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Trust and Brand Recovery Campaigns in Crisis:

Findus Nordic and the Horsemeat Scandal

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to describe and analyze a transboundary crisis, focusing on crisis communication from the perspective of an involved major corporation. More concretely, the intent is to increase understanding of how Findus Nordic in Sweden managed the crisis communication response and repair of its trust and corporate brand during and after the horsemeat scandal in 2013. The case study is based on a theoretical framework that consists of three theories or concepts: transboundary crisis, image repair strategy and rhetorical arena. Findus Nordic followed its corporate values and applied a consistent image repair strategy: denial and blame shifting towards the supplier Comigel in an extremely multi-vocal arena. This strategy was supplemented with responsibility evasion. Towards the end of the public crisis, Findus Nordic used the crisis as an opportunity to recover their position and started a campaign that had a positive impact on trust and the corporate brand. The launch of the campaign was very fast and might have been dangerous. However, according to the analysis, the success of the campaign may be explained as a consequence of its sensemaking and auto-communicative approach.

## Trust and Brand Recovery Campaigns in Crisis:

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#### Introduction

This study focuses on the image repair and brand recovery strategy of Findus Nordic during and after the horsemeat scandal 2013. There is a vast amount of research about instant crisis responses but limited research on trust and brand recovery through campaigns (cf. Avraham, 2013), which is an important device of strategic communication (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, D & Sriramesh, 2007). In this study, we attempt to fill this gap by connecting crisis response theory (during the crisis) with recovery campaigns (post-crisis). First, we concentrate on the immediate crisis response during the crisis. Second, we analyze the trust and brand recovery campaign in Sweden that was launched shortly after the crisis. The overall aim of the study is to describe and analyze a transboundary crisis, focusing on crisis communication from the perspective of an involved major corporation. More concretely, the intent is to increase understanding of how Findus Nordic in Sweden managed the crisis communication response and repair of their corporate brand using a campaign. The analysis is performed using a multi-disciplinary theoretical framework that consists of three theories or concepts: the concept of transboundary crisis (Boin, 2010) and the theories of image repair strategy (Benoit, 1995) and the rhetorical arena (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010a; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010b). The analysis of the concrete case is put in center but contextualized and viewed from a strategic communicative perspective.

The article includes a description of how the meat scandal evolved in 2013, a theoretical framework for understanding image repair and recovery strategy, transboundary

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

crisis and the rhetorical arena, and a qualitative case study analyzing how Findus Nordic planned, reacted and implemented their image repair strategy and a brand recovery campaign. The case study is based on a document analysis of six press releases from Findus Nordic, qualitative interviews with the CEO and the operations director (both part of the crisis management group at Findus Nordic) and secondary data (brand and sales statistics).

### Background – The Case

On January 15, 2013, it was reported that the Food Safety Authority of Ireland had identified horse and pig DNA in frozen beef burgers sold in Irish and British supermarkets and fast food restaurants. On January 16, the food scandal became top news in the U.K. media. Three food suppliers were found to be the origin of the horse and pig meat. The food retailers Tesco, Aldi, Lidl, Iceland and Dunnes Stores withdrew their products. On January 23, Irish Burger King, which found out that it had also bought meat from one of the involved suppliers, changed suppliers and sent tests for analysis. On January 31, the results from the analysis of Burger King's hamburgers showed that they contained horsemeat. Other Irish food retailers also found horsemeat in their products. The scandal spread to other European countries, involving several actors (e.g., EU, national governments, corporations, news media).

