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MANAGING CORPORATE REPUTATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

PROTECTING AND HARNESSING YOUR ONLINE AND OFFLINE REPUTATION



Burson•Marsteller

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[Image](#) courtesy Wikipedia

The management of corporate reputation is facing unprecedented challenges. Driven by ever higher expectations of good behavior and disclosure, NGOs and activists, newly vocal consumers, zealous regulators and disaffected employees are scrutinizing corporate behavior as never before.

Mainstream and social media are being used in increasingly sophisticated ways to draw attention to issues and mobilize opinion; anyone can now broadcast their views instantly and broadly using the panoply of tools freely available. And with journalists and other opinion-formers using blogs, micro-blogs and other web-based media as core tools to track news and trends, seemingly anodyne issues can be amplified instantly.

Furthermore, reputation is now global. What is said today in Sydney can impact sales tomorrow in Manchester. Videos leaked on the web of an altercation between a Chinese trawler and a Japanese coast guard vessel immediately jeopardized relations between the two governments.

Having long believed they were largely in control of their reputations, many organizations feel they are less able than ever to manage their reputations and influence behavior.

In fact, the ability for companies to control their reputations has always been limited – after all, brands are built not by companies, but by consumers, and not in ways that a brand manager or communications staffer might want or expect.

As former JWT chairman Jeremy Bullmore [points out](#), "Consumers build an image as birds build nests. From the scraps and straws they chance upon".¹

Bullmore was referring chiefly to consumer brands, yet corporate reputations are constructed in much the same manner.

Today, the winds that distribute these scraps and straws are increasingly forceful, blowing in from all directions and travel further and faster.

The principal monsoon winds impacting corporate reputation are:

Real-time

In November 2011, rumors of a crash of a Qantas A380 swept across the Internet. These rumors were incorrect – the plane's engine had only caught fire and it made an emergency landing in Singapore.

Yet, for a short while, rumor became news as people shared 'eyewitness' accounts online, notably on Twitter, which were picked up and reported as fact by leading wire agencies and the mainstream media.

Previously the airline and its manufacturer would have rushed to issue a holding statement to the media to contain the story. But it had already gone viral, disseminated not by professional journalists but ordinary people unbound by fact checking and boosted by trigger-happy retweeting.

Not only are rumors spreading fast, they are also going global at frightening velocity. Channeled through online

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communities and affinity groups and escalated via micro-blogs and search engines, and as the quality of online translation tools improve, language is no longer the barrier to information flow it once was.

According to a recent Burson-Marsteller [study](#), the great majority of business decision-makers feel it is now much harder to manage newsflow and reputation, and that the Internet, social media and the need to respond extremely quickly are key challenges.²

It is little wonder that many communications professionals feel on the back foot, able only to react to rather than proactively shape opinion.

Transparency

Under pressure from governments, NGOs, activists and other stakeholders, organizations are being forced to be more open about their activities. Enron, WorldCom and other corporate meltdowns forced financial disclosure into the regulatory spotlight and, with taxpayers effectively bailing out companies, changed the notion of the 'social contract' between companies, government and society. Since then other issues – notably supply chain management and sustainability – have taken center stage.

Accordingly, it is significantly easier to see weak spots, cover inaccuracies and spot inconsistencies. And those organizations that continue to limit their output to a PDF document consisting of little more than compliance check-boxes risk looking out of touch and even defensive.

It is also much harder for organizations to keep secrets. In an age when just about everything ends up as bits and bytes, how easy it is now for employees or partners to copy documents or emails or leak confidential information to the media, direct to the Internet or to WikiLeaks.

Equally, in times of trouble, it is tempting for organizations to turn inwards. Toyota's failure to disclose problems with foot pedals across a number of its product lines, despite a series of crashes and considerable mainstream media and online speculation, is a good example. BP's apparent initial

reluctance to reveal how much oil was spilling into the Gulf of Mexico is another. In both instances being perceived to have withheld the truth only made the situations worse.



The image shows two social media posts. The top post is titled "Toyota Recall" and features a Toyota logo. The text reads: "An interesting analysis on Toyota's corporate culture and it's role in the recall saga:" followed by a link to "How Toyota lost its way" on money.cnn.com. A small photo of Akio Toyoda is included. The bottom post is also titled "Toyota Recall" and features a Toyota logo. The text reads: "After the tragic death of two young women in California, an investigation reveals that rental car companies don't always get their recalled vehicles repaired. Stay safe out there, everyone." followed by a link to "Deadly Rental Cars on the Road" on wildfire.gigya.com. A small photo of a car is included. Both posts show interaction options like "Like", "Comment", and "Share" along with timestamps.

