

Risk and Reward: Regulatory Focus Orientation and the Effectiveness of Promotion and Prevention Targeted Organizational Apologies

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ABSTRACT

Organisations are expected to apologise when they cause offense, but apologies sometimes fail to restore trust. This study applies regulatory focus theory (RFT) to examine why some apologies are more effective than others based on the inclusion of regulatory focus keywords. Our findings are based on a textual analysis of 38 real-world apologies and instrument data from 298 U.S. participants recruited from the CloudResearch Connect platform. Both paired samples t-tests and a mixed-design ANOVA showed that apologies containing promotion or prevention-focused elements restored significantly more trust, $p < .001$, than those limited to a basic statement of contrition. However, neither test revealed any effect of participants' chronic RFT orientation on apology effectiveness, nor a significant interaction between apology type and orientation. The findings show that both risk and reward-focused strategies enhance apology effectiveness for U.S. consumers. Our research advances the theory of trust restoration and extends the application of RFT to organisational communication.

KEYWORDS: Trust, Regulatory Focus, Apology, Communication, Forgiveness

JEL CLASSIFICATION: M14

1. INTRODUCTION

Organisational apologies are an important tool for rebuilding trust and maintaining business relationships after a mishap (Kim et al., 2004; Knight, 2014), and customers have come to expect an apology in the aftermath of a transgression (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Combs et al., 2010). The issuance of an apology following a miscue allows an organisation to rebuild trust and increase customer loyalty, thereby avoiding loss of future business (Bhattacharjee, 2002). Although apologies are now frequently issued by organisations seeking to restore lost trust, organisations are unable to feel remorse and can only communicate regret using humans as an emotional proxy (Tavuchis, 1991). Breaches of morality are especially challenging for corporations, because they inflict more emotional damage and are thus harder to repair (Kim et al., 2004).

Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT) offers a valuable perspective on the effectiveness of apologies because it focuses on self-regulation and emotional responses to events (Higgins, 1997), such as organisational transgressions that are followed by an apology. According to RFT, individuals are predominantly predisposed to either a forward-focused promotion orientation or a risk-focused prevention orientation (Higgins, 2000). Americans tend to

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predominantly have a promotion-focused orientation (Kurman & Hui, 2011). Previous research on regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 2000; Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004) suggests that persuasive messages are most effective if they are aligned with an individual's dominant motivational orientation. Extending these findings, it is plausible that apologies framed to match a recipient's primary motivational focus (promotion or prevention) should restore more trust than apologies framed towards the non-primary orientation.

Because organisations issue apologies in response to events that may trigger an emotional reaction (especially for integrity offenses), there is potential theoretical overlap between RFT and organisational apologies in the context of trust restoration. Local communities often feel isolated and vulnerable in the era of globalisation (Nicolae & Pavel, 2016), so it is important to understand the intersection of these two constructs (RFT and organisational apologies) to maintain consumer trust in an increasingly diversified world. Our research contributes to the conceptual understanding of organisational apologies and RFT and may also be valuable to practitioners in crafting mea culpas that restore lost trust in the aftermath of a transgression.

Hypotheses

Based on our review of literature on organisational apologies, regulatory focus theory, and trust restoration, we hypothesise as follows:

Hypothesis 1: There will be more promotion-focused participants than prevention-focused participants, based on the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (Higgins, 2001) for our U.S.-based study.

Hypothesis 2: Organisational apologies for a community sensitivity violation that include promotion-focused terms will rebuild more trust than words of contrition alone.

Hypothesis 3: Organisational apologies for a community sensitivity violation that include prevention-focused terms will rebuild more trust than words of contrition alone.

Hypothesis 4: Organisational apologies that include promotion-focused terms will restore more trust than apologies that include only prevention-focused terms.

Hypothesis 5: Organisational apologies that include elements related to a promotion or prevention focus orientation will restore more trust for participants if they are targeted to match their primary regulatory focus orientation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Trust has been a central topic in management literature for many decades (Barber, 1987; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; McCarthy, 2017), and trust restoration is an important emerging field (Gillespie & Dieetz, 2009). Organisational trust relates to the willingness of individuals to be vulnerable based on expectations of a counterparty acting appropriately, even when not observed or controlled (Mayer et al, 1995). Although trust restoration is critical to the success of modern organisations and is capable of repair (Mishra, 1996; Bottom & Gibson, 2002), research in the area is limited and lacks cohesion (McCarthy, 2017), and there is a scarcity of literature at the intersection of trust and regulatory focus orientation.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) identifies the organisational apology as an effective tool used by organisations seeking to restore trust and credibility following an ethical breach. Crisis communication theory emphasises the strategic management of organisational responses to reputational threats (Tomlinson, 2011). Effective handling of consumer complaints and timely apology issuance have been shown to enhance customer loyalty and retention (Tax & Brown, 1998). Research also suggests that corporations sometimes feign sincerity as a defensive strategy to protect their reputation (Hearit, 2006).

