

**31<sup>st</sup> October 2008**

## **Reputation, Reputation, Reputation**

### **From BBC presenters to corporate PR – how are the mighty fallen?**

The news this week has been all about the BBC and its activities. Now normally you would expect they (the BBC) would be delighted to be the centre of attention, but on this occasion most BBC executives were rubbing their lucky rabbit paws hoping things would get better and the storming media turmoil would glance in another direction.

Sadly no. Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand managed to whip up one heck of a frenzy making pretty horrible remarks about Andrew Sachs' granddaughter. The peculiar thing was they made those remarks during a telephone message left on Mr Sachs' answer machine (oh yes and broadcast to the nation on a post-watershed radio show on Radio 2.)

Now I know trash is the new black when it comes to TV and radio productions. Our diet of entertainment is loaded with reality TV, soaps and just about anything that doesn't require more than the attention span of a goldfish, but publicly insulting another human being on national radio, wow, that takes the biscuit for pushing the corporate stupidity boat out to sale.

But here's the thing, at the time of the show being broadcast only two listeners complained. Yes, just two. So the question is, moral issues aside, where did the storm of protest originate?

Probably in a number of places, but it seems a pretty ardent campaign from the Daily Mail was a real catalyst (and probably good on them for bringing this to the world's attention). Their involvement (amongst others) saw the number of retrospective complaints rise to 27,000 at the peak of the feeding frenzy!

Of course Gordon Brown and the Labour Party chipped in too, expressing abject disgust with Ross's and Brand's behaviour and, briefly, helping to divert the nation's anger from their party and the government, to the BBC. Hurrah for the Labour Party. Must not forget Cameron and the Conservatives too, they don't like to miss an opportunity to support Gordon on a point of national interest!

That is just the thing with bad news. What can start out as just a whimper of trouble can quickly blow into a full scale riot involving a whole heap of people whom you never really thought had much interest in your activities or operations.

Fortunately, most organisations don't have to pamper to excessively overpaid celebrities who feel they can stomp all over normal codes of moral behaviour and get away with it. But they do contain people and people, as they say, do the funniest things. Managing your people and making sure they don't bring the company name into disrepute is quite tricky. Here are a few examples of faux pas by company staff, whilst on company business, that have caused uproar in their corporate head office:

- Staff arrested for lewd behaviour on a beach (in a middle eastern country with strict controls on behaviour in public)
- Board members arrested for drunken and disorderly behaviour on a plane

- Staff releasing the internal plans of a major corporation to significantly reduce redundancy payments (published in the press)
- Senior board member accused of not telling the truth in a court case

You probably read about these issues in the paper. Organisations hitherto unknown outside their industry or geographic area can attract enormous negative publicity if an issue captures a journalist's interest. And large corporations, despite endless departments designed to control the company's image, can rapidly see their PR strategy sliding into disarray when bad or shall we say 'juicy' news leaks.

How you control it is difficult to say, it depends on the business and its environment. But Murphy's Law applies and the worst things can happen at the worst times.....

Our 'advice' is:

1. **Don't employ celebrities** they cost a lot, demand a lot and don't really understand life and its complications and limitations
2. **Find out if your staff like you** (you the organisation) – you would hope they do, and if that's the case people are less likely to do damage to something they like and perhaps respect
3. **Make sure you limit the number of people with the express authority to speak to the outside world** (goodness me if I had a pound for every time a Chief Executive with the PR skills of a rhino thought they could shoot from the hip and respond to an issue immediately trashing their and the organisation's reputation in the process.....Please Chief Executives – unless particularly adept at public speaking might be best to leave it to the PR people, particularly in a crisis)
4. **Don't bury your head in the sand** monitor the market, root out news about your organisation and when bad news arrives (as it does for most at some time) have a method for dealing with it quickly and efficiently. In my experience really bad news comes when everyone's at home relaxing and the Chief Executive is wearing carpet slippers, dressing gown and watching Strictly Come Dancing (and probably voting for Cherie Lunghi, not that I watch the show of course)

OK not entirely detailed but this is a blog after all .....

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