

Managing Reputation: An Opinion

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Oxford Dictionary: *Reputation: the beliefs or opinions that are generally held about someone or something: A widespread belief that someone or something has a particular habit or characteristic: Origin: Middle English: from Latin reputatio(n-), from reputare (to) think over'*

As public relations practitioners, we say we “manage reputation”; that is, guide perceptions of others. But, if we stand back and think about it, we’re wrong.

We can’t manage reputation – never could, if we mean controlling how others independently evaluate an individual or corporation. On the other hand, if we mean monitoring how others think and attempting to persuade them to think differently, then perhaps we do “manage reputation” to a small degree.

The problem with “reputation management” is the word “management.” A dictionary definition of management highlights the difficulty. “(T)he process of dealing with or controlling things or people.” **Oxford Dictionary.**

Public relations does not control. It attempts to influence, and it often fails because its arguments are weak or unheard. Control assumes one has moral or physical machinery to incent people to do what one wants them to do. A corporate leader can promote or dismiss those who support or oppose the direction in which the leader wishes to go. A leader in public relations has only a series of messages to send through multiple media to diverse audiences. A PR practitioner can’t force audiences to believe. In fact, because of a credibility gap, the practitioner often does not deliver messages personally but puts them into the mouth of someone with perceived credibility – a CEO, a celebrity, a recognized expert.

“Reputation management” is a misnomer. Public relations practitioners are closer to research analysts and planners but not managers. We gather from traditional and online media and from surveys comments about individuals and organizations. We analyze these opinions and report incipient crises, opportunities and trends. We act as strategists and tacticians to recommend actions that individuals or organizations can take. But, we can’t guarantee that an individual or organization will act in accordance with our recommendations, and we can never guarantee our recommendations will work. If a practitioner is lucky and understands events and human nature well enough, odds of success might be slightly better than 50 percent. If a practitioner is unlucky, he can watch a blowup and be powerless to help a client.

So why does PR use the term “reputation management?” Because that is what clients and bosses want to hear. They can’t accept a practitioner’s essential powerlessness. Their egos do not tolerate that corporate control ends at the perimeter of an organization. Beyond that line, one can more or less understand audiences by observing them constantly and using observations to form predictions of where they are likely to go. However, managers do not accept this view. They have a drive to control, to make futures certain. Thus, for example, in times of recession, it is difficult to get businesses to invest until managers have some sense of security about the months to come. Managers do not look kindly upon PR practitioners who commit only to a best-efforts attempt to manage reputation.

Perceptive individuals and organizations assume change is constant. To them, the job of the individual and organization is to react quickly to change and to take advantage where possible. This is a fundamental assumption of “management by walking about,” the concept that a good manager needs to amble the floors constantly meeting with employees, customers, investors, activists, regulators, anyone who has power over an organization’s direction. By listening to and observing, one can reshape, expand or contract an organization to accommodate change. The manager guides it to beneficial opportunities and protects it from hostile forces. While this helps a company to survive and grow, it may impact the company’s reputation in the eyes of audience segments. Thus, employees may balk over new work rules. Customers may protest higher prices. Regulators may prevent a plant opening in a right-to-work state. Investors may complain that the company’s capital investments are too high and hurting earnings. The manager balances these sentiments and acts. Leaders who sit in suites and read reports are inevitably out of touch. They THINK they control when the machinery below them is running in spite of rather than because of them.

The monitoring function of “reputation management” is an extension of “management by walking about.” It gathers intelligence from the environment and helps keep managers informed. Monitoring builds situational awareness, but it can also lead to paralysis when there are competing opinions. The decisive manager filters the noise, defines basic principles then acts through persuading the organization to follow using incentives and punishments. The reputation of the organization comes partially from perceptions of actions and partially from misinformed observations. While public relations can communicate accurately what the organization is doing and try to reduce misinformation, it doesn’t have incentives or punishments to stop rumor-mongers, agitators, disgruntled investors, unhappy employees, arrogant regulators or committed activists.

So, what then is “reputation management?” It is marketing, salesmanship, an attempt to be a member of the corporate suite of decision-makers. On the other hand, it is possible to manufacture an image for a time. Hollywood has a long history of making stars and starlets from ordinary people. Most, however, fade, and just as stars fall from favor, so too do organizations. A manufactured

reputation is a knife's edge, especially with an unlimited number of outlets through which media and ordinary citizens can speak. "Reputation management" of a manufactured kind is at best transient, even with unlimited resources to commit to the effort.

However, telling clients and managers the truth about "reputation management" is not only difficult, it might also cut one out of any possibility of helping them. Clients and managers grow impatient with PR and search for someone or some thing to "fix" the problem. They spend millions on corporate image advertising and feel better because they have acted, but they may not have changed the reputation of the organization or its behavior that led to the problem in the first place.

Therefore, it may be best to let the impression stand that PR "manages reputation" while practitioners continue to act on a best-efforts basis. Telling managers what they want to hear is neither best nor honest, but it is pragmatic. What we practitioners should avoid, however, is being taken in by our rhetoric. Some practitioners have fallen for the concept of "reputation management" and honestly believe that is what they do. They argue their activities are essential to building and maintaining good reputations for the individuals or organizations they represent. They describe best-efforts work in business terms and buzzwords that give the impression of control but not the reality of it. Perhaps, they should be ashamed, but why bother?

Even a best-efforts basis to maintain a positive reputation is better than no effort at all. PR does have a role to play in providing individuals and organizations with degrees of freedom to operate, but we understand that opinions people hold are inherently fragile and frequently unjust, and there is little a practitioner can do to change human nature.

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