On their website, Urban Outfitters, a unique and innovative clothing and merchandise retail store, states “We have an established ability to understand our customers and connect with them on an emotional level” (Urban Outfitters, “Company Profile.”) In early September 2014, Urban Outfitters released a product that connected with customers on an emotional level, but in a negative way rather than positive. The product was a vintage Kent State Sweatshirt, with what appeared to be holes the size of bullets and red dye spattered over the faded salmon color. While the company say it was a product to add to their “sun-faded, vintage collection,” many consumers immediately saw it as reminiscent to the Kent State shootings in which four students were killed and nine were wounded (The Huffington Post, Short, September 15, 2014). This led to an uproar attacking the organization for their poor judgment in the release of the product. Urban Outfitters pulled the product from online and all stores, and released a short, six-sentence statement with their apologies and explanation on Twitter (Twitter, Urban Outfitters, September 15, 2014). In addition to outrage over this product, many critics of Urban Outfitters exclaimed their frustration of yet another product to be added to the list of offensive products released by the company. While a weak apology was released by the organization to the public, the insensitivity of Urban Outfitters towards different groups of publics has been an issue over the last decade, and with no consistency in communication from the company following the incidents. In order to continue having a larger customer base in the future given their most recent challenge, Urban Outfitters must take many necessary steps to improve their public relations in the future, not just with controversies but in their day-to-day operations.
In an article from The Washington Post, author Maura Judkis highlighted the many controversies as a result of Urban Outfitters products (The Washington Post, Judkis, March 29, 2013). The article was released in 2012, two years prior to the Kent State debacle, hinting a long-term reputation management issues for Urban Outfitters that continues to be a problem. As a result of all the insensitive apparel and merchandise pieces released by the company, the following publics were hurt and complained to Urban Outfitters: the transgendered community, the gay community, the Navajo Nation, Irish and Irish-Americans, independent designers, women’s health advocates and bloggers, Jewish people, residents of Mexico, and even more since then. The article also mentions that Urban Outfitters used different communication tactics to respond to these issues. When the store sold kaffiyehs offensive to the Jewish community, they issued an apology, as they did with the Kent State sweatshirt (The New York Times, Kilbum, October 8, 2014). However, after releasing numerous shirts that depicted Irish-americans as binge-drinkers, no such apology was made (today.com, Fenner, March 2, 2012).

After a decade of over 13 controversies from Urban Outfitters, the company has a major issue in regards to their reputation management, and in the ability to communicate with their publics. Following the release of the Kent State state sweatshirt, Urban Outfitters faces a challenge. The public does not trust the Urban Outfitters brand, and especially finds it not to have a sense of humanity towards their consumers following the release of many insensitive products, especially the Kent State sweatshirt. After the most recent incident, Kent State University released a statement inviting the management of Urban Outfitters to visit the May 4 Visitors Center and learn about the event that happened in 1970 (Kent State University, Mansfield and Vincent, September 15, 2014). Not only does Urban Outfitters need to learn more
about the Kent State shootings and other insensitive matters, they need to educate themselves on better public relations objectives, strategies, and tactics to regain the trust and positive brand awareness for their company and products.

Looking forward for Urban Outfitters, they have four objectives that they need to consider: there first is how to increase and improve their brand perception from positive to negative with overall better forms of communications. Second, Urban Outfitters needs to reevaluate the role of Public Relations for the organization and how it can be more effectively utilized to help with not only their image and reputation management, but also their business objectives. The store also needs to show the importance of different publics to the company, even though they caused a lot of damage in these relationships due to their controversial products, by allowing for a greater flow of communication from the store to these publics. Finally, the store needs to learn how to better handle crises in the future. Through numerous strategies, and specific tactics, Urban Outfitters can achieve these objectives and recover from the current challenge they are facing.

In order to achieve these objectives, there are four strategies the Public Relations department at Urban Outfitters must consider as they start to repair their brand awareness. The first strategy is to improve their positioning and how all communications surrounding Urban Outfitters are perceived by their different publics, and create a reputation for the organization. A second strategy the store needs to consider is helping the management to understand their corporate responsibility to communicate with the public, and comprehend the importance of public relations for the company. As corporate at Urban Outfitters learns more about the concept of reputation management, they can start to combine it with their business objectives, and
understand how the two intwine. A third strategy the organization needs to practice is a better flow of communication from the organization externally that can include feedback from different publics. Finally, the fourth strategy the company must consider is they can not only improve upon handling crisis situations, but also understanding how to better anticipate them and cause minimal damage to the brand in the future. With all these objectives and strategies to overcome Urban Outfitters’ current challenge, there are a number of specific tactics the company can employ to improve their brand in the future.

Each of the tactics consider many aspects of public relations and will help to progress the strategies and objectives of Urban Outfitters. The first tactic to consider is the R.A.C.E. model (Research, Act, Communicate, and Evaluate) which can be employed with all tactics moving forward (Millaway, September 6, 2014). As the Urban Outfitters Public Relations department looks to make changes in their communications policies, they should give each tactic considerable thought from start to finish. The R.A.C.E. model is an excellent way to consider the utilization of different forms of communications tactics and whether or not they would benefit the company.

