Reputation Management Requires PR Bricks, Not Puffery

by Barbara Lezotte, APR

Not unlike the Wizard of Oz, a corporate CEO is responsible for creating or enhancing the image of the company he or she represents. Those who assume they can do so behind a curtain of public relations pyrotechnics and PR special effects will be unlikely to build or maintain a solid, crisis-proof reputation.

More times than I like to count, I've been called in to a media crisis situation with the expectation that our PR efforts would magically salvage the organization's reputation following negative publicity of some occurrence or event. (Ah, if only we PR people really possessed such power.) Although strategic communication is certainly needed in the midst of a negative incident that threatens to tarnish the company's reputation, companies should have a public relations strategy for building and maintaining their reputations before there's ever a hint of trouble.

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Once the tornado hits, it's too late to build a strong structure in which to keep the company's image safe. That building process is done brick by brick with honesty, integrity and trust. It permeates the organization and underpins its relationships—with employees, suppliers, customers and the community, to name just a few key publics.

A company that strives to build strong relationships from the inside out is more likely to withstand the damaging winds of bad publicity. When companies focus their relationship building outwardly, concentrating on customers or clients, they may omit the more important publics of employees, board members, suppliers and others. In times of trouble, solid support from the insider base can be critical to emerging unscathed from a public relations challenge.

An effective public relations strategy is multi-faceted, taking into consideration internal, as well as external, publics. Although the demands of clients and customers can easily distract a company from its internal relationships, those relationships, when nurtured, tend to positively impact the external ones.

An internal PR strategy might play out in safety programs that put concern for employees ahead of productivity or sales volume or in internal communication efforts that give employees sufficient notice of a corporate change that will impact their jobs and families. Externally, it's a corporation that puts public safety ahead of profit, perhaps by keeping the surrounding neighborhood informed when its production process has even a slight possibility of causing harm. Or, it's a company willing to admit it made a mistake before customers end up paying for it or incurring loss as a result of it.

A true public relations strategy is about ethics, not slogans. It's about responsibility, not culpability. It's about people's actual experience, not a projected image.

It's certainly possible to build up an image that appears positive using publicity tools and targeted communication, but an image is simply a reflection or a perception, and may not hold up under stress or duress.

When we hear good things about an organization, we tend to have a positive disposition toward it; that is, until the facts disagree, or our actual experience differs from what

we've heard. We've all experienced the disappointment of having a well-hyped product fail to live up to its advertising, or had an employee whose performance didn't measure up to his or her promotion.

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Public relations needs to begin on the inside of an organization. It ties in with the corporate values, mission and culture. It's played out in the demonstrated respect for employees, customers, the community. It's embodied in open communication and two-way information exchange.

Building an image façade that has all the outward appearance of solidity, but none of the strength, is always easier than the harder work of constructing a reputation brick by brick, person by person, action by action. Companies that use public relations bricks, held together through solid relationships, strong communication and a people-ahead-of-profits philosophy, will have less damage control to do during a media storm, if they are ever hit by one in the first place. ■

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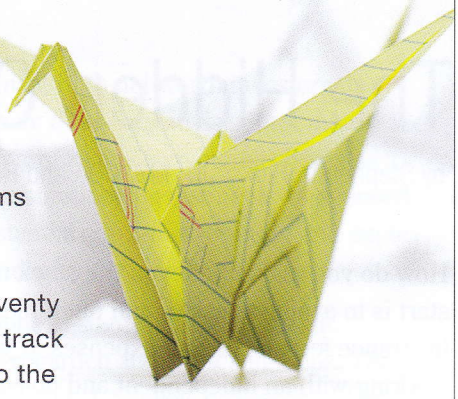

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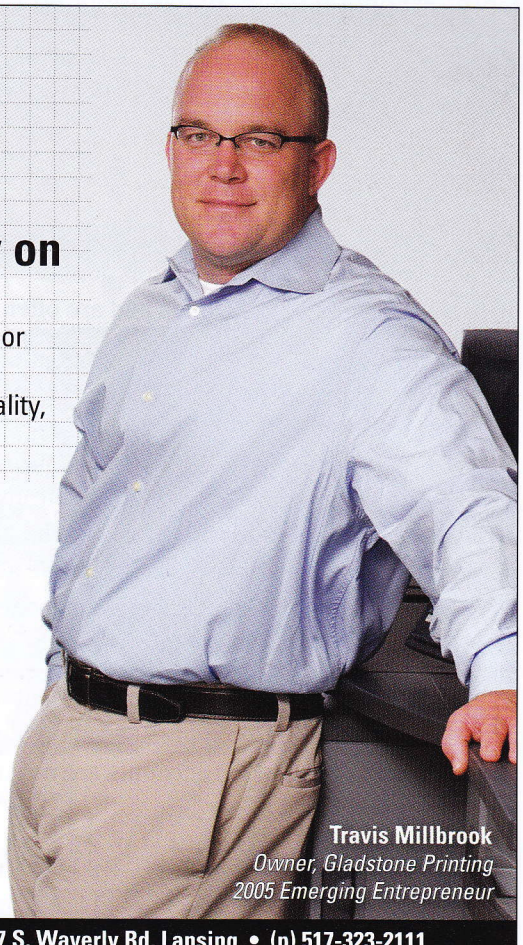

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