

APRIL 2013

This is a Reputation Hijack

We have all seen it happen. A Company we know little about gets continually lamb-blasted by the media, or perhaps a slower more methodical drip, drip, drip of word of mouth and social media starts. Although no crisis or precipitous event has occurred, overtime the continual onslaught of others views begins to sway our opinion of a company with whom we have no firsthand experience.

This is a reputation hijack.

Although we all understand how a company's reputation is at risk during a crisis, what causes the problem at other times? Without an event-causing issue, how does a company become fodder for a "bully beat down" by the media and marketplace? What impacts marketing's ability to shape and manage the company reputation?

Why it Happens Might Not Be What You Think

When a company is continually under fire by the media and others through negative word-of-mouth, the first place most turn to blame is Corporate Communications. This is where the brand story is packaged and distributed to the market. Through marketing, company perceptions are created, and brand reputation is curated, cared for and managed. This is why when a brand's reputation

is soiled, its common to hear negative, emotional comments such as, "they don't know what they're doing" and "they can't

Executive Insights



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manage our brand", to personal attacks such as "they're idiots", directed at Corporate Communications. And why not? Most believe that marketing, as owners of the brand, also own and control the stories told.

Unfortunately, reputation development is not that narrowly focused. No matter how powerful marketing may seem, they do not control as much as you may think.

So how does a company reputation become at risk of unraveling?

At the macro level, there are generally two obvious causes and one very common, but oftentimes hidden or unacknowledged reason.

1. Inept or no marketing: You're lost in a social media space where your audience isn't. Perhaps you're a B-to-B company in a vertical market and you are on Facebook, Pinterest, YouTube and Twitter. Unfortunately had you researched each channel you would have discovered your key audience in a private members-only LinkedIn group.

2. Underfunded marketing: Sadly, budget issues can happen at the best of companies and to the brightest of marketers. No matter how great the marketing strategy or how gifted the storytelling, without a reasonable budget, marketing cannot own and manage the company story and subsequent reputation in the market. When this happens, good companies are at risk of competitors hijacking the company story and staining the company reputation all at the same time.

3. Deeply hidden company issues:

Companies are a lot like families and this means there is always a little dysfunction that roots itself out. As it relates to reputation hijacking, the biggest risk a company faces is misalignment. Here is how it unfolds: A company is aspirational in its thinking. Management shares these aspirations with a well-funded, well-intended, high functioning marketing department and, with good intentions, demands integration of these aspirations into the company story. The belief is—this is who we are, lets communicate it to the world. However, although aspirational thinking is good, when it veers too far askew from the truth, a disconnect with the marketplace occurs. This happens because the marketplace experience with

the brand does not align with the story told. This disconnect leads to market distrust, or worse, a market reckoning that results in a reputation hijack—a retelling of the story from another, more believable point of view. Overtime, deciphering the “truth” between the company story and other stories is dependent upon source credibility. Typically, third party sources are viewed as more credible than with a vested, financial interest, such as a company trying to sell you something. Even a gifted marketing department will have little chance of righting this situation without appearing defensive or securing proof to the contrary.

The bottom line—reputation hijacks are real. They happen all the time. Consider Comcast. Although they have built a new digital infrastructure, offer a solid, expanding product suite and have a smart, well-funded marketing team, until the company can fix their customer service issues, marketing will not be in a position to effectively change their marketplace reputation. The misalignment between the company marketing of “awesome entertainment”, and the reality of “challenging customer service”, creates misalignment. This results in a disconnect between the brand and the market. Unfortunately these disconnects can actually spur the media, bloggers and frustrated

others to create forums such as “I hate Comcast” to force an equilibrium. There is a near-primal human nature need to ensure that the complete, not just marketed story is told.

In an increasingly transparent world, when brands do not (or are not able) to address their misalignments, even the smartest marketers, with the healthiest of budgets will be at risk of a reputation hijack.

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