

The ABC of reputation

Learn some lessons in reputation management without attending the school of hard knocks

Winston Churchill said: 'A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.' Guy Esnouf sums up the fundamentals of reputation in his honest and open portrayal of how E.ON learned to listen and improve – the hard way. Importantly, in thanking his environmental detractors, he recognises the opportunity of proper insights driving change.

All too often, that is how organisations come to appreciate the true value of reputation – when challenged, when they stumble, when it hurts. But heart-stopping tests do not have to be the only teacher. When it comes to reputation, like lessons at school, it is useful to start with ABCs.

◆ A is for Advocacy. In this world of doubtful motives and low trust, endorsements and supporting messages from other people, beyond paid-for corporate channels, are the future. Therein lies the power of social media – along with employees who are genuine brand ambassadors, customers who are sales agents and specialists who are wise advocates.

Assertions by brands are more open to challenge than ever as brand propositions are re-coloured and reshaped by multiple voices, both by individual consumers who interact with brands, and by arbiters like confused.com. Advocacy is at the heart of trust, which is the driver of behaviour.

◆ B is for Behaviour. Guy rightly says that behaviour is all. Comms' job is to stimulate the desired response and behaviour among stakeholders. There needs to be less guesswork and a greater appliance of science to what drives choice and changes behaviour. There's much to draw on from the behavioural sciences, sociology and psychology: what are the emotional and rational drivers of belief, commitment and behaviour among different



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groups? This should not be guesswork, but knowledge.

◆ C is for Coherence. Most organisations do not have 'matching luggage' between values, comms and action. Corporate structures are not made for our flat, transparent and instant world. Silos are now obstacles – and owned and paid-for comms are not usually aligned with the 'earned' spaces. Booz & Company has highlighted the importance of coherence in delivering greater effectiveness and efficiency, driving strategic and focused investment and ensuring alignment. It has become essential for organisations to challenge themselves on how they see and define themselves. They must assess how key stakeholders view them and where they are in stakeholders' own eco-systems, centred around stakeholders not the organisation, and mapped against the bought, owned and earned sources of influence. The resulting gap analysis highlights the levers to be pulled.

Roller coaster market sentiment has made the sense of unpredictability stronger. Picking up signals of impending change is more important than ever.

It's time to realise just how valuable people's perceptions are. Echo's recent study with Bestra Brands found that corporate reputation adds £460bn of value across the FTSE350. We are finding that quality of management and innovation are two of the most important reputation drivers delivering significant value. We know assessing reputation in this way helps ensure senior management addresses both tangible and intangible assets for a more resilient future. Remembering some simple ABCs will help ensure the journey is less obstacle-strewn.

As Churchill said: 'The empires of the future are the empires of the mind.'

Sandra Macleod is group CEO at Echo Research

Views in brief

Which brand has gained most, reputation-wise, in the wake of the riots?

The community brand. Local people have united, almost as in wartime, to restore the status quo and bring the 'enemy' to book. Residents, retailers, consumers and passers by came together to repair the damage and re-embrace civility.

How would you deal with an assault from UK Uncut on your clients?

We'd hope clients would have advance notice of direct action from the webcasts we do. We'd look to investigate the disconnects blocking dialogue at least, and the common ground at best, so the client could reach resolution.