One of the countries that became involved in the scandal was Sweden, where several food corporations were reported to have sold and served horsemeat in dishes such as frozen lasagna and meatballs. Findus Nordic, owned by the British private equity firm Lion Capital, was one of the corporations in Sweden affected by the scandal. Findus Nordic is part of Findus Group, which also consists of two corporate clusters in France and the United Kingdom. Findus Nordic (with headquarters in Bjuv, Sweden) mainly produces and sells frozen vegetables, fish and ready-made meals. On February 6–7, news broke in Sweden that

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

one of Findus's frozen meat products, lasagna, originating from the French supplier Comigel, contained horsemeat. The British Food Standards Agency reported that Findus lasagna in the United Kingdom contained almost 100 percent horsemeat and tests performed in Sweden gave the same results.<sup>1</sup> Horsemeat (and to a minor extent pig meat) was also found in products from other Swedish food retailers and producers such as Axfood, ICA, IKEA, Dafgårds and Coop. All these corporations withdrew these products (mainly lasagna but also some other products, e.g., meatballs from Dafgårds, which are sold worldwide by IKEA) from the national and international market. In the Swedish media and public debate, Findus (lasagna) and Dafgårds/IKEA (meatballs) received the most attention.

The Swedish National Food Agency told the news media that it was going to report Findus Nordic to the police but it never did. Findus Nordic communicated that it were going to report the supplier Comigel to the police but never did. Months later (*Svenska Dagbladet*, July 14, 2013) the Swedish Food National Agency explained that the story was complicated and that Findus Group was not responsible for what happened. In the same article, Findus Nordic concluded that it had terminated all contracts with Comigel, but that the responsibility was shared with other suppliers since Comigel had several suppliers. Findus Nordic decided not to start legal proceedings since this would be too complicated and not worth the effort. Comigel bought the meat from another French meat producer, Spanghero, who bought the meat from a Cypriote meat dealer with connections to a Dutch meat dealer and a possible relationship to slaughterhouses in Romania. However, food corporations in the U.K. and France were prosecuted. The scandal was debated in the EU, and the Commissioner for Health, Tonio Borg, proposed new regulations for safer food on May 6, 2013.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The description of the development of the food scandal is based on information published by the Swedish National Food Agency ([www.slv.se](http://www.slv.se)), interviews with Findus Nordic management representatives and articles in *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, two leading Swedish news papers ([www.dn.se](http://www.dn.se); [www.svd.se](http://www.svd.se)).

<sup>2</sup> [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-13-400\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-400_en.htm)

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on research within the quickly expanding sub-field crisis communication. Crisis communication is a fundamental part of strategic communication, since organizations sooner or later will experience a crisis situation when communication is used purposefully by an organization to accomplish a certain result (cf. Hallahan et al., 2007). Some scholars, such as Bowen (2009), claim that communication professionals who would like to get access to the dominant coalition must have profound knowledge in crisis communication. Hence, there is a close relationship between strategic communication and crisis communication. This study shows how campaigns can be used by organizations to handle a crisis situation.

The horsemeat crisis is a transboundary crisis, challenging the traditional borders between organizational and societal crisis. According to the established dichotomy, crises may be defined as societal and organizational constructs. From a societal perspective, a crisis may be viewed as “a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making critical decisions” (Rosenthal, Charles, & ’t Hart, 1989, p. 10). From an organizational perspective, a crisis is “a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization’s high-priority goals” (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007, p. 7). Coombs (2014) underlined that a crisis is perceptual, i.e., it is different stakeholder perceptions of an event that assist to define it as a crisis. Further, Coombs emphasized that even if a crisis is unpredictable, it is not unexpected. Organizations do, in most cases, know that different forms of crises can emerge.

The concept of a transboundary crisis, which was introduced by crisis management scholar Boin (e.g. 2010) and focuses on societal crises and disasters, may be viewed as a

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

consequence of late modernity. Here, convergence and integrative processes challenge modern dichotomies. Transboundary crises spread across functional, geographical and time boundaries (Boin, Rhinard & Ekengren, 2014). An example of where different actors at different levels got involved is the Mohammed cartoon crisis in 2005 and 2006. The publication of Muhammad cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllandsposten* led to a national and international crisis with consequences for actors in very different spheres. Examples that can be mentioned are the Danish executive government, European Union, national governments in Middle East countries, media and business organizations, e.g., the Danish-Swedish dairy company Arla whose products were boycotted in the Middle East. “Whether we talk about epidemics, energy blackouts, financial crises, ice storms, oil spills or cyber terrorism – the characteristics of these crises are strikingly similar: they affect multiple jurisdictions, undermine the functioning of various policy sectors and critical infrastructures, escalate rapidly and morph along the way” (Ansell, Boin, & Keller, 2010, p. 195).

