion, officials emphasized, "Exxon is cooperating fully;" "We are beginning to act like a team and that's very important;" and "I was very pleased to see Exxon and the Coast Guard, the City of Valdez, and the DEC all going forward working today."

Even when confronted by the audience with facts that pointed to organizational ineffectiveness in dealing with the spill, the representatives always struggled to present Exxon in the best possible light. For example, when asked by a member of the audience if it was fair to characterize the response as poor, an Exxon official replied, "No, I think the clean-up is going very well...It takes a while to get everything deployed and everything working."

Information Control. Goffman (1959) has emphasized the importance of information control as an impression management strategy. Audiences, Goffman stresses, must not acquire destructive information about the situation that is being defined for them, since such information could ruin the performance and stigmatize the performer. In the oil spill, Exxon tried to control the dissemination of information in two ways. The press

conferences themselves were one major method; by exerting control over the scheduling, frequency, and duration of the contacts that took place with the press and the public, Exxon was able to establish favorable ground rules for at least a portion of the discourse that was taking place around the issue of the oil spill. At these public conferences, the company representative would continually attempt to manage exchanges between Exxon and the press and public: "I will need to ask that we limit the press conference to about a half hour;" "I have time for about two or three more questions;" "One question at a time, or I am going to stop this press conference right now;" "I am doing my best here to keep a train of thought. I am trying to be helpful. If you don't want this information, I will sit back down."

Other groups did occasionally challenge Exxon's attempt to control these exchanges. At one point, for example, media representatives asked that the morning press conference be held earlier to allow journalists to make East Coast deadlines, and this request was granted.

A second commonly-used method of information control involved what Goffman refers to as strategic ambiguity. During the spill emergency, Exxon officials emphasized some information about the spill and the response, deemphasized other information, and made extensive efforts to omit discrediting information from the performance. However, audience members often challenged the use of these methods.

One key strategy Exxon representatives frequently used to create strategic ambiguity was to claim they lacked specialized knowledge or expertise; this enabled them to avoid discussing potentially discrediting topics in depth. A common answer to questions regarding the spill, its effects, and the clean-up was "I don't know; I'm not a specialist in that area." One audience member, dissatisfied with such demurrals, asked "Well, do you think that maybe tomorrow you could bring someone who does know something about that area?"

Information control also took place through the use of what Goffman terms crucial omissions. This strategy was particularly likely to be used when the questions that were asked could be construed as verging on what the NTSB was investigating. For example, when it was learned that standard procedure for such investigation involved the administration of blood alcohol tests to all crew members, audience members wanted to know the results of the tests. In response to such questions, Exxon representatives regularly replied that "It wouldn't be appropriate to discuss that now."

Personalization of the Event. During the press conferences, Exxon representatives took pains to create the impression that they were personally and directly involved with the crisis, both in their occupational roles and in terms of their emotions and private lives. Conversely, they sought to portray Exxon as an organization comprised of deeply concerned individuals who were all trying their best to mitigate the spill's effects. This personalization strategy

is not unlike Goffman's (1961; 1959) concepts of role embracement and dramaturgical loyalty. Role embracement occurs when an individual disappears completely into the self available in the situation. In this case, the message conveyed was that even the most essential Exxon employees were prepared to become totally committed to ameliorating the oil spill problem. At one point, for example, Frank Iarossi announced that the company would be renting him a house in the area, so that he could continue to oversee clean-up operations. In various statements, he shared his personal views with the audience: "Let me shift to feelings, my gut feelings, the feeling of my key people;" and "I would for the first time like to give you my personal assessment or judgment or feeling of where we stand and how things are going."

Goffman used the concept of dramaturgical loyalty to refer to performers who were completely committed to the performance at hand. In the following expressions of remorse, the speaker repeatedly uses the word "I" and seems prepared to assume personal responsibility for the spill, embodying that kind of loyalty to the performance: "On behalf of Exxon, I wish to express our regrets for the anxiety and the inconvenience caused by the grounding;" "I know we've just messed up everybody's Easter holiday enough;" and "I got to be honest with you, there is no way I can stop the oil from impacting more beach area...I obviously can't guarantee you that I am going to get the oil out of the vessel and that I am going to refloat the vessel."

Cleaning up the spill was represented as a personal quest for those involved, and personal involvement on the part of key officials was also used as an indication of the organization's deep commitment to resolving the crisis:

I have total authority to get this job done. There is no monetary limit on what I can do. There's no limit on my authority. I'm lifting planes into the air from all over the world. It's going to be a hell of a bill, but right now I'm not stopping to count.