Accountability

In addition to transparency, many types of organizations are being made to be more accountable for their actions, and to involve stakeholders to a greater extent in the decision-making processes.

Hong Kong-ers have a long history of political activism, be it against the British colonialists, or more recently the SAR government. From mid-2009, groups of residents and activists came together to protest advanced government plans to develop an Express Rail Link between Hong Kong and Guangzhou in southern China. The line, they argued, was not needed, would be environmentally damaging and overly expensive.

Similar to recent events in the Middle East, the Hong Kong protests were largely organized and amplified using tools like Facebook and mobile phones. In this case, the protesters gathered in front of the Hong Kong government headquarters and before Parliament, forcing the issue onto the front pages and back onto the government agenda.



Image courtesy of Flickr user [Melanie_ko](#)

Of course, it is not just governments that are feeling the heat - consider the problems Tata Motors faced from displaced farmers (and, subsequently, activists, politicians and celebrities) when trying to open a new factory in Orissa, India, in 2008. Or the bouts of strikes over pay and conditions suffered by Honda Motors at its car plants across mainland China in 2010 from workers who felt ignored.

Consistency

Until recently, organizations could communicate the same information to employees, consumers and investors in quite different ways, using different messages and separate channels. Information still largely travelled locally, so the chance of these messages getting into the 'wrong' hands was relatively low.

Nowadays, however, people have access to not just to greater amounts of information, but also, thanks to the Internet and search engines, to much of the same information.

There's also the ever greater array of gatekeepers busily patrolling Wikipedia and other key information gateways. A mixture of true subject-matter experts and self-appointed guardians, they see their role as recorders of the 'truth' and exposers of corporate and mainstream media inconsistencies, half-truths or outright falsehoods.

All of this makes it much harder to communicate differently among various audiences, as Goldman Sachs found when it was discovered to be betting against its clients in the financial markets despite [claiming](#) that their 'interests always come first'.³

But it also raises the bar on good corporate behavior, which must now be ever more joined up.

Nowadays... people have access to not just greater amounts of information but also... much of the same information.

Why, it is asked, should a corporate brand behave differently, or have apparently different values, to the operating brands it owns?

Professionalism

NGOs and activists are becoming increasingly adept at using the plethora of channels and tools at their disposal to increase awareness of their campaigns and activities, organize and activate support and raise money.

As noted in Burson-Marsteller's [Brand Vulnerability Index](#), the more successful the brand, the higher the risk of it being challenged on environmental, social and human right issues.⁴ According to Greenpeace, "targeting brands was like discovering gunpowder for environmentalists".

In March 2010, Greenpeace published a [new report](#) stating Nestlé was buying palm oil from unsustainable sources in Indonesia, the latest salvo in a long-running campaign for sustainable palm oil.⁵

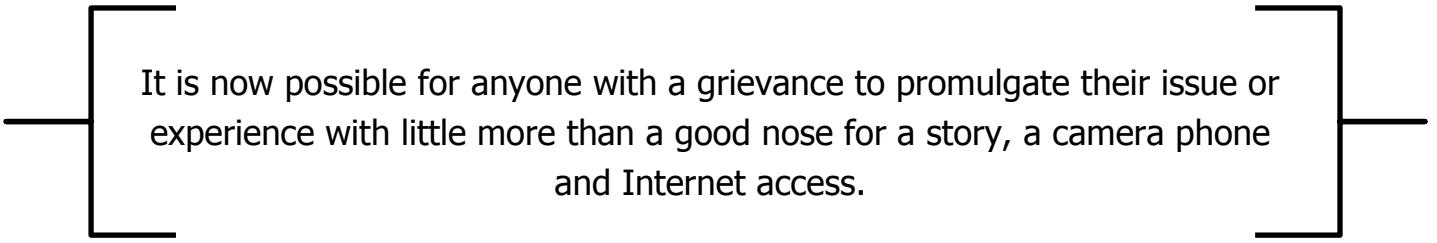
This latest phase was launched using a combination of conventional media relations, guerilla marketing and highly sophisticated use of the Internet and social media that included the simultaneous launch of multiple websites across the world, each with localized materials for followers to download and spread the message, hostile attacks on Nestlé social media channels, and an [emotive video](#).⁶

Within three weeks, over 1.5 million people had viewed the campaign on YouTube, over 200,000 emails had been sent to Nestlé, thousands of comments had been posted on Facebook and hundreds of calls had been made to the company. Shortly thereafter, Nestlé partnered with The Forest Trust to set the objective of achieving zero deforestation by 2015.