Previous research in crisis management tells us the importance of sensemaking, that is, a decision maker’s ability to interpret signals and create an understanding of what is going on (Boin, ’t Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2005; Weick, 1995). This is not only pivotal for crisis management but also necessary in order to be able to communicate in a crisis. One example of the difficulties of sensemaking in transboundary crises is the equivocality and complexity. In most equivocal and complex situations, there is not a lack of information; these situations are instead characterized by confusion and are not solved with more information (Weick, 1995). Equivocal situations are managed with sensemaking processes within an organizational interpretation frame, i.e., organizational culture. Sensemaking processes produce a common understanding – a social constructed reality – that constitute a foundation for organizational actions during a crisis situation. Sensemaking makes it hard to define the borders between risk and crisis, which has been a solid distinction in earlier research. Due to



Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

the merger of risk and crisis, Reynolds and Seeger (2005) state that “changes in the nature and scope of crises and emergencies, in the levels and kinds of threats faced by the public and in the ubiquitous nature of media coverage, require more comprehensive approaches to communication” (p. 52f).

Transboundary crises also change the dynamics of arenas and stakeholders that are closely connected since the main stakeholders tend to be different at various geographic and functional arenas (see the theory of rhetorical arena, Frandsen & Johansen, 2010b). As a result, crisis managers are often caught off guard since they tend to focus on stakeholders who they are already acquainted with and who, at first sight, seem to be the most powerful (Christensen & Kohls, 2003). Stakeholder issues become even more complex when looking at transboundary crises due to the multitude of issues attached to the crisis as well as the cascading arena dynamics. From a stakeholder perspective, this means that the crisis will almost certainly involve a variety of actors that will most likely change over time due to the cascading and non-linear dynamic. The notion that crises travel across administrative, cultural and geographical borders opens up the importance of networks. The emphasis on communicative networks, which has been facilitated by recent developments in communication technologies, in contrast to traditional mass media approaches, steers attention towards message exchange, relationship building and message creations as a process (Zaharna, 2007).

Message formulation is another field that is challenged. Following traditional crisis communication, advice organizations should do their best to limit the number of actors that communicate during or after a crisis. Ideally, all communication is managed and controlled by a centralized crisis management group. One spokesperson is supposed to represent the whole organization and speak with “one voice.” However, this is very difficult to follow (partly due to the development of social media and organizations) in transboundary crises and

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

the idea of crisis communication control falls easily. Consistency, adaption to established frames and pre-understanding of how different actors managed earlier crises limit the possibilities for organizations to communicate. Further, in crises where the geographical boundaries are crossed, a message intended for a specific public might easily be picked up by other publics; a process that is facilitated by today's information technology. A good example is the Muhammad cartoon crises (see Holmström, Falkheimer, & Gade-Nielsen, 2007). One message in one context may not work in other contexts. The idea of one message to all during and after a crisis is challenged: contextual and situational factors may lead to message strategies where different messages are used (Coombs, 2014). Crisis communication in transboundary crises requires more elaborate strategic thinking.

An outcome of a crisis is that an organization's social legitimacy tends to be weakened or even devastated because the organizational actions are not considered to be in line with generally accepted norms (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002; Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy is a public perception of an organization's actions in relation to norms, values, beliefs and definitions that are shared in a society, and legitimacy can be used strategically as an important resource in the competition with other organizations (Suchman, 1995). Massey (2004) concludes that there is a clear relationship between successful crisis management and the possibility to maintain and recover its legitimacy. One way to recover an organization's legitimacy is through a trust and brand recovery campaign. The aim of a campaign is to influence a relationship between an organization and certain publics. According to Botan (1997), the ethicality of campaigns is related to the values that are communicated.

