

Reputation management not a priority for corporate SA



By [Lisa Dawson Biggs](#)

14 Aug 2008

Government's management of the recent xenophobic violence should be a lesson to corporate South Africa about proactive reputation management. Its tardy response to managing the xenophobic violence and the resulting media backlash is an example of how ineffective stakeholder management - often seen as a non-core management function - could tarnish an organisation's reputation.

This was confirmed when influential international media, including Reuters, CNN, BBC, AFP and Al Jazeera, criticised spokespeople from Government Communication and Information Services, GCIS, at the recent International Media Forum held in Bryanston, for not being available for comment on a wide range of issues such as Eskom, health legislation, Zimbabwe and the economic outlook.

Communicating these weighty issues are challenging at best but made even more complex when management does not see communication as a priority. This problem is not just endemic to Government but is much broader.

Just as guilty

Corporate SA is just as guilty. Communication managers end up looking ineffectual and incompetent because management has not equipped them with the correct information and they are not part of the decision-making process. At times like these, they are often hung-out to dry by the media who see these professionals as a barrier to communication, as opposed to a conduit.

So how should the perceptual crisis have been managed and what are the lessons for organisations who cannot afford to have a reputation crisis?

The first and most important consideration in reputation management - whether in the private or public sector - is to be prepared for any type of crisis. Communication must be seen as a strategic management function.

So how does one prepare? Quite simply, it's all about issues management. One should constantly scan the environment being vigilant of issues that could pose reputational challenges.

A few years ago the life assurance industry was rocked by the bulking scandal where companies made secret profits without passing those profits to investors. While the main perpetrators were indicted, other companies dodged this bullet by managing the issues proactively, by admitting fault, changing procedures, admitting the challenges upfront and working to earn the public's trust. Granted, issues management is more complex for Government as opposed to a listed company, due

to the many complex socio-economic issues facing a relatively young democracy. However, the process would still be the same.

Identify smouldering crises

It's important to note that many of the issues that could tarnish an organisation's reputation such as the recent xenophobic attacks are smouldering crises that are present for many months or years and "erupt" through any number of catalytic developments.

When these smouldering crises are identified, this is when the issues need to be mitigated. Other examples of potentially smouldering crises facing Government include crime, poverty, housing, recent low levels of water quality and the two centres of power - just to name a few.

Naturally, if an organisation fails to recognise an issue as having a reputational bearing that's one thing, but once potential crises are identified as a reputational risk, an organisation must identify a suitable spokesperson that can intelligibly and credibly keep stakeholders updated. Earn and maintain stakeholders' trust by revealing what's known and the extent of the crisis. This is crucial for creating the perception that the organisation is on top of a problem. By contrast, failing to resolve a problem that appears to be getting worse - if that problem was understated in the first place - potentially creates a bigger reputational crisis.

Appropriate spokesperson

Identifying the appropriate spokesperson is a tricky business. Using the president or a CEO as a spokesperson is inappropriate if say, the deputy director at a Government department or a human resources manager is arrested for corruption or fraud. By contrast, if this is the fifth time this year that either of these problems have arisen, creating perceptions of a deep-rooted underlying problem, it may become appropriate for the president or CEO to become involved, signalling that organisation's intention to resolve the issue as a priority.

Often, during major reputational challenges, it's often best for the CEO to take charge initially during a press conference, for example, and then inform the media to forward any additional queries to the relevant minister or director. This tells stakeholders that while the current issue is a priority, the organisation does have the depth to deal with the issue.

After identifying an appropriate spokesperson, the next step would be to identify a few key messages and stick to those messages, regardless of the stakeholders. The key is to maintain key messages under any context.

Control perceptions

Identifying appropriate messages and continuously driving those messages gives an organisation the opportunity to control perceptions. By contrast, being cagey gives the media and other influencers such as trade unions the opportunity to speculate. If speculation is rife in the media, the organisation often ends up having to focus on and fight speculation rather than resolving the issues that lead to the original problem.

The next step would be to evaluate the appropriateness of messages as circumstances change.

Once a crisis has passed, an organisation must evaluate its management of the crisis. This gives an organisation the opportunity to modify its preparation and response to future crises.

ABOUT LISA DAWSON BIGGS

Lisa Dawson Biggs is business unit director of FCB Redline (www.fcbredline.co.za), a division of Draftfcb South Africa. As marketing and sponsorship director of the National Olympic Committee of SA, her career highlights included development and implementation of the 2004 Olympic Games Marketing and Communication programme for NOCOSA, where she was responsible for issues management, crisis communication, rights packages, standards guide and communication with all stakeholders, both internally and externally. She has been with Redline since 2003. Contact her on tel +27 (0)21 680 7725.

■ [2012 trends] Re-evaluating the way we work, communicate - 19 Jan 2012

» Reputation management not a priority for corporate SA - 14 Aug 2008

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>