

Rage Against the Machine Had it Right: “The Frontline is Everywhere.” Even with Respect to Reputation Management

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In the pre-digital age, corporate reputation was relatively easy to track and determine. Word of mouth, a few letters to the editor of the local paper, an irate phone call to the company’s 800 number, or a commissioned survey helped communications staffs figure out their standing in the marketplace.

But with today’s proliferation of digital information, it’s become increasingly difficult to know where a company stands, and who to believe.

Social media allows the most outrageous issues and perspectives to see the light of day. Just recently several companies and their CEOs were in the spotlight due to international trade concerns, ethical behaviors, faulty products, and employee boycotts. Then there are the stories about evading taxes, ethics, and lack of commitment to social causes.

As a result, as it was noted at a recent Fortune event, more than half the CEOs present said their job of Chief Executive Officer had too often morphed into that of “Chief Reputation Officer”— forcing them to spend more than half their working

hours articulating and defending the values of the firm.

Yet those positive social values have become much more important to consumers in today's world and often impact buying decisions. Paradoxically, as a survey by the USC Annenberg [Center for Public Relations](#) in conjunction with *Chief Executive Magazine* has learned, CEOs on the one hand feel more pressure than ever to speak out on social issues, from gun control to immigration, but really want to spend the bulk of their time simply promoting their *businesses*. It's worth noting that many CEOs have effectively found the intersection of their brand purpose and where they can have true positive social impact.

With the proliferation of digital social channels – many of which spread increasing amounts of false information, innuendo, and rumors – the job of protecting a company's reputation has become ever more difficult yet essential.

To combat this, we need a new reputation management playbook.

A recent American Banker article said that, with hedging against political risk expected to become especially important in the coming year, a focus on reputation will go a long way.

If companies don't act now, we will quickly reach a point where an enterprise's reputation will be up for grabs, regardless of the facts because people no longer have any idea what or whom to believe. According to the USC study, 62% of communicators expect that in five years, the average person will not be able to make a distinction between paid, earned, shared, and owned content. To make matters even worse, 55% agree that the average person won't even care.

Couple that with more news being written by artificial intelligence and service being provided by bots, and the task of reputation management for communicators becomes ever more challenging.

In this new world, three key points must be addressed:

1) How to combat the explosion in digital media and data. Today, the consumer has little idea what data to look at, and which data to trust.

2) With the correct digital tools, valid data can be separated from trash; the challenge is how to make this clear to those consuming it.

3) Reputation-destroying bots that produce fake news, stories, reviews, and experiences are not going away. Companies must figure out how to prepare for them.

To get an accurate view of a company's reputation, communications executives in today's world need unimpeachable data on a company's value proposition, data from brand audits, client satisfaction scores, employee engagement surveys, plus data from product review sites, employer brand sites, and an understanding of the share of voice metrics in earned social media.

There's no doubt that communicators need access to data. But more importantly, they need the skills to turn it into actionable results.

As brands look to increase customer experience, but turn to bots and more "self-help" options, and media looks to AI, influencers, and gig-economy writers to help sort out and deliver the news, the importance and accuracy of [reputation management](#) will only increase, become more difficult, and involve many more C-suite players.



About the Author: Michael is focused on the global development, protection and promotion of First Data and Clover's powerful brand and superior reputation across numerous stakeholders and external audiences. This includes responsibility for evaluating, advocating and strategizing with senior leaders across all communications channels and vehicles. In this position I collaborate with marketing, brand, internal communications, investor relations, strategy, digital and social media, and other areas globally. This also includes managing the overall administration and creation of public relations programs for internal clients, staff administration, public relations planning, measurement, financial management, budgeting, staff training and professional development. As a key member of the Corporate Marketing team, he is also focused on driving the organization's overall media relations, thought leadership engagement strategy, and crisis communications functions. | On Twitter: [@MikeGSchneider](https://twitter.com/MikeGSchneider)