There are several theories on crisis communication response strategies. In this study, we chose to combine and apply image repair theory (Benoit, 1995) and the concept of the rhetorical arena (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010a, 2010b, 2013). Image repair theory is founded in rhetorical apologia theory and analyzes organizations or individual response

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

strategies during a crisis, focusing management of threats to image. Benoit (1995) is the dominant communication scholar when it comes to the analysis of responsibility in crises. Communication strategies that are used in the post-crisis phase are different forms of responses to accusations of guilt and wrongdoing, and offer an alternative version of what has happened (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). The theory consists of five main image repair strategies. Depending on "what the person or organization has said and done and what others say about and how they behave toward that person or organization" (Benoit, 2013) the theory may be used to conclude which strategy is or was most efficient. The five main strategies, which may be combined, are: (1) Denial (e.g., simple denial or blame shifting), (2) Evasion of Responsibility (e.g., provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions) (3) Reducing Offensiveness (bolstering, minimization, differentiation, attacking the accuser) (4) Corrective Action (e.g., recall), (5) Mortification (apologizing).

The theory of rhetorical arena is based on a critique of an earlier crisis communication theory, including the image repair theory. Frandsen and Johansen (2010a) found that previous research mainly focused on one sender or one actor, neglected crisis communication before and after the crisis and was only interested in verbal messages. As an alternative, they developed the rhetorical arena, aiming to understand crisis communication as a multi-vocal process. Frandsen and Johansen (2010a) pinpoint that "if we want to capture the complexity characterizing crisis communication, we must look for various types of (dis) connections and for more or less coded patterns in the many communication processes that take place inside the rhetorical arena" (p. 429).

## Method

We have conducted a qualitative case study of the Findus horsemeat scandal. As of now, there is no generally accepted definition of the case study (Hammerlsey & Gomm, 2009).

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

Researchers in the social sciences and the natural science conduct case studies but the concept entails different meanings within these disciplines. A case study is consequently not a methodology (VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007; Yin, 2014). It is rather a research strategy with several characteristics such as the number of units studied, focus on the particular rather than the general or typical, and the use of several additional methods (Heide & Simonsson, 2014b). This study embraces Findus as an organization and how the crisis situation during the horsemeat scandal was managed. The empirical material is based on interviews and document analysis, with an emphasis on the latter. We conducted two long semi-structured interviews with the CEO and the operations director at Findus Nordic. Our interview guidelines contained questions on the perception of organizational crisis, the course of events, strategies, experiences, mistakes and so forth. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and we then read through the material several times with the goal to find different patterns and themes that could guide us during the analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We also performed a documentary analysis of six press releases that the company distributed during the crisis. Documents are social facts that “construct particular kinds of representations with their own conventions” (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997, p. 47). This means that we must always bear in mind what the purpose of the document is and what it is used for. Press releases are texts produced in relation to certain conventions, and the form and function of the texts must be analysed. We primarily used press releases to describe how the management group tried to persuade the media and the public and how they handled the situation. Additionally, we used secondary data, such as brand, trust and sales statistics, in our analysis. We do make analytical generalizations, typical for qualitative analysis, but do not claim that there are any statistical correlations between the crisis management and the effects on brand, trust and sales statistics.

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

The following case description and analysis is based on the idea that the horsemeat scandal is a transboundary crisis. We are well aware of the need of a multi-vocal approach but empirically focus mainly on Findus Nordic and their image repair strategy. This means that the role and effects of other voices in the case study are analyzed from the perspective of Findus Nordic.

### The Management of the Crisis and the Recovery Campaign

In 2013, Findus Nordic only had a few products that were not produced at their Swedish facility; one of these products was frozen lasagna. When the crisis took off in Ireland and the U.K. in January, Findus Nordic directly asked for guarantees from their supplier. The supplier Comigel in Luxembourg did not reply and on February 4 it became apparent that something was wrong. On the same day, a couple of days before the scandal became public in Sweden, Findus Nordic withdrew the lasagna from the market. Findus communicated with the Swedish National Food Agency (SNFA), called all retailers, asked Eurofin (the only DNA laboratory available) for tests and prepared to go public.

