

### **3-MINUTE CASE STUDY**

#### **Florida International University Bridge Collapse Incident**

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In 2001, Tom Davenport and John Beck authored a book called *The Attention Economy* and started their work with this quote: “Understanding and managing attention is now the single most important determinant of business success.” This idea was created in the context that attention span is increasingly shorter. In related research, our firm found that the average length of a soundbite in the news media is now 8.95 seconds. A 2015 study by Microsoft measured the attention span of an average American adult at 8 seconds while at the same time, found that goldfish have about a 12-second attention span.

With this post, I'm wondering about attention span in two dimensions:

- 1) Is it easier to read a chronology of events and scoring tabulation like that done below to convey how Image Repair Theory works?
- 2) Did the quest for speed divert Florida International University's attention from engineering fundamentals leading to the bridge collapse?

As you'll see by the messaging examination below, the two questions intertwine in a tragedy that claimed the lives of six people.

#### **INCIDENT SUMMARY**

At 1:47 p.m. on Thursday, March 15, 2018, the 950-ton Florida International University-Sweetwater pedestrian bridge collapsed onto the roadway below, killing 6 people – one a student – and injuring 10 others. The bridge, championed by the university, was built using Accelerated Bridge Construction, where its major components were prefabricated offsite then positioned and assembled onsite.

#### **CHRONOLOGY OF OFFICIAL MESSAGING**

Thursday, 3/15/2018 at 1:47 p.m.

FIU-Sweetwater pedestrian bridge collapses.

Thursday, 3/15/2018 at 2:37 p.m. (+ 50 minutes)

FIU released the following statement:

“We are shocked and saddened about the tragic events unfolding at the FIU-Sweetwater pedestrian bridge. At this time we are still involved in rescue efforts and gathering information. We are working closely with authorities and first responders on the scene (1). We will share updates as we have them (2).”

Thursday, 3/15/2018 at 5:00 p.m. (+ 3:13 minutes)

President Rosenberg addressed the community with this first message:

"I am heartbroken at the news of the collapse of the pedestrian bridge on 8th Street and the resulting devastation. We send our deepest condolences to the victims and their families. We are working with the appropriate agencies to assist in rescue efforts (3). As soon as we have further information (4), we will share it with you. Please keep the victims and their families in your thoughts and prayers."

Thursday, 3/15/2018 at 9:00 p.m. (+ 7:13 minutes)

President Rosenberg addressed a press conference, then released his remarks in a statement:

"Today is a dark day in our history.

Just five days ago, we stood on SW 8th Street, united in celebration. Tonight we grieve for all the victims of the bridge collapse. The bridge that was being built was about collaboration, hope, opportunity, and determination. About strength and unity. About being good neighbors. About goodness (5). Not sadness. Now we are feeling immense sadness.

Our hearts go out to all those affected, their families and friends (6). We should take comfort in the fact that even on this dark day, there were glimmers of light. Our FIU doctors, nurses and medical students rushed to the scene as soon as they heard the collapse. They checked on many who were hurt and offered life-saving aid before rescue crews arrived (7).

There will be more difficult days ahead, but even as we mourn and reflect, there is still goodness and hope in this world (8). Please keep everyone affected by this tragedy in your thoughts and prayers.

The university is committed to assisting in all efforts to overcome the tragic bridge collapse."

Friday, 3/16/2018

President Rosenberg posted a message on the school's Twitter account hours after a deadly crash near the campus. (Essentially same remarks as previous night's news conference)

Friday, 3/16/2018

FIU deleted a tweet from President Rosenberg from the prior Saturday celebrating the positioning of the bridge span across the highway.

The tweet read: "FIU is about building bridges and student safety. This project accomplishes our mission beautifully"

Friday, 3/16/2018

President Rosenberg's remarks as quoted in a New York Times interview...

"Do I worry about the image of the university? Every breathing moment. But the response that we've gotten from around the country has been overwhelmingly positive. It's not the time now to be worried about our image (9)."

"This was a good project. This was a project that spoke to our desire to build bridges. When the board hired me, I told them, 'If you give me a pile of rocks, I'm going to build a bridge, not a wall.' This was about neighborliness and collaboration (10)."

Dr. Rosenberg said the institution was planning an independent investigation of the collapse of the pedestrian bridge, which was intended to be a showcase of engineering and collaboration with the community (11).

"We will try to understand if there are areas where we could have done better," he said.

**Friday, 3/16/2018**

FIU responded to the Florida Transportation Department's assertion that they were unaware that cracks had been found in the concrete of the bridge span.

The university later added a more detailed recollection of the Thursday meeting. It was convened by FIGG and Munilla Construction Management (MCM), which built the bridge, "to discuss a crack that appeared on the structure," the university said.

"The FIGG engineer of record delivered a technical presentation regarding the crack and concluded that there were no safety concerns and the crack did not compromise the structural integrity of the bridge, (12)" the university said in a statement, adding that representatives of the school and the state Department of Transportation attended the session, which lasted two hours.

**Saturday, 3/17/2018 at 8 p.m.**

President Rosenberg addressed the campus...

