

Reputation management, a more integrated ecosystem



By [Daniel Munslow](#)

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Looking at corporate reputation management in 2020, one of the biggest challenges we are going to face is the full integration of reputation across the entire value chain. It is accepted that communication must be authentic, agile and in real-time, but now the complexity is around the scope of such communications and its span of control.



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Whether we are talking internal communication or external public relations, the role of communication is to manage reputation through connecting with stakeholders around purpose and value. Stakeholders need a reason to believe, and it's this that drives connection.

However, reputation is not just the written word. It is also not just a message in isolation. Reputation is the sum of all experiences with a brand, its product, people or even a country. A company today can have the most-loved brand and amazing product, but if the service component falls short, the brand's overall reputation suffers.

Still, many organisations are trying to work out where the role of communication comes in, in so far as reputation management is concerned. The reality today is that it's the entire value chain, as even poor customer service can significantly impact a brand's reputation. It is, therefore, more critical than ever that communicators are involved in the entire value chain of anything that shapes reputation, to proactively safeguard such risks.



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There is nothing more frustrating than a brand that cannot connect the dots. As an example, I recently had to call a call centre and after a nearly 70-second process of reaching someone (those annoying IVRs), the agent has to put you on hold for a minute or so to transfer you, only to hear the CEOs voice saying how customer focused his company is (but 2 minutes in and no one is helping you yet). I eventually spoke to someone who was not skilled to assist and eventually hung

up the phone when I asked to speak to a supervisor. I wonder if this CEO knows the context in which his voice and message is being used. Someone looking at this process from a reputation lens will pick up different nuances than a call centre specialist.

Reputation is the golden thread that connects the dots from call centre to marketing to brand to IT to the CEO's office to the learning and development department – all have to converge to create a powerful reputation.

Communicators are going to have to embrace a more complex, less sanitised and wider span of control to manage reputation effectively. Similarly, other business owners in their departments are going to have to allow these communication specialists to play their role as strategic advisors to support them reputationally.

Are we on the right track? Well, on the positive side, generally speaking, more companies are engaging with the importance of this integrated communication approach and recognising the business impact of effective employee communications. Many companies are seen to be investing more to align communication in complex, federated businesses.

There is also a growing number of professionals focusing on organisational outcomes as well as communication outputs. This has to be coded into a robust communication strategy to quantify ROI and business impact using 3D modelling.

The good news is the fundamentals don't change. Communication is about, well, communicating and while technology is making communication faster, more agile, more customised and more accessible, we should never forget that at the end of the day a customer forms a multi-dimensional view.

So how can we create this more integrated approach?

Put stakeholders at the centre of your communication

We have to shift from executive-driven content and campaigns – what the company wants to say from the inside out to what all stakeholders want to hear from the outside in. A stakeholder-driven value chain is sure to connect better, with messaging that stakeholders can relate to, in an authentic way.

Shape great experiences

We use content to connect but experiences to engage. Whether we are talking employee engagement with managers or the brand's experience with a customer, it's those moments of truth that make or break a brand.

Match what you say with what you do

As with experiences, if your brand messaging is misaligned to physical experience, there will be a trust gap leading to disconnection. When employees hear they are the most important asset, but the company's actions don't align, and when a company says they're invested heavily in technology but the user experience is worse than before, these are examples of

disconnected brand experiences. They can erode reputation quickly.

Personalisation

Definitely nothing new here. The drive to cloud-based, mobile-only systems continues, with the added dimension of genuine data-personalisation.

Changing lenses

Communicators are trained to spot a reputational risk, sometimes from an angle that other professionals in IT, facilities, legal or compliance might not see. In the same way that communicators might not see the same risks they see. This is the importance of the integrated ecosystem. It ensures everyone is working together from the beginning to plan ahead. It requires expert-based teams that are able to partner on multiple dimensions.



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Change communication

It wouldn't be possible to talk about 2020 without talking about change communication and the pace with which organisations are asking their employees to change.

Change is disruptive, no matter how small. It is critical to maintain harmony within an organisation during bold initiatives that shift the fabric of how business is done. Whether this is a new operating model, sustainability, environmental or digital, communication plays a key role that can make or break such change.

This communication, once again, must look at the change from the users' perspective. I recently ran a focus group where a person said, “The way exco uses a product is different to the way we use it. So, they must remember that when they sign it off, we are the ones that have to make it work. What gets sold to them is very often very different from what we are told it can do, and even more different from what it can actually do.”

Collaborate with your stakeholders

No one operates in isolation. No one is an island. Organisations need to set in motion better more effective ways to interact with stakeholders more regularly and more systematically. This avoids frustrating (and very costly) mistakes and workarounds later on.



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Manage issues proactively

If 2018 and 2019 taught us anything about crisis communication, it's to manage issues faster and with greater transparency, and to be available and visible when leadership is needed. It is still mindboggling to see the number of leaders who have to backtrack and apologise for not responding, than simply responding and leading from the front in the first place. It is critical to have a reputation lens on at all times, and plan proactively to build resilience. Where it gets quite tricky is where there is a need to protect both a regulatory licence to operate (the business, legal and legislative framework

that allows a company to function) and a social licence to operate (the trust society places in a company, usually involving an ethical dimension, that makes people feel good doing business with an organisation).

2020 will no doubt be a year where integrated communication continues to step up as a key strategic advisor in business and to look at reputation more holistically, even if it means offering advice to business areas that don't always understand why communication wants to (has to) have a say.

ABOUT DANIEL MUNSLOW

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