

Organizational Reputation

The University of Melbourne / PHIL90022

DATE: 24/06/16

REVISION: A

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CHAR. COUNT: 21 567

STUDENT#: 749244

WORD COUNT: 3 495

«A good reputation is of fundamental importance to a commercial organization, since it is only if it has a good reputation that consumers will be attracted to its products. The way to get a good reputation is to provide goods and services that satisfy consumers. So in the case of commercial organizations at least, we can be sure that actual and deserved reputation align.» Can we? If we can't, what should be done about it?

As we will see, reputation can be built by providing consumers with products and services that fill a space in a market. This is however not equivocally the same as an authentic, well-deserved, ethically good or morally well-reasoned reputation that is able to stand its own. We as consumers and individuals can often fall under the naïve and simplistic view that it is in the organization's best interest to act ethically and we therefore intrinsically trust that they do so. From an organizational viewpoint the effort of managing the perception of an organization's reputation can be likened with trying to manage one's own popularity (Hutton et al 2001; Snellman 2015). I will in this essay look at why and how this disconnect between our expectations and organizations' actions exists, at specific examples of organizational ethics, how these examples fared and a look at what can be done to improve the quo in aligning reputations with reality. Before we do this however, it is necessary to elaborate on how reputation is built, and how deceptive reputations can be a part of creating the apparent disconnects and stark conflicts of interest.

1.1 Ethics of Marketing

Organizational reputation is the product of how consumers perceive the organization and its products through values such as quality of service and products, treatment of employees and fair pricing. When evaluating these aspects, we are inherently biased by what information is readily available to us. This includes our experience with the products, with services, with support, sales and through tales from friends that together paints an internal picture of how caring and professional an organization is and what values it holds. Lastly, we can hereunder also factor in the marketing efforts deployed by the organization. These efforts, by the use of persuasion, are designed with the intention of building or reinforcing the consumers perception of the organization, its brands and its values and efforts (Kotler & Keller 2016; Waddington & Earl 2012; Lozano 2000; Snellman 2015). This persuasion of opinion—by the use of Aristotle's three modes of rhetoric; the ethos, logos and pathos—creates narratives that subsets of consumers will sympathize, agree or connect with and that changes and persuades their perception and connotations. Ethical and moral marketing of an organization, product or brand is expected to build its rhetoric on claims that are reasonably true and authentic—but both present and previous history can tell us that organizations regularly persuade to the level of deception. With this knowledge in mind we can also say that reputation is largely a social construct and very subjective in its form. Every consumer weigh values differently, become subjected to different levels of marketing and media, and will therefore also build different internal rationales for the reputations of the commercial

organizations that they observe (Kotler & Keller 2016; Toye 2013). In terms of the possible dark sides of the reputation, where reputation is not deserved, it is only through true research and sometimes through the help of whistleblowers that one discovers what others have set out to hide. As often is the case, this research is done by watch organizations or very investigative journalism and not before the majority of purchases or interactions with organizations that consumers engage in (Waddington & Earl 2012; Archambeault & Webber 2015).

1.2 Consumer Naiveté

If we then consider a reputation to be solely the result of the naïve above-water iceberg view, where reputation is the result of a balance between organizational image-building efforts and the perceived negative connotations due to negative media coverage or individual research, it is apparent that if everyone readily and naïvely accepted the information provided, the balance would tip in favor of the largest and most prominent voice. In this we can also briefly tap in on a parallel to some of the early founding principles of the free society, markets and that of democracy; where the separation of powers, attributed to Montesquieu, ensures that no state entity has universal power in judging, legislating or executing moments of law; it is rather to be balanced through separation—and arguably more just. We duly know that it is important for a state to be able to govern itself, and we can easily see the benefit of this when comparing well-functioning democratic societies with very authoritarianistic societies. For organizations however, we argue for these to govern themselves, and do not provide completely overarching and absolute principles that they all need to adhere to or how they ultimately should do their operations. The result is then that there again is room for a disconnect between how we expect an organization to behave and what incentives they possess to act otherwise in the search for margins (Ahmed & Fatima 2013; Bufacchi 2011).