"Our hearts break for the victims of the bridge collapse. Lives have been lost. Futures and families shattered.

I have met family members and friends of the victims. My heart goes out to them. There is nothing I can say to ease their pain but we are putting our arms around them and doing everything in our power to support them (13).

Even as we grieve, we all have an interest in getting to the bottom of what happened (14). This effort is being led by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) in a full and comprehensive investigation. FIU is cooperating fully with this investigation and working closely with government authorities. We are also forever grateful to the first responders – including some of our own doctors, students and others who rushed to the scene – and the dozens of others who came to assist. I am particularly moved by the men and women who have worked around the clock to recover the victims (15).

It will take time for our community to heal.

As a first step, on Monday, we will have a moment of silence at 1:47 p.m. Please join us wherever you are.”

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#### IMAGE REPAIR TECHNIQUE USAGE

| Marker | Image Repair Technique | Marker | Image Repair Technique |
|--------|------------------------|--------|------------------------|
| (1)    | Accident               | (9)    | Corrective Action      |
| (2)    | Defeasibility          | (10)   | Good intentions        |
| (3)    | Accident               | (11)   | Time shifting          |
| (4)    | Defeasibility          | (12)   | Blame shifting         |
| (5)    | Good intentions        | (13)   | Accident               |
| (6)    | Accident               | (14)   | Corrective Action      |
| (7)    | Transcendence          | (15)   | Transcendence          |
| (8)    | Transcendence          |        |                        |

- Blame Rejection techniques in Orange (10 total)
- Blame Acceptance techniques in Purple (5 total)

| William Benoit's Image Repair Typology w/ Hahn Modifications (noted in red highlight) |                                      |                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| General Strategies                                                                    | Available Tactics                    | Messaging Example                                                                  | Goal                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Denial                                                                                | 1) Simple denial                     | I did not embezzle the money.                                                      | Changing an existing belief; did not perform the act                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                                                                                       | 2) Blame shifting (scapegoating v.1) | Steve took your wallet, not me.                                                    | Creating a new belief; act was performed by another                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Evade Responsibility                                                                  | 3) Provocation (scapegoating v.2)    | I was provoked. I insulted you but only after you criticized me.                   | Providing a justifiable pretext to create a new belief about the accused's blameworthiness; responded to the act of another                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                                                                                       | 4) Defeasibility                     | I was late because traffic delayed me.                                             | Pleading lack of information or control over circumstances to create a new belief about the accused's blameworthiness                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                                                                                       | 5) Accident                          | Our collision was an accident.                                                     | Claiming act was an unfortunate mishap, inadvertent, beyond control; creates a new belief about blameworthiness                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                                                                                       | 6) Good intentions                   | I didn't tell you because I hoped to fix the problem first.                        | Reduces perceived responsibility by stressing positive volition to create a new belief about why the accused performed the offensive act                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|                                                                                       | 7) Time shift                        | A panel of experts is sorting through complexities.                                | Emphasize how self-investigation needs time to surface facts and truth as well or better than outside parties                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Reduce Offensiveness                                                                  | 8) Bolstering                        | Think of all the times I helped you.                                               | Strengthens the audience's positive impression for the actor to create a new belief about desirable traits or acts of the accused                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                                                                       | 9) Minimization                      | I broke your vase, but it wasn't an expensive one.                                 | An accounting strategy claiming the act was not serious; changes belief about the extent or magnitude of an act's offensiveness                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                                                                                       | 10) Differentiation                  | I borrowed your laptop, I didn't steal it.                                         | Claims a less offensive act; creates a new belief that offensive act is not as offensive as similar acts                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|                                                                                       | 11) Transcendence                    | Searching travelers at the airport is inconvenient but protects us all.            | Stresses more important considerations; creates a new value about the offensive act                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                                                                                       | 12) Attack accuser                   | Joe says I embezzled money, but he is a chronic liar.                              | Creates a new belief by reducing the credibility of the accuser; if accuser is the victim, then victim deserved what happened                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                                                                       | 13) Compensation                     | Because the waiter spilled a drink on your clothes, we'll give you a free dessert. | Reimburses victim; creates a new belief about accused by providing some of value to the victim; functions as a bribe                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Corrective Action                                                                     | 14) Corrective action                | Because the waiter spilled a drink on your clothes, we'll have it dry cleaned.     | Emphasizes the plan and actions being taken to resolve and prevent recurrence; creates a new belief about accused as problem solver. See also Hearit's twin myths of technological redemption and managerial rationality to support this strategy                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Mortification                                                                         | 15) Mortification                    | I'm so sorry I offended you. I regret hurting your feelings and I apologize.       | Apologizes for an act; creates a new belief about accused's remorse.<br>Three (Dezenhall) variations:<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Judeo-Christian: getting right with God through true repentance</li> <li>▪ Transactional: a display (admitting to little or no wrongdoing) of repentance in exchange for value (e.g., to settle an issue)</li> <li>▪ Inoculation: an apology issued in order to move on</li> </ul> |

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