In regards to their positioning, there are a number of tactics to consider. First is to consider what is the unique selling proposition for the company, and what exactly makes their proposition strong enough to win over the public from their competitors (Millaway, September 13, 2014). While Urban Outfitters currently strives for the vintage-hipster vibe with all of their merchandise, in an attempt to be different, they have started to become offensive. They should strive for a unique selling proposition that does not cause concern for the publics. This also ties into the positioning of the company in regards to attributes. Every company is known for specific
characteristics with one that makes a company unique. Currently, Urban Outfitters is known for being controversial, but they need to find that characteristic that makes them unique in a positive way. This leads to their positioning in regards to innovation. As they continue to innovate new products, they need to consider their unique selling proposition, and innovate in a way that shines a positive light on the brand, and not continue to create more controversies for the organization.

Another concept for Urban Outfitters to consider in regards to positioning and brand awareness is the Laws of Public Opinion (Millaway, September 13, 2014). Following major events, public opinion is highly sensitive and can be determined by major occurrences more than ever before. If the company had known about this concept, they might have considered it with the release of the Kent State sweatshirt. Following a major event like that, even after 40 years, public opinion is still sensitive, and to create a product reminiscent of the shootings reminds the public of the event and resurfaces those negative, upsetting emotions, which are then directed towards Urban Outfitters.

In regards to management having a better understanding of the role of public relations for the organization, there are a number of tactics to employ. Specifically they should create a formal code of conduct that would highlight the values and business practices of the organization (September 13, 2014). Such a formal code would most likely not want to create insensitive material towards specific groups of people. Within that code, management would want to consider their corporate social responsibility, and how the store would want to have positive impact on society. Instead of creating materials that are insensitive to consumers, they should focus on creating products that offer a sense of pride. The organization should not only consider
corporate social responsibility in regards to their merchandise, but could also have more of an informative, educational presence with awareness to issues they have previously used in a comical manner. Instead of creating shirts that said “Eat Less,” they could make efforts to educate their consumers on healthy nutrition whether through apparel or other merchandise available at the store (The Washington Post, Judkis, March 29, 2013).

However, for many managements, there is little understanding of how public relations could influence not only the brand awareness of an organization, but it can also help with the business objectives, which is usually the primary concern for leadership. Many of the leaders at Urban Outfitters could play a larger role in helping to promote the role of public relations for the company, and allowing the practice to “have a seat at the table” (Millaway, September 27, 2014). In order to do this, the PR team needs to have an idea of what management is looking for, how they measure what is successful, and set achievable goals for the company. At Urban Outfitters, a more agreed-upon form of communications between the public relations department and management will help to better understand the goals for the brand, and how they want their brand to be perceived by their merchandise.

Finally, management should consider the important elements of leadership in order to have successful reputation management: honesty, consistency, ethics, and humanity (Millaway, September 27, 2014). With the recent controversy in regards to the Kent State sweatshirt, Urban Outfitters did not consider at lease three of these elements. They continued not be consistent in their crisis communications tactics with just an apologetic tweet made available on Twitter. They appeared to lack honesty in their explanation about why they wanted to sell the product. Finally, the company, once again, showed a lack of humanity with the release of the product, not
considering how the sweatshirt might emotionally influence their consumers. If management at the store considered these leadership communication elements more in regards to their business objectives, as well as the role of public relations, they will have more consistent, positive brand awareness.

The flow of communication externally at Urban Outfitters also warrants greater consideration as they attempt to overcome their latest challenge (Millaway, September 20, 2014). Currently, Urban Outfitters works with a two-way asymmetric form of communication in that they send out a message to the public via their merchandise. From there, they receive feedback when customers complain about the messages they are sending. While Urban Outfitters occasionally makes a response in crisis moments, this is the only time that they respond to the public. Instead, the organization should seek to use a two-way symmetric communication model in which there is more of a balanced flow of communication between the organization and their publics. This would mean that the store would have to more actively participate in the conversations consumers are having about their products and merchandise, especially online and through social media. As opposed to just responding when there is controversy, if Urban Outfitters is actively participating in the conversation, not only is this a better form of communication, but they might be able to anticipate, or even prevent, crises before they arise.

One immediate step to take in order to monitor these conversations is to become more active in social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter, where consumers frequently share their opinion. By considering these channels, the store will have a better idea of what the public is saying not only about their individual products but their brand as well. By having a better flow of communications with their publics, the company will understand what sort of messages they
want conveyed through the merchandise, and what sorts of issues they might find offensive. Going forward Urban Outfitters and all their different publics will have a much healthier relationship.

