

It's time to connect the dots

'Nice to do' is now 'have to do' when it comes to business reputation, responsibility and sustainability

Things are different – there is no denying that. What is only starting to be appreciated, however, is to what extent and in what ways things are different – and how it will affect us all. Gone are the days of 'nice to do because we've always done it'. Welcome to 'we have to do this because it matters'. And hello to letting non-essentials fall by the wayside as we become leaner and tighter than ever before. Reputation, communications, CSR and sustainability all matter. Oh, and by the way, they are interrelated.

Above all, their materiality matters. How do they link into the various parts of the organisation, across business units and operations? How do they support the organisation to drive change? What change can and should they be impacting? And how do they truly become built in, not bolted on?

Connecting the dots, as PricewaterhouseCoopers used to say, is the answer. Focusing on the organisation's mission and objectives is the starting point (in particular, how these shape your identity). Assessing the various needs and expectations of key stakeholders (in their image of you), and the influencers on their perception, then allows you to do a gap analysis of what may need changing or reinforcing as the basis of strategic planning and resourcing. At Echo, we call this the i3 approach to reputational evidence to bring the business with you and ensure you are aligned with it.

When considering the likely return on reputational investments and focusing on the things that really matter to the CEO and the organisation (hopefully the same things), research comes into its own in support of the PR professional. Benchmarking current perception gaps, pre-testing likely impact or saliency of ethical or other initiatives, and demonstrating impact are essential to bring an unaware or, worse, cynical management team with you.



PETER CRANE

In the transparent world in which we live, sleepwalking one's way into the future is no longer acceptable. *The Clue-train Manifesto* forewarned ten years ago that 'the end was nigh' for unchallenged corporate and political propaganda – largely because the internet would level the playing field by giving all and sundry the right to opine on, and, if desired, undermine the implausibly positive assertions of the spin industry.

Research provides an understanding of what audiences expect and find reasonable. Swathes of unwarranted hyperbole generate cynicism and continued loss of trust. The organisation providing a public face of pure marketing-speak has lost its claims to transparency and authenticity. As expectations and sources of influence change, careful stakeholder research and understanding are required to guide strategy development above and beyond just communications alone.

There can be challenges in directly linking PR causes to effects, such as demonstrating how the initial communication led to an ultimate behavioural change. But there is no substitute for post-testing how a communication filters through – via the media, web 2.0, advocates, critics and the whole stakeholder chain – to the end consumers, be they customers, employees, new recruits or regulators.

The task at hand is to connect those dots in a way that demonstrates you are advising and helping to move the business forward in a positive, holistic and sustainable fashion, true to the values of the organisation and its people.

Speaking the language of business, being indispensable to the CEO and the management team, actively listening to your key audiences and their influencers, and demonstrating the impact of sound principles of true joined-up thinking matter in these times of change. It is there for communicators – or others – to take up and own.

Sandra Macleod is group CEO of Echo Research

Views in brief

Which company has produced the most relevant and resonant corporate responsibility work over the past year?

John Lewis Partnership. With its special system of co-ownership, it has always been structurally close to the CR spirit. The past year has seen it backing urban regeneration in city centres ahead of out-of-town parks, and decimating vehicle mileages by launching a new super-green distribution hub. John Lewis, like Marks & Spencer, is a through-and-through British brand, and its CR burnishes a reputation for living the presumed British virtues of fairness and decency.