

# BUSINESS JOURNAL

Vol. 10, No. 15 • October 9, 2006

www.nwabusinessjournal.com • \$2.00

## Building Reputation that Lasts

As we all know now, the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina were only the catalyst to catastrophe. What ultimately crippled New Orleans was a false security in a weakened embankment system built hundreds of years ago. It was just a matter of time before the city's levees would give way from the storms, stress or simply an inability to maintain integrity in the face of disaster.

Sounds a lot like what has happened in a number of corporate reputation crises we've watched unfold before us: Enron, WorldCom, Tyco and so many others. In all of these situations, we find ourselves asking, "Where was the levee system that should have kept these people out of trouble?"

Don't criticize too quickly, though. We should all harbor a healthy fear of a gathering storm that could test our personal levee system and risk the loss of our own reputation.

Fortunately, companies large and small are focusing on reputation issues with a new bottom-line urgency. The continued erosion of public trust in the business community is of particular concern, but it has forced us to recognize the value of being well regarded, especially at a time when business is under such scrutiny.

The good news is the credibility battle is not necessarily a losing proposition. It is in fact a pretty easy game to win. Fundamentally, reputation is won or lost based on what you do, not what you say. Strong company leaders know exceptional organizational behavior is always the goal. Telling that story becomes easier if the right actions are there first. And if communication with stakeholders is open, honest and ongoing then, even

when mistakes are made, relationships and reputation will not suffer as severely.



**Elise Mitchell**

*Guest  
Commentary*

What can companies do to build stronger reputations that will withstand the storms of controversy and crisis that will happen sooner or later?

Underpinning a timeless reputation are fundamental public relations principles we share with our clients and any company can adopt. As early as the 1930s, Arthur Page, the father of corporate public relations, laid down seven simple but powerful principles to define what proper organizational behavior should look like:

- Tell the truth.
- Prove it with action.
- Listen to the customer.
- Manage for tomorrow.

■ A company's true character is expressed by its people.

■ Conduct public relations as if the whole company depends on it.

■ Remain calm, patient and good-humored, especially in times of crisis.

These are straightforward timeless truths — doing good doesn't have to be complicated, and it shouldn't be.

My favorite on this list is the last one.

Crises have a way of showing us what people are really like. All of us mess up; the real test comes when you decide what to do about it. There are a few things company leaders ought to remember when a crisis arises.

Gather the facts to get a clear sense of what has happened. You really can't do anything until you understand the context of the situation.

Get everyone's emotions in check. Cool heads think and communicate best. Project calm confidence and it will be contagious.

Set priorities. Think through what decisions must be made in the proper order to care for people, the environment, equipment and facilities. Follow established company procedures to ensure these things are handled appropriately.

Determine to make bad news your own before someone else makes it theirs. Always understand the value of communicating appropriate news at the appropriate time in order to maintain trust and two-way communication with your stakeholders and avoid unfounded rumors.

When you do say it, say it carefully. Work closely with your public relations and legal teams to prepare your messages. Never speak rashly or speculate. Remember what happened in the West Virginia coal miners' tragedy? You won't have to worry about miscommunication, starting rumors or wrongly being in the headlines if you follow proper protocol.

Show you sincerely care about the impact on people. It is more than appropriate to make statements of empathy when communicating with employees and the media. Otherwise you may be viewed as heartless.

Learn from your mistakes. Monitor feedback from others to determine how well your communication was received and what impact if any was made on the organization. Share those findings with others in follow-up discussions to prepare for the future.

Your values, ethics, choices and behavior are your levee system. If your levees are strong enough, after the storm has passed, your good name remains yours. And that's one of the few things in life that really matters. ■

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