

Online Corporate Communication

Some Thoughts on Reputation, Transparency and Search

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May 6th, 2015

Word Count: 3,359 (excluding references)

The Significance of Reputation

A cursory search for a unifying definition of public relations reveals that there is no such animal. But there are common threads that run through many of those proffered. The UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), as cited by Davis (2007, p. 6), emphasises one aspect: "Public relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you". The notion of reputation repeats as the CIPR (Cipr.co.uk, n.d.) definition goes on to state:

"Public Relations is the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics."

Harrison (1997, p. 128), in talking about Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), notes that "how companies, act and how they are reported and thus perceived by their publics is possibly the greatest factor in the management of their reputation." Harrison goes on (p.130-131) to state as cogent a definition of corporate reputation as I have read, in stating:

"A company's reputation can be seen as the sum of the public's beliefs about it, based on their own experience of its products or services, what they have read or heard about it from others, and the way in which it - through its front-line and top level staff - is seen to behave."

In looking at what active PR practitioners, global and local, have had to say, the word reputation does frequently recur. FleishmanHillard (n.d.), a worldwide PR giant, lay claim to reputation management as one of their areas of expertise and have this to say:

"Reputation is a fundamental quality of every organization – what stakeholders believe about it, expect from it and say about it to others".

"PR is about thoughtful and strategic management of reputation" is the definition offered by Cathy Riordan, PR Wise (Business Plus, 2014). Importantly Riordan proceeds to tie reputation to storytelling and audience engagement: "It involves finding out what makes an organisation, brand or product interesting, and then

creating a story or campaign to engage key audiences." Several other practitioners surveyed for the Business Plus (2014) article, *What Is Public Relations?*, echo the emphasis on reputation, some by mentioning goodwill and mutual understanding, some more directly: "Public relations is focused on helping organisations or individuals to protect, enhance or build their reputations ..." (Paul Allen, Paul Allen PR); "Public relations involves strategically managing reputations" (Nigel Heneghan, Heneghan PR); and "PR is all about building and managing reputations" (Sharon Plunkett, Plunkett Public Relations).

L'Etang (2008, p. 48), notes that the "emergence of corporate reputation as a concept and practice signifies the complex structures, instant communication and symbolic sophistication of contemporary developed worlds". L'Etang's reference to instant communication, and Grunig & Hunt's (1984) dictum that the best communication model of the four posited is symmetrical, where the interests of an organisation are balanced with those of its publics, provides a useful if imperfect segway to a discussion of the rewards and risks inherent in corporate communication in an online and permanently connected world.

From Reputation to Transparency to Search

The Internet provides PR practitioners with a unique opportunity to gather information, monitor public opinion, and engage in that direct dialogue favoured by Grunig & Hunt (1984) with various publics about a host of issues. But if there are PR opportunities provided by new media, there are also dangers, specifically the risk to reputation. As Rob Brown (2009, p. 14) notes in his book *Public Relations and the Social Web*, "the substance of Web 2.0" is that "the owners of the means of communication no longer control the content". Lloyd & Toogood (2015), in *Journalism and PR*, published in association with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford note that "though always part of PR, reputation is now seen to be more fragile, more open to attack, especially on social media."

In the *Share This Too* chapter, *Digital PR Is Dead*, Brown (2013) touches very briefly on *PR-led SEO*. Brown notes, as many others have, that PR has always been about managing reputation and adds that a key factor in determining reputation is the content that is returned on page one of a search on Google. A quick explanation of SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) is probably warranted. Simply put, it is the process of increasing traffic to a website by making specific modifications to that site to improve its ranking in the "organic" (i.e. unpaid) or "natural" results returned by

search engines. All the major search engines - Google, Bing, Yahoo etc. - return a search engine results page (SERP) containing links to relevant web pages, images, videos etc. depending on the search criteria provided by the user. Typically, the higher the ranking on that results page the more visitors a site will receive. According to a 2013 study the top listing on Google's organic search results receives 33% of the traffic, the second 18%, and fifth receives just 6% (Lee, 2013). Ideally then you want your website to have the highest possible position in the natural listing, i.e. the main body of the SERP, for a range of specific keywords entered by users. SEO is the process by which this is achieved. Google.com (2015) has a very understandable explanation of how search works.