Such skills apply not only to well-known NGOs; bloggers and other social media cognoscenti are also highly proficient users of the tools of their trades, skilled at building interest in their specific fields and ensuring their output is

visible on the top pages of search engines.

Indeed, it is now possible for anyone with a grievance to promulgate their issue or experience with little more than a good nose for a story, a camera phone and Internet access – a real potential challenge for all organizations, nor least those with poor quality products or customer care.



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Control

Companies have long believed that they could control their reputations. As we noted above, this has always been a myth. People make up their minds about a company or brand on the basis of their own experiences together with those of their friends and acquaintances – Jeremy Bullmore’s scraps and straws – rather than what an advertising campaign or press release might tell them.

There is no question that the ability to manage one’s reputation and brand online has become exponentially more difficult with the current culture of online content sharing and manipulation. How simple it is to doctor a logo, mash-up a video, establish a fake Twitter stream, mock or attack an individual - and to remain anonymous while doing so. In this environment, conventional approaches to the protection of copyright, privacy, even patents, are at best muddy, hampered by a host of differing legal frameworks and approaches.

In the meantime, a strongly legalistic approach to controlling one’s reputation can easily backfire, as Nestlé discovered when it tried to have Greenpeace’s Have a Break palm oil video removed from YouTube, or Barbara Streisand found out when she ordered pictures of her house suppressed (the so-called [‘Streisand effect’](#)).⁷

And how react to the [@BPGlobalPR](#) Twitter stream that appeared during the oil giant’s Mexico oil spill? The account still exists and counts nearly 167,000 followers at the time of writing, compared to 26,500+ for the firm’s [official channel](#).^{8,9}

Culture & Operations

Some firms are well-suited to the new spirit of openness and authenticity – especially relatively flat organizations that place a premium on internal knowledge-sharing and open external relationships.

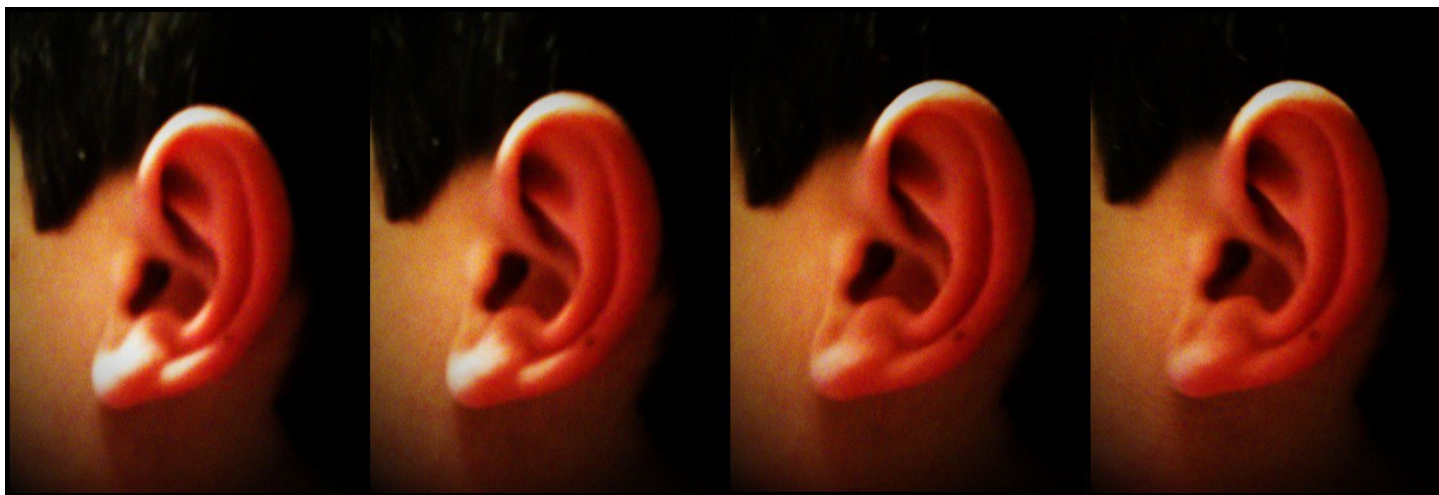
Yet the majority of organizations are struggling to identify and put in place the appropriate structures, protocols and tools to meet the challenges set out above.