In late January 2013 (8–9 days before it went public), we activated our crisis group and the internal discussions took off. On February 4, we withdrew the portion lasagna from our product range. We had to postpone making this public due to the response time from the laboratory. Even when we only suspected that there was horsemeat in our lasagna, we contacted the SNFA and then kept them informed continuously.

The first press release was sent February 7. The text is very informative and describes the lasagna withdrawal and how Findus Nordic acted (stopped distribution, sent lasagna for DNA tests and so on). In the text, Findus Nordic communicates that the supplier guarantees it is not dangerous to eat the lasagna but anyone worried about this may contact Findus Nordic and return the product. The crisis management group did not arrange any press conference, which

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

they later found was a mistake due to the massive media attention. An investigation by Findus Nordic showed that the horsemeat had been marked as beef in a complicated supply-distribution chain involving actors in Cyprus, Holland, Rumania and France. The crisis management group concluded that Findus Nordic was a victim of fraud and terminated all agreements with Comigel. Findus Nordic realized that Comigel was a supplier to probably 60 food corporations in 16 countries and contacted the Swedish suppliers and the Swedish Food Trade Association.

In the second press release (February 8), Findus Nordic communicated that it was recalling the lasagna since test results showed that the lasagna was consistent with horsemeat. Findus Nordic took no responsibility for what happened. On the contrary, Findus argued that it had taken the correct actions at every step, modestly blaming the supplier.

In the third press release (February 10), the informative tone in the first releases changes. In this release, Findus Nordic accused the supplier Comigen of fraud and the CEO said “we will take strong action against the guilty actors in this mess. Our reputation has been hurt and we will do everything we can to restore confidence.” The immediate response strategy was, following Benoit (1995), denial and blame shifting towards the supplier. This strategy was consistent during and after the crisis. This strategy demands that you be totally clear about your organization not having any responsibility for what happened, and that you are able to communicate this in a good way to different public groups and stakeholders. This was not unproblematic for Findus Nordic since “the supply chain and responsibility were not hard to explain, but many journalists simplified the chain since, I guess, they did not understand.”

Besides traditional news journalists – Findus Nordic had approximately 30–50 media questions everyday during the main two weeks of the crisis – other voices participated in the rhetorical crisis arena, creating different frames and interpretations of who was responsible.

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

The crisis management group decided to use two main spokespersons: the CEO and the operations director. They did not ban other employees from communicating about the situation and noticed that retired and current employees stood firmly behind the company. The CEO media participation led to more than 6,000 news items.

The core values of Findus Nordic (transparency, responsibility and action) were, according to management, applied in the crisis communication actions. The rhetorical arena was complex and consisted of actors at different levels and spheres of society. First, there was an international sphere. The two other Findus Group cluster corporations in the U.K. and France did not manage the crisis communication in the same manner as Findus Nordic (in the U.K. and in France the reactions were slow, not transparent or organized and very reactive). However, for many customers it was not possible to distinguish between the different parts of Findus Group. Representatives from the EU and leading politicians in the U.K. and in France heavily criticized Findus. In Sweden, the Minister of Agriculture and the Director General of the National Food Agency also criticized Findus Nordic, despite explanations that Findus Nordic CEO had communicated with experts and officials. The Minister as well as the Director General later changed their critique.

Beside the political sphere, consumers communicated in all possible ways. A Q&A was conducted early but many customers still contacted customer support (1,000 per day) or participated in social media, mainly Facebook. Findus Nordic got 1,000 new “fans” on Facebook during the crisis and 85,000 persons viewed the updates. The Findus Nordic Facebook page received 1,000–2,000 comments (mainly negative), and several ironic and humoristic images spread through different social media channels.