1.3 Ethics of Business

Individuals can and do act outside of what is ethical and moral, but we are thought, through nature, laws, culture and regulations that it is wrong to do so. It is inherent to our selves to stay on the inside of these moral and ethical boundaries. Businesses and the environments they operate in also contain rules and norms regulating the ethical and moral boundaries, but the understanding of the self differs from the top management, procurement, sales and to service and support; ethical understanding for organizations is explicitly more difficult and fragmented than for individuals (Bishop 2013; Waddington & Earl 2012; Kurki & Wilenius 2015; Snellman 2015; Riivari & Lämsä 2014). There are a lot of cultural differences for this—as there also is for all the aspects that we discuss—but these difference can be significantly more prominent as the cultural differences are ingrained in the people of the nation.

As we have also touched on, without any valuable reason to act otherwise and in a situation where no rules existed, some organizations and individuals would, if given the chance, do whatever they wanted. We are ultimately subjective, and when given the opportunity have the ability to act unethical and with a biased perception—which gives reason for ethical guidelines and for regulations beyond these (Kotler & Keller 2016; Kahneman 2012). When we see this from a consumer viewpoint, we again have to consider the impact that all positive connotations have on their perception of the organization in question, and given a powerful of positive connotations, it can be hard to shift away from salience, selective perception and choice supportive bias. If we follow Aristoteles' ethics, there is no difference of kind between the ethics of the actions of an individual and that of a mass, and that the only difference is in volume. This conception is lost in Lozano (2000) where it is argued that business ethics is irreconcilable with personal ethics.

1.4 Morality of Business

So what does this then say for the morality of business? Business morality can be separated from business ethics in that it is more of an intrinsic conception and that it therefore often is manifested as something that ultimately lies in the culture of employees and other entities. As consumers we expect organizations that we interact with to adhere to the same absolute morality as us. We expect them to not engage in social injustice and we expect them to use their position and wealth to possibly do something about the situations that they observe. As we have already discussed, the disconnect in regards to reputation appears when this is not the case. We see this happening for worker wages, for factory conditions, for large levels of lobbying for their own causes and we see this in an unwillingness to change or to accept own fault (Hodge 2016; Lozano 2000; Bishop 2013).

1.4.1 Role Morality

One conception that is central to the idea that organizations do not follow the same moral and ethical principles as individuals and can expect their employees to then act in a way that would otherwise be considered strictly immoral is role morality. Role morality defines that individuals act in accordance with the morality of their role—something which stands the chance to create cognitive dissonance—and that individuals therefore “have the permission to harm others in ways that would be wrong if it weren't for the role [the individual] is playing”. When this conception for executing immoral actions is cumulated, one can end up on a slippery slope that leads to large atrocious actions that only serve the benefit of the bottomline of the organization (Gibson, 2003).

1.5 Incidents of Misalignment

H&M and Zara (Inditex) are two of a plethora of examples of fashion organizations where positive, and often naïvely constructed perceptions have long affected how they have been able to continuously act fairly unethical—in scenarios where they have well had the chance to act differently ("H&M - Ethics, Sustainability, Labor Rights Data Researched ," n.d.; "Zara: Ethics, Sustainability, Labor Rights Researched," n.d.; Egels-Zandén 2013; Bain 2015¹a). H&M and Inditex are both emblems of modern fashion and are the two largest operators in the sector and whereas H&M has been around since 1947, Inditex was founded in 1963 and their flagship store Zara in 1975. Between them the two groups have over 10 000 stores worldwide ("History," n.d.; "H&M Group," n.d.; "At a Glance," n.d.). They have both been accused of, and proven to, have been taking advantage of workers and their conditions in developing and poor countries such as Bangladesh and Cambodia by significantly underpaying, operating in unsafe and hazardous factories and allowing the use of child labour("Three Years After Signing Bangladesh Accord, H&M Factories Still Not Safe," 2016; Bain 2015a; "Zara: Ethics, Sustainability, Labor Rights Researched," n.d.; Bain 2105b; "Work Faster or Get Out," n.d.). In order to combat the negative impressions and media coverage, the organizations deployed CSR initiatives such as a 'Fair Living Wage' strategy and a set of seven commitments to sustainability, and their checks are again mostly in balance and consumers have forgotten for how many years the situation has been extremely unethical. Connecting back with misalignment of reputations and actions we can read the following from H&M's website; "At H&M, we like to think of sustainability as a word of action, something we do rather than something we simply say" and compare it with the Clean Clothes Campaign's press release stating that three years after signing an Bangladeshi agreement on fire safety, 70% of their strategic suppliers still lack adequate fire exits("Our Responsibility | FAQ," n.d.; "Sustainability," n.d.; Gabay 2015; "Three Years After Signing Bangladesh Accord, H&M Factories Still Not Safe," 2016).