Brown (2013) quotes briefly from a *Wired* article which I would highly recommend, even if you disagree with the underlying premise. The tag line of the article (Thompson, 2007) alone catches the eye:

"Fire the publicist. Go off message. Let all your employees blab and blog. In the new world of radical transparency, the path to business success is clear."

Thompson starts with a case study, that of Redfin, an online real estate brokerage firm, whose CEO decided to fight back against detractors using pointed posts in a newly minted blog. Contrary to perceived wisdom the ploy resonated with customers. Transparency worked. Thompson notes that the resultant rush to publicly blog about what would have been previously hidden - internal memos, errors, mea culpas - was significant, with the CEOs of Sun Microsystems and JetBlue specifically mentioned. Now power derives from "how many bloggers link to you - and everyone trembles before search engine rankings". Thompson goes on to quote Don Tapscott, author, along with David Ticoll, of *The Naked Corporation: How the Age of Transparency Will Revolutionize Business* as saying that "you can't hide anything anymore". Examples of poor attempts to conceal corporate blunders abound, from Sony spyware unmasked by bloggers to Microsoft paying to have their Wikipedia entry varnished to YouTube videos of the hacking of supposedly impenetrable Diebold voting machines. Thompson offers up many more examples, including from the political arena, as evidence of why he believes "secrecy is dying". He acknowledges that some of it is a generational culture shift, "a redrawing of the lines between what's private and what's public" but suggests that, since "customers are going to poke around" and "workers are going to blab", transparency be turned into a positive by "turning everyone into a partner" in the business. Southwest Airlines and Zappos.com are lauded. The calculation, as stated by the Zappos CEO, is that disclosure makes stakeholders

more forgiving and knowledge makes them like the company more. The Redfin CEO perhaps puts it best in stating that CEOs who cannot write with conviction are "leaving themselves defenseless" and those who obviously "enjoy writing and blogging" have "competitive advantage". What Redfin also discovered was that getting customers on your side meant that they were willing to publicly agree with you, including backing the company on online forums. It becomes, as one reader wrote to Thompson, a matter of trust which increases when people know what is going on. However Thompson issues a warning about "transparency's implied social contract", specifically that it's an all or nothing deal i.e. don't promise openness and then get caught in a lie. The case of Jobster layoffs, vehemently denied and subsequently acknowledged by their CEO, is provided by way of example of what not to do. As Thompson notes, a search for the CEO's name repeatedly returned a prominent newspaper's article detailing the jobs debacle.

Which leads to the critical point that Thompson makes, and the quote that Brown (2013) borrows for his *Share This Too* chapter:

"Google is not a search engine. Google is a reputation-management system. And that's one of the most powerful reasons so many CEOs have become more transparent: Online, your rep is quantifiable, findable, and totally unavoidable. In other words, radical transparency is a double-edged sword, but once you know the new rules, you can use it to control your image in ways you never could before."

Thompson sacrifices accuracy for simplicity in the points he makes about inbound links and how Google uses them in search. It is an important "off-the-page" factor (*aside: off-the-page factors are those elements influenced by readers, visitors and others and beyond the immediate control of the page publisher*) used in their search algorithm but by no means the only one - there are literally hundreds - and the quality measure ascribed to the sites providing those links is vitally important. In fact purchasing links in hopes of improved rankings is a well-known "black hat" technique. That said, the general point Thompson makes is correct. In the case of the Jobster controversy lots of writers and bloggers linked to the uncomplimentary newspaper article and so that article was pushed high up the search engine results page (SERP). And thus was reputation affected.