Consumers expect organisations to apologise in the aftermath of a norm violation in order to reestablish trust (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Combs et al., 2010) and lose faith in leaders who don't apologise after a transgression (Tucker et al., 2006). According to the foundational literature on apology (Goffman, 1967; Tavuchis, 1991; Lazare, 2005; Smith, 2008), apologies should evidence regret and/or sorrow in order to be effective. A multi-disciplinary review by Fehr and Gelfand (2010) identified expressions of empathy ("I'm sorry", "I apologise"), compensation, and acknowledgment of responsibility as the three most important and recurring elements in an organisational apology.

Apologies that relate to a moral failure are classified as integrity violations, whereas apologies that relate to issues of performance are classified as competence violations (Kim, Ferring, Cooper & Dirks, 2004). According to a grounded theory examination of organisational apologies (Rhodes, 2017), the most common transgression leading to an organisational apology issuance is a breach of community sensitivity, a form of integrity violation. Integrity violations have been shown to be more difficult for organisations to repair in terms of lost trust than competency violations (Kim et al., 2009; Zavyalova et al., 2012). Vulnerability has emerged as an important theme of trust research (Bigley & Pearce, 1998), and in a globalised world, local communities now feel even more vulnerable (Nicolae & Pavel, 2016).

Regulatory focus theory (RFT), developed by psychologist E. Tory Higgins, in 1997, has emerged over the past three decades as an important theory of self-regulation and motivation (Johnson et al., 2015). RFT is a model for functional understanding of approach and avoidance behaviour, explaining how individuals pursue goals through a promotion or prevention focus. An alternative to the classical pleasure versus pain principle, RFT posits that regulatory orientation, regulatory anticipation, and regulatory reference all impact approach (pleasure) and avoidance (pain) motivations. According to a subsequent offshoot of RFT termed regulatory fit theory, individuals are socialised to be predisposed towards a "chronic" regulatory focus orientation, but priming through memory or context can also trigger a "momentary" orientation towards either regulatory focus (Higgins, 2000). The regulatory focus questionnaire (RFQ), included in the Study 2 instrument, was developed to identify a promotion or prevention orientation (Higgins et al., 2001).

Apologies serve as a mechanism for acknowledging wrongdoing, expressing remorse, and signaling a willingness to make amends (Schlenker & Darby, 1981; Tomlinson et al., 2004). Effective apologies often contain multiple components—such as expressions of regret, responsibility-taking, and reparative compensation offers—which can influence the extent to which trust is restored (Lewicki et al., 2016). However, the same apology may not resonate equally with all recipients, depending on their motivational orientation. Emerging research has begun to examine how regulatory focus shapes both the production and reception of apologies. For example, individuals with a promotion focus may value forward-looking statements, growth opportunities, and emotional transparency in apologies (Zhao &

Pechmann, 2007). In contrast, prevention-focused individuals may respond more positively to apologies emphasising rule adherence, caution, and measures taken to prevent future harm (Cesario et al., 2008). This distinction is particularly relevant in trust repair contexts, where the offended party assesses not only the sincerity of the apology, but also the degree to which the apologise aligns with their expectations and values. Prevention-focused recipients may require assurances of control and compliance, while promotion-focused individuals may be more receptive to visionary or reconciliatory appeals.

Trust repair following transgressions is a complex interpersonal process, with apologies often playing a central role in managing reputation threats (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Kim et al., 2004). Drawing relevance to the digital age, a recent study found that timely and sincere apologies on social media can mitigate negative customer perceptions and restore trust (Manika, 2017). While AI-driven messaging allows organisations to deliver rapid, consistent, and targeted responses during crises, supporting reputation management (Loof et al., 2023), risk-averse customers have been found to distrust mechanical (versus human) service interactions (Belanche, Casaló & Flavián, 2019). The foregoing suggests that AI-generated apologies would be less effective in restoring trust from prevention-focused individuals. It has also been shown that the effectiveness of crisis communications is impacted by cultural differences (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010), including a study by Shafa, Harinck, and Ellemers (2017) uncovering that honour-based culture individuals are less forgiving than dignity-based culture individuals.

