



Don't leave reputation to the roll of a dice

Leslie Gaines-Ross, chief reputation strategist at Weber Shandwick, draws on her new book, *Corporate reputation: 12 steps to safeguarding and recovering reputation*, to explain how companies can protect and repair their reputation in a changing and volatile business environment

1 Take the heat, leader first

A single corporate leader must serve as the official spokesperson and accept responsibility during troubled times. Messages must be clear and consistent to avoid confusing stakeholders and damaging credibility at a time when trust is paramount. This is not the time for finger-pointing.

2 Communicate tirelessly

People are hungrier for information when times are challenging. Leaders must communicate crisis-related information honestly and quickly. To relieve doubt and jump-start productivity, employees also need reassurance.

3 Don't underestimate critics

Be on guard against well-organised and experienced critics, including competi-

tors and pressure groups, which can mobilise quickly and take advantage of a company's vulnerability. Critics have staying power that can last for years, and many have now flocked to the blogosphere where their voices are amplified for entirely new audiences.

4 Reset the company clock

Focus on what needs to happen next for recovery, while instilling a new sense of urgency to ignite change and accelerate progress. One chief executive, for example, summoned his senior team and displayed charts of the firm's rapidly falling market share.

5 Analyse what went wrong and right

While maintaining a focus on the future, take time to learn from what went right and what went wrong. Reputations are

not destroyed overnight, but are gradually worn down over time. Remain vigilant for signs of potential problems and address them before they mature into a full-blown crisis.

6 Measure, measure, measure

Experts are right when they say you can manage only what you measure. Create benchmarks, conduct reputation tracking/employee and customer satisfaction surveys, perform media audits, scour the internet, monitor social media, and review reputation scorecards and league tables to check progress and ensure the company is moving in the right direction.

7 Correct the culture

Although a few individuals can usually be blamed when a company loses reputation, wrongdoing is frequently systemic. Even if a culture does not actually encourage misconduct, it might at least tolerate it. To right a company's culture, leaders must pay utmost attention to its value system and apply steady pressure to replacing values that are either wrong or no longer relevant. As former IBM chief executive Lou Gerstner said: 'In my time at IBM, I came to see that culture isn't just one aspect of the game – it *is* the game. In the end, an organisation is nothing more than the collective capacity of its people to create value.'

8 Seize the shift

Overcome 'exceptionalism', where you make an exception for your own firm. Instead, align business models and practices with small and large new

business shifts and a transforming business environment. Royal Dutch Shell recognised that it had to catch up with changing business practices if it was going to restore its reputation following an oil reserves understatement several years ago. A post-Enron worldwide focus on stricter corporate governance led Shell to recognise that its dual-board structure had grown unwieldy and outdated, so it unified the two parent companies with a single independent board headed by a non-executive chairman and a single chief executive.

9 Brave the media

Know how and when to use traditional and new media to communicate recovery progress, and respond quickly, cohesively and consistently to any negative issues or criticisms. Over 10 percent of Fortune 500 companies now have external CEO or executive blogs that present the company's point of view and invite comment. Dialogue trumps monologue.

10 Broadcast the good news

Recovering reputation typically does not come from one major event or announcement, but rather from a series of incremental steps that slowly generates positive momentum. By communicating positive milestones and actions clearly and succinctly, companies can begin replacing negative stories with news of progress and achievements.

11 Commit to a marathon, not a sprint

Understand that reputation recovery is a long-term process that does not end after a sudden burst of success. It is a continuing effort built on a long and successful track record.

12 Minimise reputation risk

Stay ahead of the curve by monitoring ongoing reputation risk, learning from organisations' strategies, and planning for the worst-case scenario. Minimising risk is critical to maximising reputation recovery. Anticipating problems should be practised every day to avoid unforeseen problems and keep companies on the straight and narrow path to full recovery. ●



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