Such performances served to create the impression that it wasn't a distant corporate entity, but rather personally-involved individual actors, who were taking responsibility for managing the situation. By implication, those criticizing the handling of the spill could be portrayed as personally attacking individuals who were only doing their best.

Redefining the Event. Throughout the crisis, Exxon officials went to considerable lengths to redefine the crisis in ways that involved less stigma for the corporation and that put the organization in the best possible light. Efforts at redefinition took various forms. First, attempts were made to recast the crisis as one that Exxon was in fact managing effectively. Rather than allowing the event to be defined as a disaster involving immense quantities of spilled oil that were ruining beaches and killing wildlife, Exxon repeatedly called attention to two other tasks it tried to define as equally important: keeping the oil that was still on the grounded ship from spilling and salvaging the wrecked

vessel---tasks that by its own definition the organization was performing well. Thus, while the press and an outraged public were focusing on the eleven million gallons of oil that had spilled, Exxon continued to assume an "It could have been worse" stance, focusing on all the oil that was still on the ship and that had not been spilled. For example, Frank Iarossi, stressing the importance of transferring the oil still on the vessel, emphasized that "We have a major problem with 240,000 barrels on the water. If it became 1,240,000 barrels we would have five times the problem."

However, Exxon faced a major dilemma in its efforts to redefine the event. On the one hand, to avoid accepting the widely-held and discrediting view that the spill was a genuine environmental disaster, Exxon had to downplay the seriousness of the event and emphasize its manageability:

...we are beginning to view this whole problem as an oil spill recovery problem and a ship salvage problem, rather than a catastrophe. I mean when we first came here, I have to tell you quite frankly, we were a little overwhelmed, but our focus is changing, our feeling is changing. We are now viewing it as doable segments.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Exxon officials also needed to define the event as a very serious incident that posed immense challenges, thereby explaining the organization's relatively slow and ineffective response. One way this was accomplished was through reference to outside contingencies that were beyond the corporation's control, such as the weather:

As you know, the weather was very uncooperative last night...As a result of the high winds, the FAA totally shut down helicopter operations...We were shut down because we couldn't get the helicopter control plane in the air...That wind is hampering us.

In addition to explaining why more wasn't being accomplished, such statements also served to cast Exxon in the role of a victim, subject to the whim of outside forces.

Exxon's redefinition efforts often sought resonance with strong cultural themes. Cultural analysts have pointed to the frequent use of sports metaphors in many aspects of American life, including politics and crisis situations such as war (Jansen and Sabo, 1994). Exxon relied extensively on sports imagery throughout the emergency, equating the oil spill response with a hard-fought athletic contest. Speaking of the clean-up effort as a football game, Iarossi explained that "In football terms, we are on the 10-yard line, but we've got the ball. We are moving forward. Ten yard line might not be much, but quite frankly the first 24 to 36 hours, we were in the goal line stand." A subsequent statement that "I am so happy we are moving forward rather than standing on the goal line," is another of many instances in which sports analogies were invoked.

In this recharacterization of the event, Exxon, rejecting the corporate criminal designation, depicted itself as a sports team facing a tough adversary and making headway against difficult odds. This use of sports metaphors helped Exxon draw upon a deep complex

of symbols and values that pervades contemporary social life.

#### Managing Impressions in the Absence of Consensus

In the previous section, we outlined four basic techniques Exxon used to neutralize the stigma of the Valdez oil spill: competence enhancement, information control, personalization, and redefinition. Goffman argues that through these sorts of performances and impression management strategies, performers and audiences typically achieve a working consensus. This consensus entails not only the performer's use of defensive tactics to maintain the impression being fostered, but also the audience's use of protective practices essential to the maintenance of the performance, such as tactfully not seeing slips made by the performer.

Goffman does acknowledge that such collaboration does not invariably occur. In certain crisis situations, for example, consensus can break down, and the audience may decide that it can no longer play the game. However, because Goffman was primarily interested in interaction characterized by consensus, he did not explore in depth the strategies that are used in situations where performance-audience collaboration is difficult or impossible to achieve.