Studies show that when messages are framed to fit an individual's regulatory focus, they are perceived as more persuasive and satisfying (Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004). Applied to apologies, this suggests that tailoring an apology to match the recipient's regulatory focus may increase its effectiveness in restoring trust. The regulatory orientation of both parties involved - the transgressor and the victim - can shape trust repair outcomes. A promotion-focused transgressor might issue a more emotionally expressive or optimistic apology, whereas a prevention-focused transgressor might offer a more cautious or procedural apology. Similarly, the recipient's focus affects how an apology is interpreted and whether trust is regained. Misalignments in regulatory orientation would likely cause a misfire, with the apology appearing insincere, inadequate, or even counterproductive.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study 1: Textual Analysis

A textual analysis was conducted of 39 apology texts derived from a 2017 grounded theory study of organisational apologies, their antecedents, and consequents (Rhodes, 2017). The three co-authors collaboratively reviewed the apology texts and identified passages that were related to future plans, positive outcomes, and individual compensation (promotion-focused) or risk protection, responsibility, and community protection (prevention-focused). The foregoing textual analysis was based on the identification by Fehr and Gelfand (2012) of words of empathy statements ("We're sorry", "We apologise"), compensation offers, and statement of responsibility as the most important recurring elements in organisational apologies, together with a finding by Rhodes (2017) that assurances of non-recurrence were also commonly included in organisational apologies.

3.2 Study 2: Questionnaire

Study 2 was a quantitative analysis of questionnaire data from a final sample of 298 U.S.-based participants recruited through CloudResearch's Connect service. A total of 305

participants were recruited, 300 completed all of the questionnaire items, and 2 failed the reading check item, resulting in 298 usable datasets. Participants on CloudResearch have been shown to pass attention checks at a higher rate compared to MTurk, undergraduate samples, and Qualtrics (Douglas, Ewell, & Brauer, 2023). The Connect service provides advanced participant screening tools and allows recruitment of individuals matching the demographic characteristics of the US population (gender, age, race, and ethnicity). All participants are verified as US residents using IP addresses. Demographically, the recruited sample ($n = 305$) was reported by the Connect service as 49.8% men ($n = 152$) and 50.2% women ($n = 153$). Ages ranged from 18 to 99, with 22.0% aged 18–29 ($n = 67$), 25.9% aged 30–44 ($n = 79$), 26.2% aged 45–59 ($n = 80$), and 25.9% aged 60–99 ($n = 79$). A majority (78.4%, $n = 239$) identified themselves as White, 13.8% ($n = 42$) as Black/African American, and 7.9% ($n = 24$) as another racial background. With regard to ethnicity, 15.7% ($n = 48$) identified as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, while 84.3% ($n = 257$) did not.

The questionnaire consisted of 21 items, including 11 items from the standard Regulatory Focus Questionnaire and a single reading-check item. The remaining items included a baseline measure of trust in multinational organisations and eight items relating to community sensitivity (integrity) violations. The two scenarios were derived from a grounded theory study of organisational apologies (Rhodes, 2017) and represent the most common transgression type for which organisations issue apologies (see Table 1 below). For both scenarios, participants indicated whether they thought a multinational company was trustworthy following a transgression (10-point Likert scale; 1 = strongly agree/most trustworthy to 10 = strongly disagree/least trustworthy).

Table 1. Transgression Scenarios

Scenario 1: Conference Event	“You are attending a conference event. The representative of a multinational company is making a presentation to open the conference. The presentation includes a video advertisement produced by the company that you feel is hurtful and insensitive to your community.”
Scenario 2: Restaurant Event	“You are visiting a restaurant owned by a multinational company. There is a poster inside the restaurant that displays people from your community together with a national symbol that was designed to be decorative. You feel that the poster is hurtful and insensitive to your community.”

Four trust items were asked for each scenario: (1) trustworthiness following the transgression itself (pre-apology), (2) trust after a basic apology (an email from the company just “apologising for the event” with no further content in the message), (3) trust after a promotion-focused apology (the same emailed apology, adding language emphasising compensation, advancement, and positive future outcomes), and (4) trust after a prevention-focused apology (the same emailed apology, adding language emphasising risk reduction, responsibility acceptance, and community protection). Table 2 provides examples for the trust items used in each scenario for the basic apology, promotion apology, and prevention apology conditions (identical for both scenarios).

Table 2. Examples of Trust Items used for each Apology Type

Basic Apology	“Assume you receive an email from the company apologising for the event. Is the company trustworthy?”
Promotion Apology	“Assume you receive an email from the company apologising for the event.