Is social media principally about marketing? Or is it about reputation? If the latter, who’s the spokesperson? Or should reputation building and management be more a local prerogative, driven by grassroots staff? Who pays? How to measure success?

Equally, do your employees understand whether or not they are allowed to participate in online discussions in a professional capacity and, if so, understand the legal and reputational consequences of their actions. Few firms would want to experience their people recording themselves adding mucus to take-away pizzas and uploading the videos to YouTube, as Domino’s suffered in the US.

In this context, companies must also be conscious of employee loyalty. High staff turnover is generally indicative of a culture that fails to manage or reward its staff sufficiently, and disgruntled employees are much more likely to be publicly dismissive of their employers, or former employees, than those committed to the long-term.

SIX KEY PRINCIPLES FOR MANAGING REPUTATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE



[Image](#) courtesy of Flickr user [woodleywonderworks](#)

[Recent research](#) by Burson-Marsteller shows that most companies' responses to the new reputational challenges raised by the Internet and other drivers outlined above tend to be tactical and incremental.⁹ And most firms are [poorly prepared](#) for crises as they emerge and spread online.^{10, 11}

Clearly, social media works better for some types of organizations than others. [Studies](#) show that 'flat' companies that make decisions quickly and encourage internal and external knowledge sharing report measurable benefits from their investment in social media, especially technology companies and business, legal and professional services firms.¹²

Yet most organizations are less nimble and have yet to adopt the new mindset required. Here are some basic principles for organizations of all types looking to manage and grow their reputations today:

#1 Listen Closely, And Be Seen As A Listener

As Greenpeace discovered, consumers (rather than investors or the media) largely drive perceptions about companies. Hence it is imperative that companies know and understand what influences or shapes perceptions about them.

Traditionally, companies invest in focus groups and other market research tools to gather customer insights. Yet, despite the avalanche of discussions on the Internet – not least from those all-important customers and prospective customers - only an [estimated](#) 20% of companies are tracking what people say about them online.¹³

A virtual focus group of thousands, even millions, the Web provides a real-time snapshot of what your customers and other stakeholders think about you, your competitors and your industry. It can also yield an unparalleled glimpse into what your stakeholders consider important in their lives, providing a rich seam of information from which to develop products and hone your marketing and communications.

Of course, listening has long underpinned corporate reputation management, helping to identify broad societal shifts or develop a better understanding the specific interests and requirements of politicians, journalists and employees. Yet the challenge today lies less in keeping one's eyes open but rather, given the pace of change and the titanic volumes of data and information at our disposal, in how to identify what really matters – be it a well-connected customer with a justifiable grievance, a forum post with real potential to damage or a discussion that uncovers a business opportunity.

This requires a clear idea of what you're looking for and good knowledge of the tools to help strip away the clutter.

A forensic approach to assessing data also helps.

Beyond listening, it can also pay to be seen as a listener. Having experienced first-hand the power of the Web in exposing faulty products, Dell launched [Ideastorm](#), an online community where anyone can add and vote on ideas about how Dell can improve across any area of its business, from products to customer service to supply chain management.¹⁴

Better still, Dell convinced its stakeholders that this would be no empty vessel but a core tool in re-building its business and its reputation. Since its launch in February 2007, users have contributed 15,000+ ideas, over 430 of which have been implemented by the company.

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#2 Be Genuine

In a more networked world in which partial truths and untruths are dismantled all too easily, it is ever more critical that organizations are seen as genuine. But what does being genuine mean?

At one level, being genuine is about aligning one's corporate agenda and priorities with those of your core stakeholders. It involves engaging stakeholders in dialogue and activity – whether highly structured such as trade union negotiations or more open-ended online 'jams' - that are deliberately and unambiguously designed to benefit all parties.

