

EMBLEMS AND SHORTCUTS: RETHINKING CORPORATE REPUTATION RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

With public relations gaining ground over traditional channels such as advertising, and growing in relevance with the diffusion of media channels and an increased reliance on word of mouth, opinion research has the scope and opportunity to become the hub of inspiration for corporate communications.

Opinion research and corporate communications are in fact natural bedfellows. In essence, corporate communications centres on building and maintaining a company's profile with its followers, and revolves around the concept of protecting reputation – arguably a company's most valuable yet almost intangible asset. At its best, opinion research can enable companies to be reflexive, to act and respond to both marked changes and nuanced shifts in opinion and to inform strategy.

However, in spite of the obvious synergies between the fields, the relationship in the UK market between corporate communications and opinion research has been too limited.

In comparison with advertising and marketing, there is no embedded culture of insight within public relations and corporate communications. Yet, market trends and societal developments mean that there is a huge opportunity for researchers to help corporate communicators meet new challenges.

In order to meet this challenge, we need to take what currently works best in the area of reputation research and synthesise it with new areas of innovation in neuroscience, behavioural economics and 'we thinking'. We need to locate the traditional approaches of reputation assessment within this new context, as it challenges assumptions and provides fresh perspectives.

This can give us a powerful framework to use when helping companies inform communications strategies, and provides us with a set of tools which can better embed insight within corporate communications.

OPINION RESEARCH AND CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS: THE LIMITED RELATIONSHIP

Within the context of corporate communications, opinion research has tended to be seen primarily through the prism of providing measurement on the effectiveness of communications. This is done either through primary research assessing the resonance of initiatives, or more typically, through secondary research evaluating the quality and tone of media coverage. Though many communications professionals find evaluative research useful as a measurement tool – indeed, getting evaluation right is often seen as the 'holy grail' of showing success in PR – it is, perhaps by definition, a retrospective view on what has gone before, rather than what can come about.

The market research industry in the UK has also had success at demonstrating how opinion research can help inform and design communications strategies. Methodologies focusing on assessing corporate reputation are used by many blue-chip companies to help target their messaging and initiatives, often with a focus on senior opinion leaders. In tandem, political pollsters have applied the techniques of campaign polling to the corporate arena, transferring the approach of the political war room to the corporate boardroom.

However, in contrast to the developed and now deep-rooted culture of strategic planning and insight within advertising agencies and branding firms, planners and opinion researchers in British public relations businesses are a somewhat rare breed. This has started to evolve, with several PR agencies

appointing Planning Directors over the past few years or investing in in-house insight practices.¹ This often mirrors existing examples in US PR agencies, the market leaders in connecting research and communications.

The fusion of insight within corporate communications though is still a work in progress, with communicators being pre-disposed to rely on gut instinct and researchers not doing enough to review their methodologies.

Seizing the moment

We are now at an inflection point for the role of opinion research in corporate communications, with a series of developments meaning corporate communicators will look to the skills and know-how of insight professionals in the coming decade:

- In-house communications directors are increasingly seeking data to inform communications campaigns – to match the arsenal of information their counterparts in marketing have traditionally drawn upon.
- The ‘political’ pressures businesses face due to assertive and empowered stakeholders – whether that is NGOs, shareholder activists or consumers – mean businesses need to continually be in tune with opinion; and will subsequently draw on the research approaches of their political counterparts (Levy, 2007).
- The blurring of boundaries between communications and marketing channels, and the rise of integrated campaigns, means opinion research will become the way to provide the inspiration and stimulus for action.
- As companies seek to communicate in an environment defined by information overload and default scepticism towards institutional motives, corporate communicators will look to research to work out how to cut through the clutter and cynicism.

In order to embed insight within communications, researchers need to synthesise existing approaches with new areas of thinking from other disciplines.

CURRENT THINKING: REPUTATION ASSESSMENT

Aside from media evaluation, reputation assessment is the principal area where opinion research has had an impact on corporate communications.