The fourth press release was sent on February 11. In this press release, Findus Nordic was consistent when it came to denial and blame shifting as a strategy, but supplemented this strategy with an evasion of responsibility strategy: “Findus takes initiative for industry

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

collaboration for quality issues.” Several retailers and producers in Sweden were mentioned in the release as working together to avoid future fraud. Some days later, on February 14, a new press release was distributed informing readers that new tests, initiated by Findus Nordic, revealed that there were no traces of drugs in the recalled products recalled. A final statement by the CEO summarized the consistent response strategy: “We are a victim of fraud (.). It is not acceptable that a supplier cheats and exposes Findus customers to this. I am very proud of the fact that it was Findus quality tests that revealed this fraud, which now involves over 60 food producers in 16 countries.”

### The Trust and Brand Recovery Campaign

The brand value and, consequently, trust in the company decreased dramatically during the crisis, and the management at Findus Nordic realized that the future of the corporation was at stake. When the media reporting the scandal faded away, Findus Nordic decided to take quick action and start a *trust recovery campaign*. This decision was influenced by advice from international consultants but the main idea originated from the CEO. From a traditional perspective one may think that this was a dangerous decision, since the horsemeat scandal was still manifest in the public sphere and among customers. The management group of Findus Nordic believed that they had to do something, otherwise the decline in brand value would damage the entire corporation. Hence, the decision to start a trust recovery campaign at this point in time was hazardous and could even put fuel to the fire and further deepen the crisis. In this section, we will present and analyze this quite unusual and proactive action during a crisis.

In March 2013, a large trust campaign was launched with film and print advertising in press, TV, radio, and through social media (Facebook). One of the main activities was an invitation to current or potential customers to visit the production facility, and meet the head



Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

director and other coworkers. The crisis communication campaign was titled “Welcome to Bjuv.” Bjuv, located in southern Sweden, is the village where production and the headquarters are located. The main idea behind the campaign was to invite external publics to an “open kitchen” and assure them that the company has nothing to hide. Swedish consumers were invited to a two and a half hour exhibit in the production facility. They saw a film about the production process, did a study visit in the manufacturing plant, listened to several presentations by coworkers and were provided with lunch. In other words, the crisis management group had a firm belief in transparency. That is, the idea of increased legitimacy and trust if organizations make “all” information available to external groups, i.e., to be open and honest (Badaracco, 1998; Brønn, 2010; Christensen, 2002). Transparency is the opposite of secrecy (Rawlins, 2008). The idea of transparency is to reduce organizational boundaries and it always involves rhetoric in order to bring clarity and visibility (Sillince, 2006). The main messages were: a) Findus has been a part of Swedish food history since 1945 with quality products that were tested in all aspects and b) Findus was misled by their suppliers and consequently were themselves victims.

One would think that interest would be fairly low but the “open house” attracted over 2,000 people from all over Sweden (Findus provided transportation to the visitors), viewing 42 exhibits. The local, national and international media (e.g., French and Chinese broadcasting teams) showed interest and participated and exposed the Findus brand 210 times. The head of production told us that the international journalists interviewed several people that had visited the exhibit, and they only had positive things to say about production and the company. These interviews had, of course, substantial positive effects for Findus since ordinary people who had inspected the production process could confirm that it was operated professionally. They made sense of the situation and the production process by using several senses such as seeing, feeling, smelling and tasting. This probably further

