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Five rules for global reputation management

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A marketer with experience working across cultures gives five key tips to help marketers manage reputation internationally.

What do BP, Google, Amazon, Starbucks, Unilever, Volkswagen and Mossack Fonseca have in common? Well, you might say they all have had damage to their reputations over the past 12 months, despite their best efforts and millions invested in ‘managing’ their brand perceptions across cultural and geographic lines.

Clearly, managing how you’re perceived on a global and local scale is no easy feat – especially as the beasts of television, print and social media need feeding 24/7, and have a keen appetite for corporate inconsistencies.

My work with companies around the world has proved that there are reliable ways to manage a corporate reputation. These include:

1. **Track everything, everywhere**. This includes both online and offline media since – in reality – this is now a false divide. It’s easier to track online commentary about your brand, including the number of smiles and frowns in photos that include your product or service. A dashboard that’s manageable (such as Signals), and can be readily communicated to the whole organisation, is an essential tool.
2. **Check assumptions**. What plays well in Liverpool may not work in Los Angeles, as there are both language differences and cultural messages to consider. For example, the Hispanic consumer in southern California (my original home) takes away a different message from car showroom posters showing a woman proudly standing alone next to her new car; she isn’t seen as independent. Instead – sad, alone and with no family – she is pitied. This is the unintended consequence of sloppy research and marketing execution.
3. **Manage your CEO**. Many CEOs still need to be educated about the impact throwaway remarks can have on consumers and share prices. Giving the CEO some media training up-front can protect you from serious reputational damage. For an example of how an otherwise highly competent CEO can damage a company solely through lack of marketing guidance, take a look at the career of Coca-Cola’s former head Doug Ivester. On a more positive front, proactively building a relationship between your CEO and the media could help you gain valuable coverage in future.
4. **Align your PR/comms, marketing and sales functions**. It seems obvious that you would want to ensure corporate comms knows what the marketing and sales teams are up to, and vice versa. Yet in most organisations, they stay in their silos and do not share performance metrics, or share an understanding that the strategy of each team has an impact on the others. When these teams work separately they can take contradictory approaches that confuse the public – but by working together they can amplify a single, powerful message.
5. **Rethink who your stakeholders are**. In my experience, many companies have too narrow a definition, forgetting that the spheres of influence transcend the usual suspects (staff, investors, suppliers, distribution channels, alliance partners, governments, media, and so on). More widely, I suggest including the bloggers, vloggers, influencers and expert pundits whose views are increasingly potent. They now shape public opinion and corporate policy, as Unilever found out last summer. Sofia Ashraf, a Chennai rapper, created a music video about CEO Paul Polman and the company’s toxic mercury waste disposal, leading the organisation to rethink its impact on India’s Kodaikanal forest.

So what does all this mean for those in the reputation business? Don’t take your reputation for granted, as it is always at risk and easily disrupted – but you can protect it by taking a more cooperative, holistic approach to engaging the people who talk to you.

Allyson Stewart-AllenCEO International Marketing Partners Ltd
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