The oil spill press conferences provide an opportunity to see how performers and audiences in conflict situations negotiate with one another, as the former attempt to manage impressions and salvage images and the latter reject those neutralizing strategies. In this case, a working consensus was rarely if ever achieved, and

audiences conspicuously failed to help performers by engaging in protective practices. Instead, for each of the strategies Exxon officials used in their attempts to salvage the corporate image, audiences employed counter-strategies to discredit those practices and tried to make image-salvaging as difficult as possible for Exxon's service specialists. For example, audience members resisted Exxon's information-control efforts, attacking the organization's unwillingness to comment on the captain's blood alcohol level at the time of the accident and his absence from the deck at the time of the grounding:

Audience: ...putting aside the issue of whether or not your skipper was intoxicated, could you tell us please or answer this simple question, why was that skipper not on the deck when they were going through Prince William Sound when he was uniquely qualified to guide him? Did you ask him that?

Exxon: Well, I have not personally talked to the Captain but I would remind you of what I told you a while ago. We have given you all of the information that we have that is appropriate for us to discuss. This is a 20 year employee and his career is at stake and there are 5 investigations underway and the gentleman with the information about the drunk driving arrest, I would suggest you give that to the National Transportation Safety Board or someone else who is conducting an

investigation. We do not intend to comment on Captain Hazelwood any further.

Audience: Why not?

Exxon: It is inappropriate, that is why not!

Audience: You tantalize us with saying that you have an investigation underway...and then you refuse to give us the conclusions. There is no law barring you from revealing your private company's investigation to these reporters here and we wonder what you are hiding sir. There is no law against you revealing this. Please do so, give us the facts please.

Similarly, audience members pressed Exxon officials to comment on the organization's policy for conducting background investigations of tanker captains:

Exxon: ...it is inappropriate for us to say anything more about it and as a matter of fact I have told you everything I know, so I cannot be helpful in that area to you...

Audience: Have you been able to determine whether Exxon has a policy to look at their tanker Captain records for such things? Is that part of what the Captain is checked for when he becomes a Captain?

Exxon: Since the last time you asked me that question, I have done nothing but try to bring all the force I can to bear on cleaning up this oil spill and I don't intend...

Audience: ...I think you should get us an answer as soon as

possible so that we don't have to keep asking you about it every day...

Exxon: ...it doesn't bother me...you can ask me as many times as you want...

Audience: Then why don't you find out what the policy is?

Exxon: I know you do, so do I, but the job here is to clean up the oil spill.

Audience: Don't you think the world's largest oil company who is responsible for the largest spill has the responsibility to explain what happened out there in terms of simple questions like did you have a policy regarding checking the record of your Captains of these vessels?

Exxon: I can assure you that we have policies that deal with everything, but I am not going to discuss the policies relative to the Captain because it is not appropriate and sir if you were...

Audience: ...tell us what the policy is...

Exxon: Does anyone have another question about the oil spill?

Audience members also challenged officials' attempts to personalize the event. As the excerpt below shows, even their complete role embracement evoked little sympathy from the audience:

Audience: My question is for Mr. Cornett. The first part of my question, is it going to take twenty years to settle claims in this incidence, as in France? The second part, Mr. Cornett: How much is your way of life worth to you?

Exxon: I'll take the second one first. It is not very much tonight...This is my fourth press conference today, and if I wound a little sluggish it is just because I haven't slept in a while...

Audience: ...Awww...

Exxon: ...I'm not trying, I'm not trying to get your sympathy...

Audience members responded similarly to the other image-salving strategies Exxon employed. Rather than cooperating in the performance, they instead actively attempted to derail it.

#### Summary and Conclusions

The Exxon oil spill had the potential for damaging the image of one of the world's largest corporations. As the emergency unfolded, millions watched as enormous quantities of oil spread out of control, killing wildlife and polluting one of the nation's most unspoiled environmental treasures. Response plans failed abysmally, and organizational efforts were clearly insufficient to manage the growing crisis.

Throughout the emergency period, corporate spokespersons struggled to convey the impression that their company was responding to the spill and its aftermath in a highly effective and responsible manner. This was accomplished through organizational self-presentations that stressed Exxon's competence, controlled the flow of information about the event and Exxon's response, depicted high officials as personally involved and committed to the clean-up, and redefined the event in ways that made Exxon's battle against the oil appear winnable.

Although the spill did generate a considerable amount of bad press for Exxon at the time of the spill, the losses that the corporation ultimately sustained were relatively trivial compared with the enormous size of its resource base. Corporate profits didn't suffer, the CEO kept his job, and boycotts against the company never really took off. Perhaps the most serious consequence for the company was the passage of the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, legislation that was triggered in large measure by the spill (Lukaszewski and Gmeiner, 1993).

