

The times we live in right now have thrust reputation to the fore

 By [Jeremy Briar](#)

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The one thing that's very clear about the impact of the crisis we're in is that it will no longer be business as usual. The status quo is up for grabs and to be tone-deaf to the times carries huge consequences. Just ask the CEO of Crossfit, Dischem or even Facebook. Their reputations are under fire and one hopes that they, like any responsible business leader, have the counsel of their senior public relations professionals.



The costs of not taking counsel are high and yet too often public relations is buried in marketing, sitting on the business margins, viewed as a cost centre versus revenue generator. But I reckon the shareholders of Crossfit can very clearly count the cost of their CEO's tweets regarding #blacklivesmatter - they lost a major sponsor and over 1000 gyms disassociating themselves from the chain. Or the [public relations nightmare](#) for Dischem who are counting the costs of a price-gouging suit; and litigation with landlords over rent disputes during lockdown. At play at the moment is the fallout for Facebook of major advertisers pulling their spend.

Those businesses most likely had an army of accountants on call; legions of lawyers on hand, and by my reading no one counselling them on their biggest vulnerability - what their customers are thinking and feeling. Or put another way; "What the mood is out there?"



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How would PR have helped?

How would PR have helped? Well for one, we would have known immediately how any of their actions would be received - badly. We have a good understanding of how things will resonate - we're outward-facing, dealing with your public and their proxies daily.

Secondly, we should not and don't blindly push the internal company line, or ideas or practices without questioning them. We know what will fly and what will not from years of experience dealing with the most hard-nosed of consumers - journalists; and now through social media, dealing with your consumers directly.



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Thirdly, we're acutely sensitive to, and understand the risks posed by a crisis, and that the best response is to avoid one at all costs; as the cost can be your reputation.

Your business is built on its reputation

And loss of reputation is a compounding issue. When Dischem ran into another Covid-19 issue earlier this month, this time with its staff, for charging them for Covid testing, the media referenced their two earlier Covid problems - price gouging and rent disputes. So anyone coming to this story for the first time suddenly has a broader context that doesn't look good.



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It is critical for businesses to realise that their business is built on their reputation and to play fast and loose with it is dangerous. Reputations are built over time, one day at a time; but lost overnight. And then they need to be rebuilt again, one day at a time, but this time from ground zero. I fail to understand why a business will risk that.

This is life unfiltered. Justice is swift. So take some good advice and ensure public relations is in your inner counsel.

ABOUT JEREMY BRIAR

Jeremy is the CEO of Total Exposure, a leading public relations business representing major global and South African businesses for the past 25 years.
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