In the last quarter of 2015, it became known to the public that Volkswagen had for years been implementing what came to be known as a 'defeat device' in several of their cars. The device, or code fragment, made it possible for Volkswagen to claim that their cars performed significantly better environmentally then what was actually the case (Holland, Mansur, Muller, & Yates, 2016; Oldenkamp, van Zelm, & Huijbregts, 2016). Customers who had specifically bought their Volkswagen cars based on this performance indicator quickly felt cheated—and the organization's reputation fell just as quick (Mouawad & Jensen, 2015; Ewing 2015). If we see this in the light of the question at hand, Volkswagen had built their reputation without all the ethical considerations necessary, while the customers naïvely expected the world to be as good as Volkswagen's marketing portrays. Once the marketing and environmental deception was uncovered, the reputation of Volkswagen fell rapidly due to the organization' failure to both admit fault and to take necessary action (Clark & Eddy, 2015; "Volkswagen AG SWOT Analysis," 2016).

Back in 2010 and 2011, a number of stories regarding the conditions at Apple's main manufacturer Foxconn began to surface. Just as H&M and Zara, the workers at Foxconn were not treated with the respect that one should be able to expect from one of the largest companies in the world and with one of the most valued brands in the world. The workers at Foxconn's plants were committing suicides at work as a result of low wages and conditions. Apple which regularly run audits on the conditions had arguably not held their manufacturer to an high enough standard nor taken sufficient action on the incidents that had been documented. Former Apple CEO and founder Steve Jobs did, in light of the suicide and condition allegations defend Foxconn and stated that they were "pretty nice" and "not a sweatshop." They did however go on to work closer with its producers and explicitly enforcing Foxconn to improve the conditions at their production plants (Lin, Lin, & Tseng, 2016; Xu & Li, 2013; Tiwari, Gupta, & Muthukumar, 2011). Apple is now touting their respect and consideration for the conditions at these plants on their website and 'supplier responsibility' is now one of their core values ("Supplier Responsibility", n.d.).

1.6 Summary

As a common point for the examples presented, we can see that the race for market dominance, for financial output and for brand value can lead to lack of focus in ethical practice. Doing business in developing countries can be extremely cost effective but is by no means necessarily good practice or a practice that leads to a well-deserved reputation on the basis of good organizational ethics (Hodge 2016; Bishop 2013). As with H&M and Zara, workers are payed well under the minimum, but even worse, the large organizations do not adhere to their due diligence and work to better the situations they manufacture in. Apple has done solid work to better its situation but the fact that it happens after it has been highlighted makes for it to be more of an save-face CSR initiative than an actual interest in doing something good for the sake of good. As kantian morality tells us, rational agents are expected to act in accordance with what is best without the need for empiricism, and any rational agent would see that it is in the interest of the better good to improve developing countries and that this would trump the shortsighted financial goal of the organization (Kant 1785/2006). For Volkswagen, contrary to all the other examples, it was a pure deceptive and immoral ploy set out for the organization to gain traction in the US car market (Rising & Sopke, 2015). These acts of deception and of immoral behaviour can often be seen in great contrast to how these organizations market themselves but as in the example of Apple action can be taken and what once was an issue of crisis management can become an integral part of the organization's CSR, SVC, transparency and marketing initiatives. That being said, Apple, just as H&M, got very easily away with having been part of putting workers in unfair and dangerous conditions for a prolonged period of time. There is also little discussion as to under what means these acts were committed and we can in retrospect see that this duality of motives become irreconcilable with each other; creating the aforementioned disconnect and misalignment.