An example is [Pepsi's Refresh](#) program, which encourages people to submit and vote on Arts & Music, Education and Community ideas for the drinks company to fund.¹⁵ In addition to the healthy buzz that 'genuine' cause-related campaigns can achieve, it also helps that that stakeholders feel involved in the decision-making process.

Being genuine is also about doing something and being committed to it. There is increasing public skepticism about corporate 'ambulance chasing' – companies opening their cheque-books for the next earthquake or disaster,

but just as quickly turning their backs once the cheque is written and the press release distributed. Dell's Ideastorm community can be regarded as successful not because it provides an open forum for constructive discussion, but because the firm is actively using ideas from the community to re-invigorate its business.

In addition, marketing rhetoric must match reality. As we have seen, the scope for companies to say one thing and do another has narrowed, especially on sensitive or emotive topics connected to the environment, human rights, supply chain management or customer and employee rights. It is vital to communicate in a manner that manages expectations and does not over-state the case or steer people to think about or act on something that cannot be interpreted as representative.

What's the Pepsi Refresh Project?
Pepsi is funding amazing ideas that refresh the world. Dream it, submit it, get enough votes and we'll help make it happen for your community!

Vote for Your Favorite Ideas
You can vote for up to 5 ideas every day. Feel free to vote for your own!
Find great ideas

Join a hot Discussion
Meet people who like the same topics you do, hang out, share ideas and get advice.
Find your scene

Boost your voting power
Choosing specially-marked Pepsi products could mean up to 100 more votes for the ideas you love.
Redeem Power Votes

Got a refreshing idea? Here's what it takes to get funding.

Think of an Idea
Make sure it fits into one of our three main categories, or take the Pepsi Challenge.

Submit Your App
Get Help Applying with step-by-step guidance on how to fill out the application.

Promote & Get Votes
Get out there and get votes! Need help? Check out our Promotion Guide for tips.

Get Funding
If your idea gets enough votes become a Finalist. It may get funding from Pepsi. Now go Refresh Your World!

www.refresheverything.com

#3 Engage Openly

Dell had the courage to engage its key stakeholders openly through its Ideastorm community, to manage their conversations only in the most limited sense and not to seek to close down discussions that were negative or might be interpreted as awkward internally.

For many, reputation management means little more than ensuring that key stakeholders (notably investors, journalists and employees) are kept properly appraised, appropriate regulatory and best practice boxes are checked, and that logos meet company guidelines. Yet the rise of civil society with their attendant rights and expectations, to-

But what is a transparent corporation, and how do you go about creating one?

It's all too easy to say everything should be accessible, but in reality companies must tread a thin line between protecting confidential and competitive information and opening their corporate firewall, which simply tends to fuel additional expectations on openness.

Listening closely to the demands of different stakeholders and engaging them sincerely in dialogue can help build initial trust, but a real commitment to transparency must be sustained over time for it to be credible.

A good place to start is within the company itself, notably ensuring that the appropriate corporate governance policies, internal controls and disclosure practices are in place and that the Board has full access to the information it requires. They must also consider their transparency strategy – to what extent can and should they disclose their business, social and political activities?

At a broader level, employees need to know and believe in their firm's vision, strategy and contribution; they should be your most articulate and passionate brand ambassadors. Yet for many companies, internal communications is less of a priority than keeping investors, regulators and the media on side.

A real commitment to keeping employees as fully appraised as possible on the firm's beliefs and activities – through internal town halls, a rich and up-to-date intranet or internal newsletters – can help build trust internally, limit negative word-of-mouth and reduce employee churn. Nonetheless, these tools may no longer be sufficient. Younger 'Generation Y' staff and graduates expect employers to offer them the same level of engagement and transparency as they experience on Facebook. They believe that they too have a voice, and are accustomed to using it. And if they can't voice their feelings internally, a gripe on Facebook or an anonymous post to a company review site such as [Glassdoor](#) are all too appealing an option.¹⁹

Companies, then have to think carefully about the tradi-

tional 'top-down' approach to internal communications, carefully shaped and scrutinized by corporate communications and HR. Instead, they should consider facilitating more 'bottom-up' and 'side-to-side' contributions enabled by social media such as internal blogs, wikis and collaborative systems such as [Chatter](#) through which employees can share thoughts and ideas and initiate conversations.²⁰

Likewise, corporate leaders can use these tools to communicate, frame discussions and garner feedback from their people. And by talking not just about company news or industry trends but also about their personal interests and activities, leaders can present a more human face. However, like any successful conversation, it must be sincere, based on real listening and be sustained.

