

Cultural appreciation in reputation management

 By [Daniel Munslow](#)

30 May 2016

On my most recent trip to Ghana, I had an opportunity to present to a large group of senior marketing communication professionals about reputation management and crisis communication.



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As with any workshop, we started with an objective-setting exercise... and as we went round the room in a beautiful hotel in downtown Accra, a theme emerged: How do we communicate across cultures? I paused to deep-dive that point and get a better sense of what they mean by that.

Well, as it turns out, they too are challenged with communicating to complex heterogeneous audiences. Something South African communicators are very familiar with.

What I realised was simple – the more we think communicating in different countries/ cultures/ companies is so vastly different, the more we realise it is actually very similar. The nuances are always unique, of course, such as the methods of communication and the maturity of the market, but the principles are the same.

It was easy to spot, and also explains why we often overcomplicate uncomplicated issues.

Communication gap

To make this less academic and more practical, I asked one of the communication directors for her input, and the unique challenge she faced. In her organisation, which happens to be in the financial services space, a recent acquisition has led to a conflict between the cultural approach of head office – located in a neighbouring country – and their employees' way of working. This has resulted in a disgruntled workforce that is creating a reputational risk externally.

It sounded all too familiar. We might not always see it as a head office that has a different approach as they are in a different country; but the principle of a head office not in tune with its employees in the field is not foreign to many communication professionals. And we all know that, when a head office makes a brand promise that staff cannot deliver, organisations run the risk of damaging their reputation.

The foreign company had assumed that when coming into Ghana, they could land the same messages in the way they do back home, using the same language and approach. Instead of embracing the cultural differences and working with them, they tried to force down their way of doing things – the famous (or rather infamous) ‘once size fits all’ approach. It backfired. They are now six months behind on implementation. A hugely costly exercise that could have easily been avoided.

As it turns out, staff don’t want to be ‘preached to’, as the communicator explained. Nor do they want to be ‘instructed’ via repeat emails from head office. All they wanted was a conversation – an opportunity to hear first-hand how things would work, and be afforded a chance to have a say.

Social media challenge

Another communicator raised their challenges with social media. We all want to believe that in an ideal world function follows structure. In reality, technology and social media has left many companies playing catch up on the structure. In Ghana, social media is big. Very big. And it is embraced across generations and geographies.

I was intrigued to learn that they even invite live comments on Twitter during the main news bulletin in the mornings. The national breakfast show has around 90,000 followers.

The challenge raised by this communicator, who is from the retail space, is that social media comments are not aligned to what the organisation would ideally like to see. They have worked hard to shape a brand promise, but they’ve been struggling for a while with negative comments about service delivery instead of positive engagement with experience and brand.

What this demonstrates is that there is a misalignment between the stated marketing strategy and the manner in which people experience it. All this is not unfamiliar to what we see in South Africa – there are so many brands who, when they post something on Facebook seeking to engage customers, are met with fierce comments about their lack of service delivery.

If they got their house in order first, this would be drastically reduced and their reputation would consequently be enhanced, leading to revenue benefits.

As we unpacked an integrated approach to reputation management, delegates were openly sharing where they thought they were going wrong, and interrogated the details of how they could do things differently. They also shared some great insights of amazing work they are doing on the ground. The hunger for knowledge and the drive to look at initiatives through a new lens, to achieve even greater things, leaves you feeling that you made a difference.

ABOUT DANIEL MUNSLOW

Daniel Munslow is the owner and founder of MOC Consulting and former director on the International Association of Business Communicators' International Executive Board. He has 16 years' experience in business communication consulting. He has worked across Africa, as well as in the Middle East, the US, Europe, and AsiaPac.

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