

Article for Marketing Week:

Why Reputation Matters

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As I write this, the papers are full of news, comment, opinion and gossip. Some of it is entirely positive; Helen Mirren's The Queen, the England cricket team (at last!). Some of it is quite the reverse; Bernard Matthews and Jade Goody (again) to name but two.

Ask someone in marketing about the value of what they do and they'll talk about "the brand." Ask someone in PR and they will answer "reputation." The point is, both now matter.

A revolution is upon us. In a world in which people trust people like themselves more than sources of authority; in which points of shared interest are being connected through millions of online forum and in which transparency is a fact of life, our approach to brand communications needs to change accordingly.

I would propose that reputation is governed by three things: what you say, what you do and what other people say about you.

Modern reputation management involves far more than third-party coverage, word of mouth or buzz. Nowadays what you do is generally more important than what you say because people judge you by actions more than words. The balance of power now lies with self-generated points of view. As Jade Goody has learnt to her cost.

Increasingly, then, the task for marketing will be to allow a brand's public to participate in, and interact with its reputation.

If reputation is this powerful, the next question must be: how do you create and manage such an intangible asset in what can seem a pretty scary environment?

People or brands with poor reputations tend to say one thing and do another. 'Other people' notice and talk about that negatively. Conversely, brands with good reputations tend to do what they say. 'Other people' like that.

However, creating a good reputation isn't as simple as just doing what you say. Ultimately your reputation depends on integrity; knowing who you are, what you stand for and communicating with humanity your efforts to be true to that sense of self. Good people and good brands know who they are and behave accordingly. Bad people and bad brands aren't bad just because their words and actions don't accord; they simply don't know who they are.

Think of brand integrity in terms of the following brands. Who knows themselves better and behaves accordingly? O2 or T-Mobile; Tesco or Morrisons; Dyson or Electrolux? Your school or the one up the road.

Most of all, good brands are in touch with their audiences, listening to them intently and using that listening to define what they do.

It is through this process that good brands know what decisions to take, what is 'right' and what fits with the times. This enables them to be true to themselves, yet innovate with integrity.

So what do you say? 'To thyself be true in all you say and do.' Brand reputation is fragile. Better to under-promise and over-deliver than vice versa. Accept that you can no longer control the message. All you can do is join in the conversation and believe that you have a more persuasive voice.

Reputation has to be earned. Customers are looking for the values behind brands, so 'what you do' to create your brand every day is becoming a more serious factor of choice. Care for your pupils and their parents, care for your employees, care for the environment, care for the ingredients of your brand. All of this will have an

influence on your reputation as information is shared across the connected world of your parents, governors, employees, stakeholders, detractors and customers.