In a nutshell, reputation assessment is based on the use of opinion research – typically a mix of qualitative and quantitative methodologies – to hold up a mirror to a company’s current reputation, and to use the insights to advise a business on where it should be focusing its efforts and marshalling its resources to maximum benefit.

As with any research specialism, approaches to reputation measurement vary, depending on the focus of the brief, the challenge it is seeking to address and the type of researcher looking at the issue; but assessment approaches tend to have four main characteristics.

Stakeholders

Reflecting its need to inform corporate communications as opposed to brand marketing or consumer advertising, reputation assessments tend to focus on stakeholders and elites, such as business media, sell-side analysts and elected representatives. Stakeholders fall into a series of categories – they are

either followers of a company, affected by the operations of the company, or observe or agitate about the company.

Metrics

Reputation research is based on asking stakeholders to rate a company – and its key competitors – on a series of metrics, which tend to include the following: awareness, familiarity, favourability and advocacy. These can be explored through specific quantitative polling or in a more open-ended way through qualitative depth interviews.

Attributes and corporate personality

Alongside core reputation metrics, the company is often rated on a series of reputation attributes, which seek to identify associations connected to a company. These are typically derived either through discussions between the client and the agency or through an initial phase of qualitative research with select stakeholders. Attributes are then tested through a larger-scale survey.

Drivers

Reputation researchers focus on mining the data to assess the performance of a company against a set of reputation drivers – in effect, the factors that are informing assessment of the company.

The approach can vary; in some research mandates, the focus of the project will be to identify the drivers of the company's reputation – which are most salient and important, and how does the company perform against those drivers vs. the peer group? This can be achieved through qualitative analysis to understand what is informing attitudes and the relative role of attributes; or in quantitative research through techniques to assess what is driving favourability or advocacy towards a company, and what are the most important attributes.

In other scenarios, reputation assessment is designed to assess a company against a proscribed set of drivers, which are seen as common across a range of companies and sectors. Charles Fombrun and Cees Van Riel saw companies in the 2000s being assessed against six reputation drivers – products and services, financial performance, management visibility and leadership, working environment, CSR and emotional appeal (Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004). The Reputation Institute, under Fombrun and Van Riel's leadership, now looks at reputation via seven factors – products and services, performance, innovation, workplace, governance, citizenship and leadership – which are seen as having applicability across sectors.²

Reputation audits can be immensely valuable for companies, in particular by identifying what is truly driving reputation, pinpointing where a company should focus its resources and spotting weaknesses to address. Importantly, research can identify areas which do not merit much company attention as stakeholders are either not interested, or the areas are irrelevant to the company's reputation. Intelligence on the relative contribution and performance of different reputation drivers can provide critical direction for strategic prioritisation.

The identification of a set of reputation drivers often provides a powerful organising framework for corporate communications – a clear and evidence-based framework under which messaging themes, business initiatives and tactical interventions can be located and managed. For Group or complex multinational businesses, such clarity and simplicity is understandably compelling.

DISRUPTION: FROM THE REFLECTIVE TO THE AUTOMATIC

Reflecting David Smith's concern towards the methodological silos which can afflict the market research industry (Smith, 2005), reputation assessment has become out of sync with developments in other areas of market research thinking.

Across areas including public policy, economics and advertising, there is a growing awareness that we need to re-frame our thinking about how people form attitudes and make decisions. We are moving from a rational and predominantly cognitive model, where people are seen as carefully weighing up different options and then acting in a way that maximises their own best interests, to a model which also takes into account the automatic processes of judgement and influence, and that choices are driven by biases, shortcuts and context, both social and environmental (Dolan et al, 2010).

Fundamental to this change is a greater and deeper understanding of how our minds work. Our five senses are taking in more 11,000,000 pieces of information per second, but we can only process 40 of them consciously (Wilson, 2002). The rest of the information is not being wasted; it is informing action and decisions.

This shift has been examined from a number of perspectives, each with relevance to how we could better link opinion research and corporate communications:

Neuroscience

The leap in understanding on how our minds actually work is crucially important for researchers looking at corporate reputation. Insights from neuroscience on the primary role of emotions in making decisions (Damasio, 2000) and how we build up mental 'images' of companies and issues add extra dimensions to existing reputation thinking (Franzen and Bouwman, 2001).