Exxon's corporate performances were not always on the mark during the crisis, and a number of analyses have pointed out errors it made in attempting to salvage its image (New York Times, April 2, 1989; April 21, 1989; Lukaszewski and Gmeiner, 1993). However, regardless of how flawed and hotly-contested they were, Exxon's impression management efforts in the first few days following the oil spill were probably at least partially responsible for reducing the negative consequences Exxon experienced and for containing the damage to its corporate image. †

In his own work on the Exxon oil spill, Clarke (1990) calls attention to the dramaturgical--as opposed to the practical--importance of organizational crisis management planning. Even if such plans don't actually work when they're needed, through the development of elaborate frameworks for handling catastrophic accidents like the Exxon spill or a major nuclear plant emergency, organizations present themselves to the world as capable, competent, and trustworthy. Crisis planning helps corporate

entities avoid additional regulation, legitimizes corporate business practices by providing reassurances that those activities are safe, and helps neutralize opposition to those practices. During normal times disaster plans are one among many resources that corporations can draw upon in their image-enhancing performances. When a catastrophic event like the Exxon oil spill occurs and when plans are shown to be inadequate, an organization doesn't just have a physical disaster on its hands; it is also forced to act immediately to salvage its image.

Corporations typically prefer to convey images about themselves using impersonal and highly-controlled methods, such as advertising and public relations campaigns. Major emergencies can't be handled through those types of methods; instead, as we have shown in the Exxon case, the management of spoiled organizational identities must proceed through personalized and less-controlled face-to-face interactions between corporate service specialists and their often skeptical and hostile audiences. These micro-level encounters assume great importance in the crisis context because organizational actions are under much closer scrutiny than during normal times. As this analysis demonstrates, Goffman's concept of impression management, which has generally been applied to face-to-face interactions involving individuals, can also be employed to better understand the strategies organizations use in repairing damaged corporate images in times of crisis.

As other studies suggest (Elsbach and Sutton, 1992; Allen and Caillouet, 1994), the use of the impression management framework in the analysis of organizational behavior provides a useful complement to work on organizations and environments undertaken from the perspective of institutional theory (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Scott and Meyer, 1994). According to institutional theory, organizational structures and practices reflect meaning systems and rules that are present in the larger environment. Empirical research using the institutional approach emphasizes the structural isomorphism that exists between organizations and their environments, such as the ways in which fragmentation and complexity in the environment engender administrative complexity at the organizational level (see, for example, Meyer, Scott, and Strang, 1994, on schools). However, while acknowledging the importance of culture, institutional researchers have not shown much interest in studying the more active strategies that organizations employ to manipulate components of culture to serve their ends and to establish (or salvage) legitimacy within the institutional environment. Besides making themselves structurally capable of meeting institutionalized requirements, organizations must also do all they can to communicate their adherence to those requirements. This is particularly true in situations like the one discussed here, in which an organization's ability to act responsibly is seriously called into question. Through its emphasis on performance and rhetoric, the impression management perspective provides a

conceptual framework for understanding how organizations carry out these communicative strategies.

At the same time, the institutional perspective also helps explain why organizations like Exxon are typically so successful in managing impressions and retaining legitimacy even when things go horribly wrong. As Zucker notes, the most deeply entrenched institutionalized social units and activities are imbued with enormous legitimacy that makes criticizing or opposing them tantamount to attacking society itself, and it is "formally organized collectivities, especially firms" (1988: 39) that currently hold that position in the U. S. and other industrialized societies. Exxon, in other words, played its role in the oil spill crisis from a very strong institutional position. While any group--and any individual--may try to manage impressions or repair a spoiled image, corporate entities like Exxon have an enormous advantage in that they are powerfully legitimized by the institutional order they structure and dominate.

The Exxon case thus illustrates the importance of the linkage and reciprocal relationship that exists between the institutional order and the interaction order. Organizational performances help actors achieve and maintain legitimacy; that legitimacy in turn adds impact and resonance to their future performances. No matter how well done, some performances are better-received than others simply because of the institutional position of those who enact them--a point that students of the interaction order frequently fail to appreciate.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Exxon was nevertheless widely criticized for not sending its corporate Chief Executive Officer, Lawrence Rawl, to appear before the press and the public in Alaska (New York Times, April 2, 1989; April 21, 1989). This strategy, it has been argued, badly hurt Exxon's image because it created the impression the spill crisis wasn't important enough to the corporation.

<sup>2</sup> As we discuss in more detail later, such statements seldom went unchallenged. As one listener put it, "What more do we need to show? Prince William was beautiful a week ago; now it's full of shit."