Of course, transparency also applies to online corporate behavior. To build trust, individuals should always disclose their names and affiliations when participating in online conversations, and should scrupulously avoid ramping conversations anonymously or via third parties, a practice that can easily backfire.

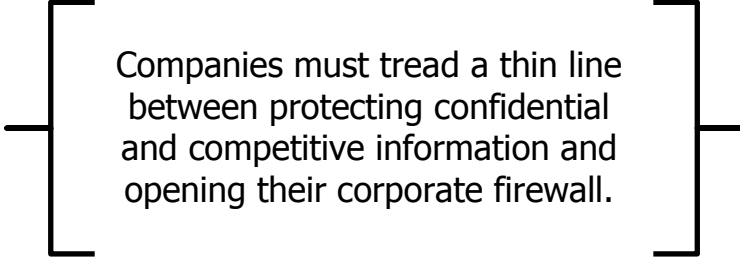
#5 Prepare Globally

In today's digital age, an organization or individual's reputation is global as much as local. The Internet helps to spread news wide, with bad news traveling instantly amongst affinity groups and by language.

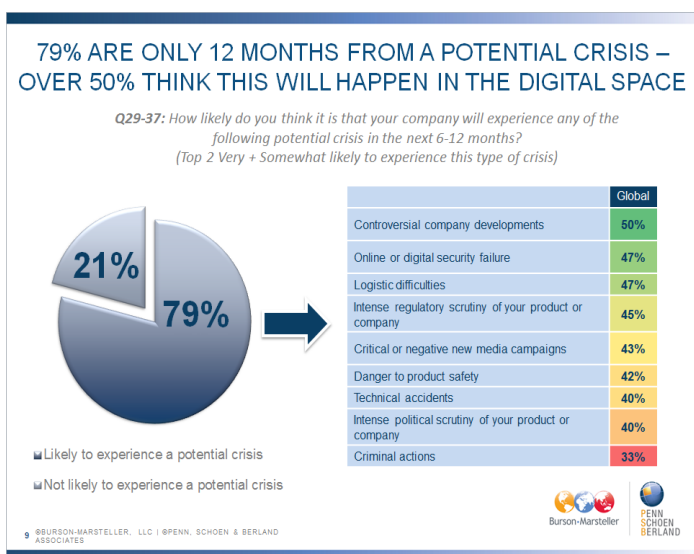
To prepare, companies need to understand the dynamics of these communities and how they work together as an ecosystem. In addition, they must analyze and understand sources of influence and the types of information that motivate these communities and the key individuals within them, both locally and globally.

Firms must also be in a position to respond effectively on a global scale. As Burson-Marsteller has [shown](#), social media-fueled issues and crises are on the rise, especially in Asia where a clear majority of executives anticipate a serious crisis impacting their organizations in the next twelve months.²¹ Yet most companies feel they have little idea how best to deal with them.

As a priority, organizations should establish the govern-



Companies must tread a thin line between protecting confidential and competitive information and opening their corporate firewall.



[Burson-Marsteller 2011 Crisis Preparedness Study](#)

#6 Connect The Dots

In our experience, many organizations focus internally and on 'conventional' opinion-formers in the government, industry and media to identify potential marketplace, operational and other weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

Given the ever greater array of stakeholder groups influencing sales and reputation, companies would benefit from taking a broader view of their audiences and influencers to include NGOs and bloggers.

And as information flows continue to accelerate through greater use of smartphones and as consumers extend and deepen their embrace of social media, it also pays to have a close understanding of core customers' interests, requirements and behaviors.

For instance, an important customer segment appears to be increasingly concerned about human rights or the environment, chiming in with activist statements, or a key online influencer is starting to question product marketing claims by a business unit in another country.

In this complex world, companies must approach reputation management as a multi-disciplinary, cross-functional effort that is closely managed and co-ordinated at a senior level. At it must be driven across the organization on an ongoing basis, rather than as a one-off exercise.