Also in regards to focusing on the communications with their publics, Urban Outfitters needs to consider the audience-centric theory of constructivism, and understanding how a customer will think about the meanings associated with a certain product (Millaway, September 20, 2014). This idea is similar to that of Edward Bernays and his focus on symbols, which conveyed with a certain product, can issue a certain feeling or emotion for the public (Millaway, September 6, 2014). Looking at the Kent State sweatshirt, there are at least two symbols the organization should have considered that the public might see. The first would be the holes, circular and small-enough to look like a bullet. The second would be the red color dye near the holes, reminiscent of blood that would come from bullet shots. Both of these symbols represent sadness, frustration, and death, making the public upset and angry. If the store had considered this idea of constructivism and symbols in regards to their publics, Urban Outfitters may have been able to predict a crisis prior to the release of the sweatshirt. Considering these tactics will benefit the strategy to improve the flow of communications from the store towards their publics.

Finally, the last strategy for Urban Outfitters to consider is an improvement in their crisis communications, an area that needs the most help given their record of controversies over the last decade. Often with crises, comes many opportunities, the chance to re-evaluate, and make change for an organization moving forward (Millaway, October 4, 2014). However, given the repetitive nature of crises at Urban Outfitters, the organization has not been able to grasp an understanding of the opportunity that comes with a crisis to improve their company. In regards to
handling crisis, there are tactics the organization could be handling in two categories: first, how to anticipate, and prevent a crisis, and second, how to handle a crisis situation in a manner that causes minimal damage.

There are many tactics the store should be employing throughout their day-to-day work in order to make crises more manageable. First would be the creation of stand-by statements and media kits as materials to be distributed during a time of crises (Millaway, September 20, 2014). Often when there is an issue, the media wants information as soon as possible. With these tools available, Urban Outfitters can give information for the press quickly while still being able to compile a formal response. Additionally, the organization should be working to build relationships with journalists from all forms of media: online, national and the outlets more likely to cover news about the store such as fashion blogs or publications (Millaway, September 20, 2014). By building relationships with reporters, when there is a crisis, journalists are more likely to cooperate and help the company avoid completely ruining their brand awareness. This later tactic would have been helpful with the latest controversy. While journalists could have discussed the Kent State shirt debacle alone in their stories, many reporters often referenced the other dozen crises the store had faced over the years, creating large graphics and slideshows to highlight each insensitive product the store has ever created. If Urban Outfitters had previously formed stronger relationships with journalists, they might not have had so much negative press, not only highlighting the current crisis they were dealing with, but also all the ones before. Finally, the organization could consider an issues management process when releasing new merchandise (Millaway, October 4, 2014). In this process they could try to identify issues beforehand that could arise. It would be during this period that they could make standby
statements for the future. For the store, if they are releasing a product, they should be considering if there is a group of people that might take offense to the product, and if so, how would they respond? How would they communicate with that group of people? All of these steps could be taken in advance to help alleviate the consequences of a crisis.

Upon facing a crisis, there are many steps Urban Outfitters could take to improve their responses. The first issue the store needs to work on is having more consistent communications during a crisis (Millaway, October 4, 2014). While they have apologized for some products that offended a group of people, with others they have made no such action. As part of a Crisis Response Plan, having consistent communication is always key to restoring a brand’s image and credibility. The organization also needs to put more of an emphasis on the goals of crisis communications as an overall umbrella to helping them improve their response. The first goal is to terminate the crisis quickly. Urban Outfitters is often slow to make any sort of a response when there is a complaint with their product, making their apology in regards to the Kent State sweatshirt days after they had released it and negative comments had surfaced. The second goal is to limit the damage, which the company struggled with given their poor relationships with journalists, and the critical articles that were written about the company and their past controversies. For the last goal, the store needs to look towards restoring credibility, which is still a struggle after a decade of releasing products offensive to certain groups of people. Instead of restoring credibility, Urban Outfitters continues to bring negative publicity to the brand. After so many crises, the organization needs to make an effort to reach out towards all the publics, and offer sincere apologies, and a strategic plan as to how they will not continue to insult groups within their consumers with offensive products. Finally, when responding to a crisis, Urban
Outfitters needs to consider “the sins of Business writing” in how they make their statements and apologies (Caywood, 543-546). The statement made in regards to the Kent State sweatshirt crisis was a six-sentence extended tweet that not only ignored the audience and sounded pompous but also seemed to lack humanity (Twitter, Urban Outfitters, September 15, 2014). The company needs to offer more of a humanistic approach in their apologies, not only with a better Tweet, but more courteous actions such as a donation to the Kent State memorial. With better communications tactics before and during a crisis, Urban Outfitters will be able to improve their strategic approach in responding to a crisis, and help bring more positive publicity to the brand.

Following the release of the Kent State sweatshirt, the most recent crisis after a decade of many, Urban Outfitters looks to bring consistent positive awareness to their brand. Through numerous public relations strategies and tactics, if employed, the organization should be able to meet their objectives: decrease the negative publicity and improve the positive publicity brought to the brand, reevaluate the role of public relations and how it can benefit the company, allow for a greater flow of communication externally to their publics, and finally, improve their crisis management during major situations. Although it seems like a daunting task, investing in all the tactics and strategies to meet these objectives will not only help Urban Outfitters currently, but help them gain a strong brand and reputation as they move forward. Investing in this public relations plan will restore great brand awareness and credibility to the company, as well strong reputation management for Urban Outfitters permanently.
Works Cited


