



Bernard Pollack

Reputation, reputation, reputation

*At a recent conference **Simon Hodgson** heard all about the vital importance of managing a company's reputation. It set him thinking about how such a delicate and nebulous thing can be handled*

It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it," said Warren Buffet, billionaire investor and so-called Sage of Omaha. "If you think about that, you'll do things differently." So it seems. You'll invest thousands of pounds into 'reputation management'.

Or, that was the message from a short conference held in London last month. Reputation and the Bottom Line showcased several companies' efforts to track and manage their reputations. Because, you see, a reputation can now be measured; and what can be measured can be managed. I can save you a few hours here, condensing the thinking into four easy steps.

First you measure your reputation: survey some people, ask what they think of you; or invest in a web-crawler service

to stay on top of every mention of your company's name in cyberspace. The latest versions even tell you whether the mention was positive or negative by automatically looking for adjacent words so no human ever has to read the article. (Acona, excellent, excellent, Acona – there, that's helped a bit for us.)

Next you map out all those who can influence it – the academics, journalists, MPs, campaign groups and so on – those who might be persuaded to say nice things about you. Or (heaven forbid) who might be planning the opposite.

The third step is to develop your messages. Consider just what it is that you want these people to think about you; perhaps you are innovative, environmentally responsible, stronger than

your peers, or particularly well managed.

And then all that remains is to communicate. Remember to be imaginative about how to do it; letters are so old hat. Take people for lunch. Make video podcasts. Place articles into the kind of papers that they read.

Voila – your reputation is now managed. For a perfect process, simply repeat the survey to check that your key audiences are getting your message and refine or redouble your efforts accordingly.

You might detect a certain scepticism in my tone here, but I just can't shake the suspicion that there's something wrong with this picture. In fact I can't help but wonder if this type of thinking isn't more a cause of the problem rather than its solution. Because in the end, I want to believe that a company's reputation is based

more on what it does than what it says.

There is absolutely no doubt the aim is relevant and timely. Even before the banking crisis, the public view of large companies and those who run them was bumping along the bottom. The latest edition of Edelman's Trust Barometer puts public trust in business leaders at 29 per cent, right down there with journalists and estate agents. Trust in business seems to have collapsed globally along with the stock markets. Equally, companies are wise to consider how and with whom they should communicate in this complex, interdependent 24-7 world. Our opinions are constantly morphing and evolving, informed by media buzz and conversations with friends as much as any formal documents we read.

And surely it is precisely that interconnectedness, that goldfish-bowl transparency which renders ultimately hopeless the attempt to manage one's reputation after the fact. To use an environmental analogy, it's like trying to fit end-of-pipe technology to an infinite number of effluent pipes. Wouldn't it be better to look again at the process going on in the factory and see if we can't remove the emissions at source?

Let's stay on the environmental theme. Environmental professionals know the huge effort it takes to run a tight environmental ship. Wastes are recorded, targets set, sites audited, action plans followed up, equipment is calibrated, legislation pored over. Thankfully, these days few sensible companies would simply publicly claim to be green without the systems – and the data – to back it up. In fact, some even under-

claim, perhaps not wanting to put a hex on something they know to be hard won and fragile. Not 'green-washing' but 'green-hushing'. Because a company's proud record of zero incidents depends, ultimately, on what happens in the Grimsby depot at 3am on a wet Thursday morning.

And so it is more generally. The reputation of a big company is formed by the millions of decisions and actions taken every day by the people who work with it and for it. If they are rushed, misguided, poorly trained or just plain incompetent, reputation will ultimately suffer. No matter how much the company might proclaim

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'customer focus' as a key message, if the helpline staff have their allocation of four minutes cut to three minutes per call, the truth will out somehow. Why not look again at that decision if one is concerned about reputation? And the employees know it too – they aren't stupid. MORI's Reputation Council released data showing that while 63 per cent of CEOs understand the importance of 'reputation management', only one in 10 front-line staff share this concern. Perhaps they see something their CEOs don't.

It is even possible that the overt management of reputation simply pours fuel on the fire. It seems likely that one

component of public distrust is a bellyful of spin, a sense that each public utterance is made with more thought given to its effect than its veracity. The harder companies work to manage the message, the thicker becomes the defensive shield through which that message must pass.

Of course, doing the right thing is much harder than saying the right thing. It's difficult to know what 'right' is; for every customer frustrated by their three-minute call limit there may be another delighted by the brisk and efficient approach. And even once we've decided, we have to change hearts and minds, or get the same effect by system and process. It's a long, slow business. But in the end, it has the advantage that it's right. Employees will – in general – welcome it. And it will eventually win out over even the most sophisticated reputation management exercise.

I'm sure that there are nuances here that I have missed, and that communications professionals the country over are spluttering in indignation. I'm equally aware that it's not an either/or choice. But it seems to me that the pendulum has swung too far in one direction and it's time for some rebalancing. It's just a personal view and another quote from the Sage of Omaha puts it – and all similar opinion pieces – properly in their place. Expressing his homespun scepticism of fancy journalistic arguments, Buffett said: "Let blockheads read what blockheads wrote". Quite. ■

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