	The apology offers compensation, a plan of advancement, and a desire for positive future outcomes. Is the company trustworthy?"
Prevention Apology	"Assume you receive an email from the company apologising for the event. The apology focuses on minimising the risk of recurrence, accepting responsibility, and protecting the community. Is the company trustworthy?"

Data was analysed using paired-samples t-tests to compare differences across baseline (pre-transgression), post-transgression (pre-apology), and the three apology conditions. In addition, a mixed-design ANOVA was conducted with Apology Type (Basic, Promotion, Prevention; within-subjects) and Regulatory Focus Orientation (Promotion vs. Prevention; between-subjects) to assess whether congruence between participants' chronic focus and the framing of apologies moderated trust outcomes. Microsoft Excel was used to calculate the RFQ scores and Jamovi Cloud was used for all statistical analyses. Reported results are two-tailed.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Results: Study 1

A textual analysis of 39 organisational apologies issued by multinational companies in the past three decades provided specific examples of passages relating to either future plans, positive outcomes, and individual rewards (promotion focused) or risk protection, responsibility statements, and community protection acknowledgement (prevention focused), as well as statements of contrition ("We apologise", "We're Sorry", etc.) (Table 3). These apology examples were used to develop the apology items for both chronic regulatory focus orientations in the Study 2 questionnaire.

Table 3. Regulatory Focus Elements in Organisational Apologies*

Orientation	Element	Examples
Promotion Focused	Compensation	"[Gift Certificate] To the Amount of Special Combo Only, \$ One Large Pizza, One 2-Ltr Drink For Resident Redeemable at Bobtown Pizza." (2014, Chevron) "Therefore, we have decided to offer every iPhone customer who purchased an iPhone from either Apple or AT&T, and who is not receiving a rebate or any other consideration, a \$100 store credit towards the purchase of any product at an Apple Retail Store or the Apple Online Store." (2007, Apple) "At present, Kingsoft company is by sound economy 'world company', to all users apologise and promise to give the user who encounters a blue screen, the compensation value of 200 yuan per person." (2013, Kingsoft)
	Future Plans & Positive Outcomes	"We plan to restore the old import experience in our next update." (2017, Adobe) "By the end of this month, we will announce a plan to help lead Lenovo and our industry forward with deeper knowledge, more understanding, and even greater focus on issues surrounding adware, pre-installs, and security." (2015, Lenovo) "...so that we can continue to improve the gameplay experience for all of the Tony Hawk fans." (2015, ATVI)

Prevention Focused	Risk Reduction	“We have taken the additional step of asking our buyers to be vigilant with subsequent orders to avoid this issue in the future.” (2014, Bed Bath and Beyond) “Kingsoft [in the] future will join together with other security companies... to avoid the same mistakes again.” (2013, Kingsoft) “We are sorry and are working hard to make sure this doesn’t happen again.” (2007, Intel) “...we have decided to stop running QQ software on computers that have installed the 360 software.” (2010, Tencent)
	Responsibility & Community Protection	“We know that it is our responsibility to deliver quality, reliability, innovation, and security to each and every customer.” (2015, Lenovo) “Chevron recognises the effect this has had on the community. We value being a responsible member of this community...” (2014, Chevron). “Also, draw the player through the following ways to protect their rights.” (2010, The9 Limited)

Note: *Apology texts sourced from Rhodes (2017)

4.2 Results: Study 2

Five of the 305 recruited participants did not answer all of the questionnaire items, and two of the 300 participants failed the reading check item, leaving 298 usable datasets. Based on the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (Higgins, 2001), more participants were promotion-focused ($n = 172$) than prevention-focused ($n = 115$), with a small neutral group ($n = 11$). A one-sample t -test of the RFQ difference score against zero confirmed that the US sample was significantly more promotion-focused than prevention-focused, $t(286) = 3.92$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.23$, supporting Hypothesis 1. Eleven participants scored evenly on the RFQ (reflecting equal levels of promotion and prevention orientation) and were classified as “neutral”; this group was retained for the paired samples t -tests but excluded from the between-subjects analyses, which compared promotion and prevention-focused participants.

A series of paired samples t -tests compared trust ratings across baseline, post-transgression, and apology conditions. Trust declined significantly from baseline to post-transgression, $t(297) = -6.94$, $p < .001$, $dz = 0.40$, indicating the negative effect of the transgression. A basic apology significantly improved trust relative to the transgression, $t(297) = 7.28$, $p < .001$, but trust remained lower than baseline, $t(297) = -2.85$, $p = .005$. As predicted in Hypothesis 2, a promotion-framed apology restored significantly more trust than a basic apology, $t(297) = 8.58$, $p < .001$, $dz = 0.50$. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, a prevention-framed apology also restored significantly more trust than a basic apology, $t(297) = 8.78$, $p < .001$, $dz = 0.51$. Both the promotion and prevention-framed apologies also exceeded baseline trust. Contrary to expectations, Hypothesis 4 was not supported, as promotion and prevention-focused apologies did not differ significantly, $t(297) = 0.11$, $p = .909$. See Table 4 below, noting that a lower number indicates greater trust (1 = most trustworthy, 10 = least trustworthy).