Behavioural economics

Closely linked to neuroscience, behavioural economics – which blends psychology with economics – is highly relevant for those working in reputation and communications. Rejecting the idea of people as fully rational actors who always make considered choices, behavioural economists such as Daniel Kahneman have demonstrated how we rely on shortcuts to make choices, and how the context in which a choice is viewed heavily influences the decisions we take (Kahneman, 2011). Behavioural economics supports many intuitive hunches about how opinions are formed, and sheds light on how to re-pivot corporate reputations.

Social copying

Coming at the issue from a different perspective, thinkers such as Mark Earls have shown how the 'we' is often more important than the 'I' when it comes to attitude formation (Earls, 2007). Earls' work highlights the role of 'copying' in society; we take positions and views due to others doing the same, whether we are conscious of doing so or not (Bentley, Earls and O'Brien, 2011). Learning how we absorb positions and narratives towards companies is highly applicable to understanding how insight can best inform corporate communications.

NEW THINKING: CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS?

Similar to how new thinking has challenged old shibboleths in market research and wider marketing disciplines, it also challenges us to look at some of the precepts behind reputation assessment.

Is reputation assessment too reductionist?

In the arena of marketing, Wendy Gordon and Caroline Whitehill have shown how developments in neuroscience disrupt traditional models of branding (Gordon, 2011; Whitehill, 2005). In contrast to brand models - onions, pyramids and their ilk – which can simplify brands to the point of blandness, neuroscience shows that brands exist in our minds as more complex networks of associations, connections and linkages.

A similar challenge exists in corporate communications. Though reputation drivers are derived from an analysis of underpinning attributes, and can provide an organising framework, a reliance on reputation drivers means the derived insight risks becoming too aggregated or over-simplified. Even if we accept that a company has its own unique reputation drivers, the drivers identified can often still seem very generic – it is hard to find a major business whose reputation will not be informed by some variant of financial performance, management strength or social contribution. Similarly, the focus on a set of common drivers can obscure that a company has many different ‘reputations’ with different audiences; the vantage point, biases and preferences of a sustainability NGO towards an energy company often being very different from that of a Wall Street investor.

From the perspective of informing communications, reputation drivers have the potential to be too blunt and generic, and to provide an overly rigid framework. A reputation driver in itself can signify many different things to various groups; a distinction which can be lost in the rush for simplicity. They can lure communications teams into thinking that change can be achieved through leveraging one driver over another, when, as shown by those studying the theory of emergence, change comes about through a much more complex and messier process (Johnson, 2001).

Does reputation assessment over-emphasise the rational?

Insights from neuroscience on the primary role emotions play in decision-making challenges the over-reliance on rational factors when it comes to reputation.

Reputation assessment can often forget that stakeholders or elite opinion leaders are people too – just like the consumer or the ‘ordinary person’, they are prone to biases and quirks, and the context of the situation and how a message is presented will inform the views they take. Behavioural economics challenges us to see beyond the illusion of people as ‘rational actors’ who are carefully weighing up options in order to make the right call. In this context, we need to continually see stakeholders as being swayed by context and situation, and therefore cannot underestimate the role of emotions.

Allied to this, reputation assessment approaches can run the risk of over-emphasising rational drivers when it comes to corporate reputation. The danger with over-relying on factors such as financial performance, products and services and management is that emotional appeal is seen as slightly separate, or something linked more to ‘brand’. The inherent danger is emotional appeal can become to be seen as the exotic intangible, or the magic dust on top, when in fact “the beats of your heart, not the fingers on your hand” are crucial for truly understanding reputation.³

Is reputation assessment too legalistic?

The focus on identifying reputation drivers, or applying a fixed set of consistent reputation drivers across all companies, needs to be located within the wider desire to apply 'rules' to the concepts of corporate reputation and communications. A main code of reputation literature is a preoccupation with reducing reputation counsel down to a set of fixed commandments, principles and 'immutable laws'.

