

GIBBS & SOELL

Insight

FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

December 2010

Ring in the New Year with a New Reputation

As we close 2010, many well-known brands would just as soon forget the past 12 months. From the BP oil spill tragedy and Toyota's sudden acceleration issues to LeBron James' public "decision" to let the world know which team would have the honor of paying him to play basketball, there were plenty of damaged reputations in need of serious repair.

What lessons can be learned from events like these? The fact that bad things happen to good brands isn't new. It happens all the time.

Wasn't it just a year ago we were talking about the irreparable damage Tiger Woods brought upon his image? And, thanks to two videos that aired on YouTube, we got to see a lone musician take down United Airlines after its baggage handlers broke his guitar, and we watched in horror as a Domino's Pizza employee violated numerous public health laws while making a sandwich.

Does Reputation Matter?

As communications and marketing professionals, we are often the keepers of the brand, company image and reputation. We're on the front lines and among the first to be called when the brand takes a hit.

Given the lackluster response many companies offer when such incidents occur, do we simply assume customers no longer take reputation into account when making purchase decisions? Hardly. A good reputation still matters. Skeptical customers want to do business with brands they trust. And if that trust remains uncompromised over a long period of time, customers can evolve into some of the most effective advocates for the brand.

Audiences today are looking for honest answers to tough questions about corporate values and bottom-line results. They're demanding straight talk – often from the CEO – which can't be conveyed easily via a store coupon, Twitter message or a Super Bowl halftime ad.

Communicating trust isn't easy. It takes time, effort and a sound strategy. When faced with adversity, some companies have tried to advertise their way back into consumer's hearts – and pocketbooks. Yet, according to a 2010 *Adweek* Media/Harris Poll of 2,098 U.S. adults surveyed online, only one in five Americans say they trust that advertising is honest in its claims all or most of the time.

In general, all adults surveyed were skeptical about the believability of advertising claims. However, results showed mistrust rises with age as older adults were more suspicious than younger ones.

The same survey asked adults which type of ads they tend to ignore or disregard the most. Interestingly, despite the explosive growth of online advertising, Internet ads topped the list, with 60 percent saying they ignore Internet ads the most. Nearly half

Feeding America: Remembering Those in Need

Gibbs & Soell would like to take this opportunity to say thanks to clients, employees and associates and to remind everyone of this special time of year – a time when we reflect, hope, dream and set new goals.

Each year, Gibbs & Soell selects a charity and makes a holiday donation on behalf of those whose commitment and support we deeply value. This year, we chose Feeding America, the nation's leading domestic hunger-relief charity that provides low-income individuals and families with the fuel to survive and even thrive. For more information, please visit www.feedingamerica.org.

of these people said they ignore banner ads the most (43 percent), followed by search engine ads (20 percent). Much smaller percentages said they ignore ads on television (14 percent), radio (7 percent) and newspapers (6 percent).

Trusted Adviser

At a time when public trust has become a scarce natural resource, many companies – and more importantly, many chief executives – are re-discovering that smart public relations can serve as an organization's powerful inner compass. For those leaders looking to convey a message of trust with their key audiences, PR enables and facilitates this dialogue with efficiency and impact.

Building credibility by nurturing relationships openly over time is what PR does best. Propelled by a comprehensive communications strategy that strengthens and protects an organization's reputation in the eyes of stakeholders, leaders can move their businesses toward economic recovery with greater confidence and purpose.

To help form their own views on a company's reputation, audiences still turn to journalists and other objective authorities. For executives thrust into the fast-paced, complex environment in which news and other credible third-party opinions are presented, an experienced PR counselor can be an invaluable trusted adviser.

But how does an enterprise measure the value of reputation management?

Measuring Reputation

Insights gleaned through targeted PR research can connect communications strategies directly to a company's business objectives and decision makers. Gibbs & Soell counsels clients to continually assess the mindset of internal


leadership while also regularly stepping outside the typical "echo chamber." Below are ways to truly capture and listen to a broader set of opinions from those who influence corporate reputation:

- **Leadership audit.** Through coordinated outreach, key players are targeted within a client's marketing and communications groups, as well as the layer of management that ultimately controls funding. To encourage complete transparency, confidentiality is guaranteed and participants remain anonymous. Results are used to align PR objectives with business goals and to build consensus on the benchmarks that will tie communications efforts more closely to business outcomes.
- **Content analysis.** The ROI of media coverage is evaluated through a thorough assessment of content. In addition to media references, content analysis applies a proprietary process to rate tone, message delivery, prominence and impact against the broader business objectives. Similar measures are used for competitive content analysis, which examines how media coverage generated stacks up against the competition.
- **Journalist audit.** Message acceptance within the traditional, digital and social media community must be measured before and after a PR campaign. Typically, the audit focuses on a specific issue or set of issues, and all journalists are guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. The substance of their replies adds yet another layer of insight into the PR measurement.
- **Stakeholder surveys.** The compatibility of brand messages is measured against the viewpoints of broader audiences, from influencers and channel partners to

end users. Surveys can run the gamut from on-site focus groups to large, quantitative online surveys.

Precious Asset

By regularly taking the pulse of company leadership, the media, customers and other stakeholders through careful research, PR evolves into a powerful guiding force for the pursuit of business growth.

After all, as many companies work hard to rebuild financial stability amid an improving economy, an investment in PR is an investment in protecting an organization's most precious asset – its reputation. 

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