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MARKETING

THE “X” FACTOR IN BRAND AND CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS



THE subject of emotion is little known and understood in the corporate world. Nevertheless, it does indeed play a crucial part in the success of brands and corporations.

Let us call emotion the “X factor” for the simple reason that many executives in the corporate world fail to understand this important factor or do not know how to handle it when it rears its head under different circumstances and situations.

To make matters worse for the corporate world, executives are now confronted by a wider range of issues affecting their brands or company and these issues carry heavy emotional overtones because of social media.

Compounding these challenges is the speed in which issues spread, giving opportunities to practically everyone to air their views or vent their feelings, anger or frustrations in the public domain.

Recently, certain individuals’ comments on social media about the country’s monarchy, temple relocation and other national issues triggered

aggressive social media backlash.

Other social media users digitally tracked down the commenters in a matter of hours, and exposed their personal information, which quickly went viral. What followed was an avalanche of angry comments calling for action to be taken against them and even threats of violence.

As a result, various police investigations and even criminal charges were filed. The online vigilantism also piled pressure on their employers to sack them in punishment, with threats of further consequences if they did not comply. The companies swiftly responded by distancing themselves from the employees involved.

Caught in the whirlwind of heated emotions, it can sometimes be very difficult for companies to come up with a response that addresses public concerns while honouring the integrity of the brand.

With today’s digital landscape, crisis or issues could come from so many angles – making it almost impossible to even identify all the flashpoints.

HOT BUTTON ISSUES, HEATED RESPONSES

Whenever the public feels interested in a hot button issue, we can definitely expect emotionally-charged discussions to occur between opponents or even friends.

This is nothing new. However, the landscape of public discourse has changed drastically in recent times. Social media has democratised information, leading to more open and transparent discussion.

However, it also seems to have amplified emotional reactions to such issues, sometimes with severe consequences.

In such heated situations, people are mentally agitated because of their frame of mind or the state of their feelings. For companies caught up in such situations, it is crucial that they know how to respond appropriately.

However, one of the factors most overlooked and underrated by crisis managers is the emotional well-being of the affected company’s internal and external stakeholders.

Many communicators believe that they can calm heated emotions by countering it with facts.

In reality, most of our communicators and corporate managers are ill-equipped to handle emotional situations, relying on facts and figures alone to resolve the situation - which is usually never the case.

For example, there was a case involving a waste treatment plant being built near a residential area. Naturally, nearby residents opposed its construction.

The dialogue session between the company and residents went something like this:

Company: "From a risk assessment viewpoint, the plant is 99.99% safe. The probability of the plant exploding is less than that of you being hit by lightning."

Residents: "What about the 0.01%? There is still some risk to us!"

In situations where the emotion level is high, presenting factual statements and statistics hardly provide any comfort to those who are affected.

The grief of the family of an employee killed in an industrial incident, the concerns of residents living near a polluting plant, the anger of customers given the run-around or the high anxiety of parents over contaminated baby food all involve heightened emotions.

Driven by emotion, people are just incapable of relating to these factual statements.

Their filters are working overdrive and everything said to correct their perception will be seen as dismissing the validity of their concerns. If your stakeholders feel like this, they will become even more emotional.

At times of crisis, the first priority should be to calmly meet the emotional needs of your stakeholders, if possible in a way that also protects the integrity of your brand.

However, most managers have not been prepared for this task by the professional trainings they had received.

HOW NOT TO HANDLE EMOTIONAL SITUATIONS

Many managers feel uncomfortable

when confronted by the emotional needs of stakeholders during a crisis. Outpourings of grief, anger or worry shake them.

This is outside the scope of the balance sheets, points-of-sale product displays, marketing campaigns or product rollouts that they are familiar with.

In addition, most managers are trained to make decisions based on facts, figures and precedents. Emotions are intangible and cannot be measured accurately.

Some situations that certain people may feel agitated about may not have the same effect on others. Another group may feel excited over what some may perceive as mundane and ordinary.

Managers need to develop a lot of emotional quotient (EQ) to discern and handle such situations.

Often, stakeholders who are being emotional or disagreeable are described in dismissive ways. In our own frustration, we use words such as

"stubborn", "unreasonable" or even "emotional" when referring to them.

This may or may not be a true description of them, but it is definitely a sure-fire way to get them to become more emotional and uncooperative.

However, if you look a little deeper, past their behaviour to the underlying emotions, you might find the real cause of the behaviour. This is the value of emotional intelligence.

Many managers also make the mistake of delegating the task of meeting affected stakeholders to their subordinates or even first-level front liners.

This is probably the biggest no-no. Junior staff may not have the maturity or the seniority to address the emotional needs of affected stakeholders.

Instead of helping to manage the situation, they may unwittingly worsen it despite their best efforts or intentions. Besides, affected persons always want to meet someone who has the authority to address their concerns.



SO HOW SHOULD YOU HANDLE EMOTIONAL SITUATIONS?

Being aware of and understanding stakeholder emotions is the key to having influence over your stakeholders in emotional situations. This is because human behaviour is driven by emotions, whether we're aware of them or not.

People, including key stakeholders, do not make decisions based on facts alone. Thus, learning how to manage emotions in key stakeholders is an essential part of running a business - perhaps even more important than being able to crunch facts and figures.

Of course, this requires a high level of emotional intelligence, and your own capability in communicating to your stakeholders.

One of the most powerful ways to communicate that you understand your stakeholders' concerns is through a symbolic gesture.

In the case of the waste treatment plant, a statement such as "To show how safe the plant is, I will live in the quarters within the complex when it

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What happens when you suddenly find yourself facing an angry client or social media vigilante group. You need to come up with a communication plan. But even before you develop your plan, there are a few items you should check-off first to make sure you are sending the right signals to your audience.

Quick checklist:

1. KEEP COOL ALWAYS.

Never lose control of your own feelings in the face of an irate client. It is only going to escalate the situation.

2. UNDERSTAND THE OTHER PARTY.

Practise active listening - consciously stopping your own responses to digest the other party's words. Often, just listening sincerely and acknowledging their feelings will calm them down.

3. UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION.

Make sure you can see where the other party is coming from. Find out what is driving their behaviour and try to recognise the triggers that provoke their emotional responses.

4. UNDERSTAND YOURSELF.

Look at the situation objectively to see how you may have contributed to the issue. By really listening to your client, you may discover ways to improve your service, processes or communication.

All this takes effort, because you may need to rewire how your brain instinctively reacts and replace it with different kinds of responses. But by setting your communications on this firm foundation, you can probably avoid the worsening of an already emotionally-charged situation.

becomes operational..." would have had more impact than statistics.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IS KEY

Companies must not forget the emotional needs of affected stakeholders in any communications.

If you worked with the emotions of your stakeholders instead of against them, you may find that you can move your priorities a little more smoothly.

Emotional intelligence is a key factor in influencing the outcomes of stakeholder meetings and relationships.

As such, someone with sufficient authority, EQ and communication skill must be tasked with managing the emotional impact on various stakeholders.

It's probably a good idea to invest in EQ training as a component of corporate

communications.

Despite the best efforts, a company might not be able to survive an emotionally charged situation and come up smelling like roses.

Chances are good that the brand will experience some negativity, at least in the immediate future.

However, handled sensitively, a company can emerge from a crisis stronger and wiser through the experience of gaining the trust of its stakeholders. **mb**

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