The complexity inherent in neuroscience and behavioural economics – which shows how opinion formation is shaped by situation and context – indicates the limitations of applying set 'rules' across all PR conundrums. Though simplicity is often much in demand when aiming to manage complex communications challenges, this legalistic approach when applied to insight can blunt its effectiveness.

RE-IMAGINING CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH: MERGING THE OLD AND THE NEW

Locating traditional approaches to reputation assessment within the setting of new areas of thinking can provide researchers with a more powerful set of tools for looking at corporate reputation, and for deriving insights into how stakeholders see companies and issues:

Identifying associations and linkages

Reputation research should take a fresh perspective on how reputations are structured and defined in our minds. Insights from neuroscience show that a corporate reputation, similar to brand image, is a series of interconnected associations and frames, rather than a static set of reputation drivers. A corporate reputation looks more like the tube map than a neat, ordered pyramid.

The evolution we need to make is to use opinion research to map out the mental associations, images and terms that define a company's reputation, and to reflect back the connections and relationships. Mirroring the journey branding has been through, we need to move from reputation drivers to reputation engrams, in effect mind maps which aim to show the complexity of a company's profile. This is not about conflating brand and reputation, but focusing on providing a true and grounded representation of reputation.

Applying the thinking around engrams and neuroscience to corporate reputation will not only help provide a more resonant and meaningful perspective on a company's profile, but also gives researchers a toolbox to draw upon when discussing how feasible reputation change is. Neuroscience has shown it can take up to two years to create a connection or association in our long-term memories, but once it's lodged, it is rarely forgotten. This confirms many 'instinctive' views of PR professionals – it helps explain why youthful associations with business names are often so ingrained, and why it requires consistent and sustained messaging over time to bring about a change in reputation.

Learning from neuroscience also enables researchers to provide reassurance in a crisis, and to show a company's reputation is only in very extreme circumstances likely to be destroyed in one swoop. Communications can be afflicted by a hoary old maxim that corporate reputation can vanish overnight – often accompanied with the quotation from Warren Buffett, "it takes 20 years to build a reputation and 5 minutes to ruin it." Our new understanding of the mind confirms the metaphor of a corporate reputation being more akin to a sand dune – it is built up over time, and the stronger and more

established the sand dune, the more resilient it is to even the worst that can be thrown at it (Thevissen, 2002, cited in Helm, 2011).

Detecting the cues and signals

When considering what is informing familiarity and perceptions of a company, we need to draw on thinking around 'low-attention processing', a field of enquiry looked at by figures from behavioural economics, advertising and political science.

- Behavioural economist Daniel Kahneman has shown how our minds use either 'fast' or 'slow' thinking (Kahneman, 2011) 'Slow' thinking is deliberative and logical. However, 'fast thinking' is in charge most of the time, and is based on how intuitive impressions have a major influence on our thoughts and choices.
- From the perspective of a political scientist looking at how voters weigh up candidates, Samuel Popkin demonstrates how even if voters are not focused on the minutiae of each candidate's policy platforms or closely following the news every day, they are still making judgements by picking up cues and shortcuts from how candidates act and behave (Popkin, 1994).
- Applied to advertising, Robert Heath (Heath, 2011) has looked at the role of implicit learning in low involvement processing. In this instance, learning is taking place without conscious acknowledgement – people are still taking in images, associations and messages from advertising, even if they are not fully engaged.

Low attention processing resonates as companies wishing to build reputation have to contend with the amount of information and stances far outstripping people's capacity to pay attention. Confronted by 'data smog' (Shenk, 1997), people – stakeholders as well as consumers – cannot focus on all issues, or have time to continually take on board everything about a company. However, our minds are still taking on information on a low level basis from the cues and signals companies send out. In Popkin's words, this 'low information rationality' gives us views on businesses – even if we have not been fully focussed.