1.7 What Can Be Done

In order to be able to do anything about the situation of disconnects and misalignment between actual and deserved reputation, without risking hurting the value of free markets that stand to bend and reshape markets and regulations for the better, we believe that all we essentially can do is to nudge the direction under different means. Just as incentives are put in place to promote environmentally friendly products and services, we can incentivize ethical behavior. The fact of the matter is that in the modern world, changes and convergences of media have enabled faster transaction of valuable information and created global movements and boycotts against unethical behavior. In an ever growing fight between customers, bad reputations hurt organizations like never before as there are so many competitors and alternatives that stand ready to take a bite at the freed up market share.

First of all, ingrained in global organizational cultures and subcultures, there are specific codes of ethics and of conducts; written or socially and culturally normative. These codes detail all the facts and quirks that define how business is done—that aren't readily defined anywhere else—and a structured way of nudging the direction of these norms towards the larger social good and not only financial output would better ensure that there is a lesser chance of the reputation being misaligned, but it would inherently lack in putting pressure to incentivize change. So should we just boycott these organizations to show them that the world does not tolerate such behavior? If enough pressure is put on their bottomline profits, they will necessarily have to adapt. But it is still a position that ultimately leaves operating well fully to the organization. It is also a position that for large and international organizations require tremendous momentums to be effective. Whereas smaller markets inhibit the same customers with the same information channels, organizations that operate in a multitude of markets across national and continental borders can still be able to ride the negative media because of their large reach and multitude.

Improved and tightened regulations will help put pressure on the pre-emptive side of the organizations operations, but this again leaves the responsibility of overseeing to the government and watchers, and moral atrocities just needs to be hid better. But, the sharper and more stringent of regulations, the more organizations will not be left with a choice. A perfect example of this is the story of the banning of chlorofluorocarbons such as Freon. The use of Freon and other CFCs was widespread as refrigerants and propellants, but once its detrimental effect on the ozone layer became known, the Montreal Protocol of 1987 which consisted of 27 nations sparked the start of a ban which later would span to 12 EEC nations and be completely eliminated by the year 2000 and in developing countries by 2010 ("ESRL Global Monitoring Division - Halocarbons and Other Atmospheric Trace Species," n.d.). This example has by many been upheld as an example of what happens when nations and states go together and create change and the science that the Montreal Protocol portrayed resulted in the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1995 (Ibid.; Colocousis 2015). The Montreal Protocol is still not completed, but the change it sparked and its

ability to do so draws a completely different story than that of global warming where it often is used as an example (Polvani, Camargo, & Garcia, 2016; Zaelke, Andersen, & Borgford-Parnell, 2012). Where regulations would put pressure on organizations, it would do so possibly at the cost of relationships between government, organizations and individuals due to a feeling of over-regulation and inflicting with freedom. Another measure, or accompanying measure, would be as we mentioned briefly is to incentivize a change of direction. If we think of this in terms of the morale, both regulations and incentives do essentially work around the problem and does instead tap into the financial interests of organizations. Incentives do however have the benefit of pushing organizations toward making the right decisions not as an punishment or as part of an fence ut rather as the greener grass or the light in the end of the tunnel.

1.8 How about the organizations

Ultimately a sustained change will have to be culturally, which in some respects is self-contradictory because of the variety that the term itself entails. A cultural change would mean producing a sustained and global shift in what organizations deem to be ethical and moral practice through means such as codes of conduct, but it is also important to create pressure to change. This is where we see the distinction between providing incentives and enforcing regulations. More important than anything in ensuring that what we as consumers consider the reputational value of an organization to be is that matches up with the reputation that the organization deserves, is that we as consumers can trust our beliefs, information and connotations. For example in terms of a free and transparent press and transparent and open organizations that let journalists in on their supplier lists, in to their factories and so on. And even more importantly in terms of the specific angles for changing the quo that we have already discussed.

1 Conclusion

Whereas the actual reputation of an organization is the result of the connotations and the perception of consumers, the deserved is the result of an organization's adherence to, or deviation from, ethical guidelines that govern how they ultimately are expected to act. Given this, there are numerous pitfalls and possible shortcuts for both consumers and organizations that stand to create a disconnect between these two models of organizational reputation. We are therefore not able to equivocally say that an organization's actual reputation is inherently well deserved. On the other hand, we can say that in the cases were there does exist a disconnect between these two modes of reputation, it can with a high level of certainty be proclaimed that the issue is in fact in some degree the result of lacking moral incitement by the organization. In other words, they are not adhering to the moral and ethical expectations of society.

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