Thompson quotes a senior Weber Shanwick PR executive stating that "online is where reputations are made now" and that a Google search result is more determinative of company perception than a high-priced ad campaign. The executive

almost seems to yearn for the days when "you'd look only at your reputation in newspapers and broadcast media, positive and negative." and notes that public relations "used to be about having stuff taken down, and you can't do that with the Internet."

That latter comment ties to something I read in Phillips & Young (2009). They devote an entire chapter to the risks and opportunities inherent in online public relations - noting management wariness of the online world and discussing risk mitigation in some detail - but it is their characterization of certain aspects of internet data that is most pertinent, in particular the notion of a "long tail" where stories, both good and bad, are "now part of the digital archive, quickly accessible to search engines" i.e. they have a long shelf life because "Google has a long memory."

Thompson sees the incentive to be more transparent as a paradox; I would tend to view it as a binary choice. A company can choose passivity and let third party commentary online determine its image or they can actively participate and attempt to influence the conversation. A company blog, for example, should be regarded as an essential part of a broader content strategy that includes the activation of stories across paid, earned, shared and owned media channels to leverage the power of valuable owned content and help attract and connect audiences, encourage conversations, and build reputation. Thompson notes that "posting interesting material frequently and often is the only way to amass positive links to yourself and thus to directly influence your Googleable reputation". I would amplify that remark by adding that interesting material is, in and of itself, an "on-the-page" factor, controllable by the page publisher, which contributes directly to SEO success. In the judgement of Google's algorithms the quality, "freshness" and substance of the content are also factors.

On a cautionary note Thompson states that "PR puffery won't work" because it will simply be ignored. It is certainly unlikely to be linked to. Worse still is spin, or evasion, which in the Jobster instance resulted in "mocking blog entries" being amassed and negatively influencing search results.

For better or worse Google's algorithms do not reward the secretive. The outgoing and prolific prevail. From a reputation viewpoint it's a matter of numbers. An otherwise solid company that has a limited number of people talking about it - and linking to it - means that there are only a few opinions available to influence perception, and, critically, one negative blog post can have a disproportionate impact. But "the law of averages takes over" when there are thousands of inbound links and comments, and the negative is swamped by the positive. As Thompson notes, "the NET rewards the transparent".

So where does that leave the PR practitioner? Lloyd & Toogood (2015) state that there is confidence in PR circles that “they can take over, and are taking over, many of the functions of journalism, and of the media in general”, and that the notion that every organization is now a media organization is “becoming a growing reality.” This idea of organization as news publisher and media owner is the fourth leaf in Edelman’s four-leaf clover.

Wilson (2013) in the *The Social CEO*, suggests that the PR practitioner is perfectly placed, as the resident communications expert, to offer advice to CEOs contemplating a presence on social media. Wilson notes that if the “motivation is to enhance the reputation of the organisation” then what is said “has to complement what is already happening”, and an existing option “such as a regular blog on the company website” may be “less risky”. Wilson echoes several of the points made by Thompson in stating that what a CEO writes to a blog “has a permanence that can come back to haunt them if they are subsequently proved wrong or change their mind”, and that “authenticity can’t be faked”.

Recommendations

Though much of what has been written here references corporate websites and blogs, some of the recommendations may equally be applied to the various social media platforms. All of them follow from what has been discussed.

Start a blog or resurrect it if has fallen into disuse. Porter, J. (2013), in a Journalistics blog post, includes notes on building and maintaining a blog, treating that blog as your “owned media channel”, and publishing your news to it on a regular basis. Porter provides several solid recommendations: compile a list of stories you want told; write those stories yourself using the classic inverted pyramid style; use keyword research, Google Analytics etc. to determine what target publics are looking for; make yours the go-blog by becoming a recognised and relevant subject matter expert; write frequently and well; and make it easy for journalists and other bloggers to contact you. I would add one of Wilson’s recommendations about the importance of listening: “Encourage comments if you blog, and use it as an efficient way to respond to feedback”.