Jonathan Powell, writing from his perspective as Tony Blair's chief of staff in No. 10, notes how the public pay very little attention to politics, but that some moments cut through (Powell, 2011). In Powell's words, these provide a 'sudden window' through which the public evaluates and assesses a politician, and forms an opinion. Transposed to the corporate arena, it is the role of researchers to locate those sudden windows within the broader framework of assessing awareness and familiarity.

Spotting the symbolic shorthand

Neuroscience and behavioural economics underlines the need to look at the mental shortcuts people are using when assessing the reputation of companies, and for researchers to identify the symbolic shorthand being used to access and describe companies' profiles.

In response to an overwhelming torrent of information, we rely on shortcuts – heuristics – to make decisions or judgements. The role of heuristics confirms why symbols matter when it comes to corporate reputation – we use symbols as a prism to 'think' about a company, whether that's bankers' bonuses, overseas call centres, supersize portions or Frankenstein Food. As the American pollster Michael Maslansky argues, symbols dominate debates in public life, and become the way people access issues. What is most memorable about when US automakers came to Capitol Hill to ask for a federal bailout – what they said in their testimony, or that they flew from Detroit in executive jets? (Maslansky, 2010).

As researchers, we need to continually remember that people and stakeholders are latching onto symbols and shortcuts in order to express a stance. New thinking confirms the ‘old’ instincts of Walter Lippman, one of the first commentators to grapple with the impact of mass media on society, who wrote in 1922:

“For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.” (Lippman, *Public Opinion*, cited in L’Etang, 2008)

Seeing the social context and narratives

The interest in understanding the role of ‘copying’ in people’s behaviour reinforces the need to identify the dominant narratives impacting a business. What ideas about a company have most social currency? We need to spot the tropes or themes being consistently applied to a company or sector – what are the common metaphors and analogies being applied, whether that is the concepts of ‘bigness’, e.g. Big Oil/Pharma – or the assumptions tied up with national provenance.

Rory Sutherland has highlighted the importance of narrative bias – how certain stories gain influence “unconnected to how closely they represent the truth”, in particular if they hark back to narratives present through literature (Sutherland 2011). Common understanding of ‘David vs. Goliath’ – visible in a modern film such as Star Wars as much as the Bible – partly explains why NGOs and interest groups are instinctively more trusted than large corporates, and why as their size and scale grows, Silicon Valley tech firms can go from being seen as plucky upstarts to being viewed as monolithic Big Brothers.

Narratives are reinforced by the sense of ‘others’ thinking the same, and collective positions being taken. Though now, with the benefit of hindsight, it would seem almost foolish not to question the wisdom of sub-prime mortgage loans, how many stakeholders questioned the economic boom of the 1990s and early 2000s, or queried how the banking system was operating? Our view of what constitutes a ‘good’ company vs. a ‘bad’ company is naturally influenced by others; indeed, Giep Franzen sees the associative networks – so central to defining a company in our minds – as collective and shared.⁴

Exploring the social aspect of a reputation is crucial to understanding how to bring about change through communications. Behavioural economics underscores that simple information provision alone is not enough in corporate communications – for opinion change to come about, social proof is needed, with people needing to see that ‘others’ are taking similar stances. Understanding the social ‘stickiness’ of aspects of a reputation is crucial to identifying how to evolve corporate profiles.

EMBEDDING INSIGHT WITHIN CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

All this new thinking provides researchers with a set of tools and approaches to apply when inputting on the design of communications strategies, and starts to show how to better embed insight within the corporate communications process.

Signature initiatives

The role of heuristics and symbols underlines the need for companies to re-fresh where they focus their communications efforts. In part due to information overload, much communication is lost in the ether, and has little impact on perceptions. Politicians have grappled with this climate for longer than business, and the most successful ones realise that to connect, companies need, in the words of Downing Street head of strategy Andrew Cooper, “10,000 volt initiatives”, to grab attention and shed light on what a leader is aiming to do.⁵

Drawing on the need for mental shortcuts, politicians use ‘symbolic policies’ to show their vision and values (Mattinson and Trayner, 2004). They are policies that are tangible in scope, yet imaginative and emotive in terms of what they imply. Margaret Thatcher’s policy of empowering tenants to buy their own council houses was a very powerful symbolic policy, conveying in an everyday way her chosen themes of freedom and aspiration. On the other side of the Atlantic, US presidents too seek their signature action— whether that is JFK and the Peace Corps, Obama and healthcare reform or Bush and No Child Left Behind.