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

improved the visitors' positive experience of the Findus manufacturing process. Research has confirmed that transparency, the right to know and honesty are vital for successful recovery strategies (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013; Vaughan & Tinker, 2009). Hence, the question of ethics is fundamental when an organization launches a recovery campaign aiming to re-establish its legitimacy. The kind of campaign that Findus conducted has a dialogical approach, which Botan (1997) regards as the most ethical since it encompasses two-way dialogical communication. This is in line with Habermas's (1984) reasoning that communication dialogue is synonymous with ethical communication. Even if the Findus campaign had elements of dialogue, or there were possibilities of dialogical communication, we don't believe that this campaign reached the high standards of a genuine, symmetrical dialogue. It is more correct, following Habermas, to conclude that it is an example of strategic action. However, the campaign is not a regular traditional one based on a transmission view of communication, but rather one based on a sensemaking view (Carey, 2009). This kind of campaign, where the visitors chose to travel to Bjuv to participate, produces in successful cases strong ambassadors that tell their own rich story about their visit to people in their networks. Human beings are naturally storytellers and they experience and understand the reality as a series of contiguous stories (Fisher, 1984). Bruner (1986) underlines that narratives are a natural way to think and localize human experiences in time and space. Consequently, narratives have in most cases a strong persuasive effect among those who listen to the stories. We all tend to listen and believe in information that we receive from people in our own network, and as a result the persuasive effect becomes larger. This effect certainly has some explanatory value when it comes to the positive result of the Findus trust recovery campaign.

The campaign also had an auto-communicative effect, while organizational members noticed it and discussed it intensively, strengthening the we-ness and the organizational

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

identity (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983; Cheney & Christensen, 2001). Auto-communication is communication that is directed toward external publics, but the message is even more important to the internal public – i.e., co-workers. An effect of auto-communication is that the identity of a person, group or organization elucidates and clarifies (Geertz, 1973). In other words, auto-communication explains and confirms for organizational members what the organization stands for, its values, norms and so forth. When auto-communication is successful, the organizational identity is amplified. Auto-communication is in most cases an effect of external communication, but auto-communication can be used strategically (Christensen, 2002), i.e., an organization can set up an external campaign where one of the intended effects would be to strengthen and consolidate organizational values among organizational members.

They also play a role as ambassador of an organization, and how they perceive a crisis situation is vital since this understanding is disseminated to customers, suppliers and people in their private networks. Hatch and Schultz (2010) claim that organizational members without a doubt are the most important messengers of an organization and, in best cases, also act as ambassadors of an organization. Hence, organizational members “live the brand” and materialize the norms and values of the organization (Karmark, 2005).

Findus regularly measures their brand value. During the crisis the value naturally declined substantially but recovered after a couple of months. The statistics, in fact, showed that Findus in Sweden had a higher preference and value than before the crisis.<sup>3</sup>

The interviewees were satisfied with the management of the crisis but concluded that they also made some mistakes: they should have been more proactive and clear about the reasons behind the crisis; they should have had an early press conference; they did not have enough resources to handle the social media storm; they did not have a clear strategy and

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<sup>3</sup> This statistic originates from Findus Nordic but has been done by respected survey companies. Still, we cannot guarantee the validity or reliability.

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

communication with the political arena. The CEO and operations director were crucial actors. Both of them also had previous crisis management experience and education. How the crisis was managed at Findus is problematic from a communication professional perspective in terms of status. If the CEO and other directors believe and are also successful in crisis management, the possibilities for communication professionals to get access to the dominant coalition are decreased and the status will also be weakened (cf. Bowen, 2009).

### Conclusions

Our limited case study describes a crisis situation that may be defined as a transboundary crisis, challenging borders between the national and international arena as well as between the corporate and political spheres. The roles of social media in this and similar crises are increasingly important as channels for consumer critique and interaction. On a macro level, the crisis that Findus Nordic experienced may be interpreted as a consequence of the late modern development of global capitalism, where corporations use suppliers and distribution lines that are exceptionally complex and difficult to control and make transparent. The risks (besides the financial benefits) with this globalization of production and distribution are obvious not just from an organizational perspective, but also from a consumer perspective that becomes more political and uncertain about his/her consumption (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke, & Malpass, 2010).

The case study describes how Findus Nordic applied a consistent image repair strategy: denial and blame shifting towards the supplier Comigel (cf. Benoit, 1995). This strategy was supplemented very soon with evasion of responsibility, lifting the issue of food quality to an industry level. The crisis management of Findus Nordic was obviously focused on the voice and possibilities from the organization. But the voice of Findus Nordic was only

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

one of many. The horsemeat scandal took place in a multi-vocal rhetorical arena (cf. Franden & Johansen, 2010a).