The community manager function is almost an essential one, whether provided by a dedicated company resource or through a service from a qualified public relations firm. Fabretti (2013), in *Community Management*, has a lot of solid advice to offer on

what should be on any management checklist. Fabretti's simple definition of community management being "the nurturing of an audience" is a good one as is the encouragement that, properly planned, it "can mean that your communities can become self-serving" and "self-advocating". Comprehensive listening and monitoring tools can be used to quickly identify, assess and respond to online conversations - whether it is participating in positive discussions or managing negative ones. The community manager also aids in influencer identification and maintenance of relationships with the face of new media - bloggers, self-publishers and others.

I would also echo Pack (2013), who in *The Unsocial Web*, while detailing problems to avoid, mentions becoming "so scared of the results of interaction that you close your ears to the negative comments" and goes on to state that "it is a danger because sometimes the critics are right".

Do not indulge in astroturfing, a term used to describe the process whereby a message's sponsor is hidden to make it look as if that message came from, and is supported by, ordinary people at the grassroots level. While there is some debate about the effectiveness of such activity, the price paid for discovery is high. Consider the classic case of *Working Families for Wal-Mart*, where PR giant Edelman was forced to reveal (Money.cnn.com, 2006) that several of their employees were behind blog entries that had appeared to be created by independent Wal-Mart supporters. Far from being a spontaneously created grassroots group, *Working Families for Wal-Mart* turned out to be an advocacy group jointly formed by Edelman and Wal-Mart, and financially supported by the latter. Numerous angry posts followed and worked their way up the results for an "Edelman" search on Google.

(aside: Thompson noted in passing that Richard Edelman, by apologising profusely on his own blog and others, largely succeeded in blunting the criticism).

Become familiar with SEO - if not with the technical jargon then at least with the broader principles. The best place to go for practical instruction is to Google themselves who have an excellent downloadable PDF document titled *Search Engine Optimisation Starter Guide* (2010). It's basically a best practices guide which outlines several, mostly small, modifications that can be made which collectively will improve the user experience and can positively impact organic search performance. A complete analysis of those modifications is not justified here but pointing out some more common SEO mistakes or misconceptions (Tolentino, 2014) might prove instructive: expecting immediate improvements for SEO changes - a site's history is

also factored in; falling for quick and cheap SEO solutions that use "black hat" tactics such as keyword stuffing, hidden text and link buying; thinking about SEO at the completion of a website design rather than at the planning stage; forgetting keywords and adding them in haphazardly at the last minute - I suggest using some or all of the keyword research tools available such as Google AdWords Keyword Planner or Übersuggest; not addressing duplicate content; adding too many PDFs or not optimising those that are necessary - optimising means using plain text instead of words in the form of images, assigning a title in the document properties, making the file size small for fast download and using SEO-friendly URLs (with '-' between each word); ignoring social media elements; and neglecting content - it needs to be well-written and all images should have descriptive alt tags applied.

There are a myriad of books and website articles which will suggest how you can best optimise your site for search engines and improve your current ranking with design improvements. Some are well researched and very readable; some are outdated or overly technical. A quick search on Google for the terms SEO or Search Engine Optimisation will return free and paid results for firms who, for a fee, claim to guarantee improved search rankings. However webmasters, web developers, or even site owners with a basic knowledge of website internals can apply some or all of the improvements described in Google's literature. SEO should be high on the list of items to address during the planning phase of any website design (or redesign).

Ranking high in organic search results is a guarantee of increased traffic to your site, increased business for your company and, hopefully as previously outlined, an enhanced reputation.

Closing Note

In deliberately narrowing the focus of this report to online search, how that ties to transparency and to owned media in particular, and how it can be seen to impact on reputation, I hope I have offered a fresh perspective on otherwise mundane topics such as SEO. I am conscious that in the contraction I have foregone analysis of the significant impact certain third party sites, such as Wikipedia, can have on reputation. Having previously addressed the Wikipedia phenomenon elsewhere I would just say that managing reputation on those pages, engaging appropriately with the Wikipedia community, and navigating the complex layer of behavioural, content and editing guidelines which govern Wikipedia's operation, is deserving of an in-depth treatment beyond the scope of this report.

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