The instincts of smart politicians are confirmed by the knowledge of social psychologists – Harvard professor Howard Gardner sees the need for leaders and companies intent on change to show “representational redescription”, in effect a tangible example of a wider vision (Gardner, 2006). In order to shift perceptions, companies need to develop and promote emblematic initiatives, which give context, granularity and an emotive edge to their corporate mission. At its most successful, a company’s emblematic initiative becomes part of the symbolic shorthand people draw upon, and cuts through the clutter of information overload and default scepticism.

Our role as researchers is to identify the most compelling territory for a signature initiative, which will draw on the company’s area of specialism or focus, linking in some logical way to what people already know or think about the company, but also be aligned with stakeholder priorities. Importantly, it cannot be spin – a successful signature initiative must be embedded within the culture of the business.

Issue-led programmes

The role context plays in shaping perceptions of reputation, and the importance of public narratives, underlines the need for companies to look at reputation campaigns which are designed to tackle broader issues and debates impacting society. This is about initiatives which are ‘outside-in’, rather than ‘inside-out’ – about the issue first, the company second.

Companies are increasingly expected to have a broader view on issues impacting society, in part due to awareness of their power, and because there is less faith in the power of governmental institutions to bring about change (Tett, 2012). The role context and public narratives play in informing perceptions of companies also highlights the broader benefits of being a company that tackles societal issues.

Opinion research should then be geared to looking at social issues and broader policy themes that surround a company in a specific sector; such as financial literacy for banking, childhood obesity for food and drink companies, or access to medicines for pharmaceutical companies. In the words of business academic, Michael Porter, “no business can solve all of society’s problems or bear the cost of doing so. Instead each company must select issues that intersect with its particular business.” (Porter, cited in Stopford, 2011)

Our role should not just be to diagnose the issue, but to then provide inputs into the development of a platform designed to address the debate, whether that is through primary research on the topic or a methodology centred around stakeholder engagement on the issues.

Reputation signifiers

Drawing on the insight that a corporate reputation is informed by the cumulative and combined effect of associations, behaviours and initiatives, opinion research should be geared to identifying the ‘points of light’ which can act as reputation signifiers.

This is not about developing laundry lists of attributes or endless communications channels and messages, but about identifying the most powerful corporate behaviours and initiatives which can start to re-shape corporate profile. Reflecting the reliance on shortcuts, stakeholders tend to recall specific corporate policies or hallmarks, or remember an initiative or action which resonated with them. Successful reputation signifiers are imaginative and memorable, and often will challenge pre-existing assumptions about what a company in the sector would do.

Using the technique of reputation engrams, our role as researchers is to identify the current behaviours and policies shaping corporate reputation, and then to identify new ideas and inspirations which can improve and bolster reputation.

THE WAY AHEAD

In recent years, reputation management and corporate communications have been at times paralysed by the fear of management consultants, and their perceived growing interest in reputation and measurement. Yet, the challenge is to look more at the inspiration behind reputation, rather than retrospective evaluation. Dazzled by the perceived advance of the consultants, there can be a tendency to develop yet more engineered models, when the opportunity is to tie together new insights into how the mind works with incisive creativity.

The communications industry has been at fault for focussing too much on how research in the form of evaluation can increase its professional status, when it is the use of opinion research to design communications strategies that can increase credibility. Corporate communications needs to look afresh at research, and embed insight deeper into what it does.

In a seminal paper, the planning pioneer Stephen King looked at the limitations, and potential folly, of applying research too directly to decision-making (King, 1983). He saw it not only as wrong, but also potentially dangerous and counter-productive. King saw the role of research to stimulate thinking, imagination and ideas, and to avoid mechanistic measurement. As researchers and corporate communicators move into a challenging yet exciting era, these are principles we would all do well to heed.

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