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## 6 Foundational Benchmarking Tactics For Reputation Management Strategy

By Eugene J. Berardi

**A** company that once had dominated a subset of the publishing industry but has since seen a decline in new business contacted our firm. The problem, its leaders believed, was simple: A handful of authors from recent years were unhappy with their contracts and had complained on literary blogs and industry websites. “How quickly,” the executives asked, “could we fix the problem?”

The underlying brand and reputation management challenges were more complex than they expected. The company lacked a digital footprint other than a website, and critical postings by the authors quickly rose to the top of search result pages before finding their way to industry influencers and the media. Following the publisher’s repeated denials of wrongdoing, a complete breakdown in communication between the company and its authors escalated the problem—and the narrative—to a genuinely hostile level.

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The unhappy authors constituted a small proportion of the publisher’s portfolio. But the image crisis they generated was quite

real. It was compounded by the fact that the organization was entirely unprepared for how much harder it was to “fix” the problem than it would have been had it sought advice earlier. In the end, the publisher rejected the options we presented, including a subtle marketing campaign that would leverage counter-narrative from their many satisfied clients and a reconciliation initiative with the authors it already had lost. The self-soothing “wait and see” approach was a mistake and something the publisher still is struggling to recover from, independent of us.

While most crisis and issue management professionals in the PR world focus on activities that take place from the moment a reputation management scenario begins, I’ve found success working with clients using a more holistic strategy. This approach begins long before a brand’s legitimacy and/or bottom line are at risk. This foundational approach to reputation management—one that establishes fundamental stability and then layers on more advanced PR tactics over time—can be impactful. In the case of the aforementioned publisher, the company and brand would have had greater resiliency entering the credibility crisis. Executives also would have been in a better position to make informed decisions about recovery options.

Here are six foundational benchmarking tactics to use as cornerstones for your reputation management strategy. Together, they will help preserve your organization’s standing in the eyes of its stakeholders:



**Figure 1: SWOT Matrix for Reputation Management**

Conducting a SWOT analysis with corporate leaders is a good first step to improve their overall situational awareness and foster a collaborative working relationship on reputation management issues. This simple exercise has the added benefit of integrating a strategic planning acumen in the corporate communications process.

1. **Regularly assess your 'façade' profile vis-à-vis the competition.** In an era when brand storytelling has dominated, the ways that consumers engage with an organization have never been more complex or more important to managing its image. Compile a list of communications assets and public-facing interface points—call centers, retail locations, social media assets and websites, for example. Then simulate the journey that stakeholders such as customers, investors and media outlets take

when they interact with your brand. The odds are strong this simulation will reveal faults you hadn't noticed. Poor language choices on websites, incomplete executive profile pages on LinkedIn and inactivity on social media pages usually top the list. After you've made these improvements, benchmark your finished products as a litmus test to see how well you stack up against your competition. These types of façade housekeeping should be done anyway, but pursuing them with a reputation

management mindset will produce sharper messaging and additional returns for everyday business needs.

2. **Be proactive about managing a robust digital presence even if you lack immediate needs or objectives.** I often work with companies that prefer a minimalist digital footprint, either because their industry predates the need or, in the case of certain startups or B2B professional service firms, because they don't see an opportunity for ROI. Our collaboration usually leads them to embrace a more thoughtful approach. Dilution is the solution to pollution, and in the case of reputation management that simple premise has never been truer. The more you can do to foster an abundance of positive information through organic and paid mediums, the easier it will be to bury your critics on page 15 of online search results and prevent them from gaining critical mass.
3. **Develop an all-hazards crisis response plan that will allow you to automate the company's response in the initial phase of an urgent scenario.** Whether they are external or internal, most threats to an organization's credibility will originate outside your immediate sphere of influence. As a member of the communications team and thus a leader of crisis response, your first step needs to be triaging the damage and ensuring that your actions (and those of other corporate leaders) are being performed with military-style, mission-oriented focus and precision. This requires a hard look at priorities.

Briefing the press and addressing investors are examples of things that can, generally, wait. Ensuring that a reporter won't catch your CEO off guard at home

cannot. As a minimum threshold for reputation management response planning, draft a notification protocol and rally plan (a predetermined conference bridge will suffice during off-business hours) for your corporate principals. Follow up by issuing quarterly reminders about what people should do and avoid during the first minute, hour and day of a crisis scenario. Relying on common sense to prevail during dynamic events is never a reliable backup plan. Identifying a single spokesperson for internal and external communications and action items that will streamline a professional and organization-wide response certainly are.

4. **Cultivate a wide range of surrogates for your brand and key organizational leaders.** Explore networking opportunities within and even beyond your core industry and marketplace to showcase your organization's strengths—and those of key team members—to as many people as possible. This kind of broad based approach to raise brand awareness and visibility will ensure a virtual 360-degree wall of influencers whose baseline impression of your brand is positive at the outset of a reputation management scenario. The invisible buffer zone of neutrality they create will be hard to quantify in real terms but will often lessen collateral damage during extended events such as labor disruptions, litigation and product recalls.
5. **Establish a baseline working relationship with the industry and media outlets that are most likely to pick up and report on a reputation management event.** We are routinely asked to work with companies that lack a com-

munication or press shop, or even a working understanding of how media engagement could benefit their business model. While this isn't surprising to find with startups and small businesses, it's enlightening to see how many mid-size organizations—some generating tens of millions of dollars in revenue—manage to exist in this fashion.

Members of the media may one day be an important conduit for information that will reach the eyes of your customers, investors, industry and governmental partners, and the public at large. Identifying and then developing standing relationships with reporters who cover your field is equally important. If a full-blown courtship with the press isn't something you're prepared to manage, start with low-impact outreach on everyday issues, drafting press releases on major hiring decisions and operational changes that will have a positive economic impact on communities you serve, and the like. You can cultivate relationships further through personal contact as your comfort level with media engagement grows.

- 6. Increase transparency about the strengths and weaknesses of your organization.** The companies you work with may not have dedicated staff for community affairs, corporate philanthropy or environmental sustainability, but they are probably already taking

positive steps in each of those categories. Compiling a periodic crib sheet on corporate sustainability that includes each of these three areas—and potentially many more of relevant interest—is a good first step.

Similarly, a company that communicates openly with stakeholders during good times is better positioned to avoid the pitfalls of a communications spiral during a crisis. Weaknesses you've communicated about openly in the past make less attractive copy for reporters and will lower your overall risk profile. Even one-off (truly unanticipated or unlikely) crisis scenarios will be less of a concern to stakeholders when the company and its leaders have an established record of transparency.

It's not surprising that America's most trusted brands have some of the strongest corporate communications platforms and that reputation management is an inherent consideration in nearly all major C-suite decisions. Integrating brand and issue management in your everyday communications and public relations program is just another form of preventive maintenance, one that will infuse resiliency into every corner of your organization during times of crisis.

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