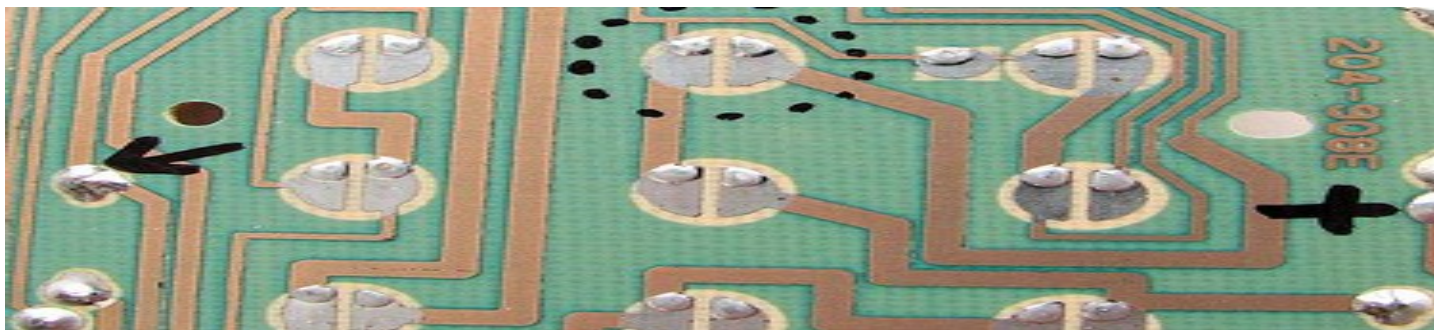
ance infrastructure that that will govern participation in social media across the organization on an ongoing basis – most typically a company-wide social media policy – and ensure that not just marketing, communications and customer service teams in the front lines but also their broad employee base fully understand the do's and don'ts.

They must also consider carefully how social media sits within and across their organization and ensure that their core customer-facing teams are properly prepared through customized social media education programs. Firms are also putting in place cross-functional steering committees or corporate centers of excellence that develop strategy, co-ordinate teams and share best practices.

From a reputational standpoint, firms need to have a clear picture on their vulnerabilities, and will benefit from identifying and prioritizing the issues that may impact them and map out the responses in terms of triggers, messages and approval processes. They will also likely need an accelerated approach to issues escalation and, in some instances, a more flexible messaging architecture.

They must also make sure that the tools are in place to help spot and tackle issues early - most notably a social media monitoring system (or systems) that can scour the web for relevant discussions and mentions across multiple languages and markets – as well as the channels through which to help contain issues and respond effectively during a crisis.

NEXT STEPS



[Image](#) courtesy of Flickr user [oksay](#)

Here are some steps an organization can take to start strengthening its corporate reputation:

1. Understand Your Audiences

Few organizations get a grip on what their audiences think about them, beyond those they already know well. It is also important to appreciate their behaviors in terms of preferred sources of information, approaches to research and relative spheres of influence - both online and offline. What people say and do online does not necessarily reflect their offline lives.

2. Assess Your Communications Infrastructure & Capabilities

Understand how well equipped your internal and supplier teams are to plan and use social media, build relationships in the online environment (including leveraging existing 'offline' relationships), and track, analyze, escalate and manage online discussions. This is in addition to your communications infrastructure that includes dedicated resource to undertake regular assessments and monitoring of your corporate reputation offline and online.

3. Identify and Minimize Gaps

Identify the gaps between your overall communications objectives and plan, and your current social media knowledge, skills, systems, processes and tools. Look to strengthen weaknesses through training, recruitment or by improving internal decision-making processes and procedures. Ultimately, your integrated communications goals need to support your company's business objectives.

4. Re-design Policies, Procedures and Toolkits

Make sure your current communications infrastructure is up-to-date and sufficiently flexible to meet today's reality. This may include the introduction of a corporate social media policy, the development of social media playbooks, interactive, self-guided training programs and updating your issues and crisis communications protocols.

5. Communicate Employee Roles and Responsibilities

It is very easy, and tempting, for employees to share their own views and experiences on company-related issues on the Internet. It is vital that your people are aware of the evolving legal framework (in some countries) governing disclosure to bloggers, their professional and personal responsibilities and the broad principles of communicating online.

6. Cascade Learnings

While often the best way to develop capabilities in any area is through the implementation of actual communications programs, also consider how best to develop a system for sharing social media knowledge and learnings within and across your communications teams, and ensuring these stay top of mind.

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About Burson-Marsteller

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Talk to us

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