Findus Nordic was proactive and communicative at an early stage and confronted the scandal in Sweden (to some extent, together with Dafgård and IKEA). Several other food corporations were rather silent. The Findus Nordic brand value was damaged and one may think that the proactive approach was counter-productive if one compares it to other food corporations. But considering the successful trust recovery campaign, we draw a different conclusion.

Findus Nordic acted in the crisis according to the corporation's core values, saw the crisis as a possibility to increase their value and position and started a campaign that led to increased knowledge and positive effects. Total sales for Findus Nordic in 2013 actually increased despite the withdrawal of the lasagna. The crisis had negative effects on the Findus Nordic brand value despite what may be interpreted as a fast, consistent and transparent crisis response. But the trust recovery campaign that was launched very soon after the crisis was, according to our analysis, rather unique. The crisis response and recovery campaign were clearly founded in the corporate values of Findus Nordic (transparency, responsibility and action). This type of campaign, where "ordinary" people are invited to a manufacturing plant and offered to make sense of the situation by using all human senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch), has great potential to make a significant impact on the visitors. As stated in the theoretical framework section, a crisis is perceptual to the extent that how a person understands and makes sense of a crisis situation determines how they react. A visitor's perceptions and understanding will later be distributed in his/her private networks and via social media. There will also be a vicarious learning-effect when interviews with the visitors are communicated in different mass media. A campaign where publics are invited to experience and study an organization from the "inside" is grounded in a belief in

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

transparency and must be regarded as ethical and exemplary. This ethical way of managing a crisis situation is also enhanced by the communicative approach that the Findus campaign embraces. The visitors had several occasions during the study visit to question employees at Findus and get involved in discussions and dialogues. We have also emphasized the importance of the ambassador effect. If the visitors were satisfied with what they saw, heard, smelled and tasted, they would probably tell stories to their friends and acquaintances in their networks. Narratives are, according to Fisher (1987), essential to human communication since they provide a structure of experiences and influence others to share common understandings. In other words, narratives of the visitor's experiences will spread and affect the image and trust of the organization. We have also underlined that a trust recovery campaign has an auto-communicative effect on organizational members, i.e., in best cases they cement their belief in the organization and it's potential to manage the crisis situation. Employees also act as ambassadors of an organization and what they say about the organization have significant effects on different public understandings of and trust in the organization. Organizational members are the most important group, but the internal aspect of crisis communication is still a rather neglected area (Heide & Simonsson, 2014a; Johansen, Aggerholm, & Frandsen, 2012).

This case study has several implications for scholars and practitioners. First, it shows the fundamental importance that organizations act proactive, and as soon as possible after a crisis consider the possibility to set up and launch a recovery campaign that aims to rebuild the general trust. The campaign activities must not only be directed towards external publics, but also, and presumable even more important, towards employees. Since employees have a strong role and function as ambassadors of the organization, they must as soon as possible regain their belief and trust in the organization. Parallel with internal trust building campaigns, the communication professionals must design and launch campaigns that intend

Falkheimer, J. & Heide, M. (2015). Trust and brand recovery campaigns in crisis: Findus Nordic and the horsemeat scandal. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2), 134–147.

to recover the external trust. Second, the case study demonstrates that core values may have an important function to organizations, not at least in a crisis situation when organizational members have to act fast and improvise within a strategic framework (Falkheimer & Heide, 2010). In many organizations core values do not have any substantial value; they are mostly a product of normative isomorphism, i.e. an external pressure to be perceived as a rational, wise and modern organization that do have core values (cf. Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). In equivocal crisis situations, when the sensemaking process collapse, core values function as guidelines for interpretation of the situation and as a springboard for various actions that are needed to be made. Third, this case study can be seen as a role model for successful trust recovery campaigning. All too often, scholars tend to focus on failures or mistakes that are done by practitioners. These studies contribute with critical understanding of strategic communication, but we would like to encourage scholars to also pay attention to successful practices.

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