Table 4. Regulatory Focus Elements in Organisational Apologies

Comparison	Mean A	Mean B	t	p	Cohen's dz
Baseline vs Post-Transgression	5.82	6.90	-6.94	<.001	0.40
Baseline vs Basic	5.82	6.19	-2.85	.005	0.16
Baseline vs Promotion	5.82	5.35	3.24	.001	0.19
Baseline vs Prevention	5.82	5.35	3.29	.001	0.19
Post-Transgression vs Basic	6.90	6.19	7.28	<.001	0.42
Post-Transgression vs Promotion	6.90	5.35	9.90	<.001	0.57
Post-Transgression vs Prevention	6.90	5.35	9.92	<.001	0.57
Basic vs Promotion	6.19	5.35	8.58	<.001	0.50
Basic vs Prevention	6.19	5.35	8.78	<.001	0.51
Promotion vs Prevention	5.35	5.35	0.11	.909	0.01

N = 298, *df* = 297 for all paired comparisons. Ratings are based on a reverse-coded 10-point Likert scale (1 = most trustworthy, 10 = least trustworthy). Cohen's *dz* is reported as the effect size for paired comparisons.

To test Hypothesis 5, a mixed-design ANOVA was conducted with Apology Type (Basic, Promotion, Prevention) as a within-subjects factor and Orientation (Promotion vs. Prevention) as a between-subjects factor. The analysis revealed a strong main effect of Apology Type, $F(2, 570) = 61.70$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .178$, with both Promotion and Prevention focused apologies rated as significantly more effective than Basic apologies. The Promotion and Prevention apologies did not differ significantly from each other. The main effect of Orientation was not significant, $F(1, 285) = 1.19$, $p = .276$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$, indicating no overall difference in ratings between promotion and prevention-focused participants. The Apology Type $\times$ Orientation interaction was also not significant, $F(2, 570) = 0.33$, $p = .720$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$, showing that the relative effectiveness of apology types did not differ by orientation group. Thus, Hypothesis 5 was not supported: congruent apologies were no more effective than incongruent apologies (see Table 5).

Table 5. Mixed-Design ANOVA for Apology Type and Regulatory Focus Orientation

Effect	F	df1	df2	p	Partial η^2
Apology Type (within)	61.70	2	570	< .001	.178
Orientation (between)	1.19	1	285	.276	.004
Type $\times$ Orientation	0.33	2	570	.720	.001

Mixed-design ANOVA with Apology Type (Basic, Promotion, Prevention) as a within-subjects factor and Orientation (Promotion vs. Prevention) as a between-subjects factor.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The mixed-design ANOVA showed that the inclusion of prevention and promotion-focused language in organisational apologies led to significantly more trust restoration after a moral transgression than quick-fix apologies that included only words of contrition (“we apologise”) and could even raise trust in the organisation to levels higher than before the transgression occurred. Paired-samples *t*-tests further confirmed that trust declined significantly after the transgression, was partially restored by a basic apology, and was restored to a greater extent

by both promotion and prevention-targeted apologies. While even a basic “We apologise” was found to improve trust post-transgression compared to no apology at all, supplementing those words of contrition with promotion or prevention-focused elements made the apologies more effective at restoring trust.

We acknowledge several limitations to our findings. In addition to not controlling for the severity of the transgression and focusing on one type of integrity offense (community sensitivity), our study relied on self-reported trust ratings without behavioural measures, which leaves open the possibility of measurement artifacts (e.g., apparent changes in trust ratings resulting from exposure to multiple transgression and apology events within the same instrument, potentially due to contrast effects). Future research should address these limitations by testing apology effectiveness across different communication platforms (e.g., social media posts vs. press releases vs. in-person statements) and examining whether promotion and prevention framed apologies differentially affect emotional versus cognitive dimensions of trust. Longitudinal studies should also be conducted to assess whether trust restoration is temporary or sustained over time. In addition, exploring non-U.S. populations, varying levels of organisational size and reputation, and different types of transgressions (including competence violations) will lead to a broader applicability of regulatory focus theory to organisational communication.

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