



BY STAN POHMER

# WHAT'S YOUR REPUTATION QUOTIENT?

Reputation: 1. overall quality or character as judged by others; 2. a place in public esteem or regard.

Over the last year or two, the media has been teeming with stories about the demise of major companies that, because of poor decisions, poor management, poor ethics or poor leadership have had their reputations destroyed or, at the very least, severely tarnished. And it's not just the companies that bore the brunt of the trust or confidence erosion; there were key individuals whose personal reputations took an irreparable hit (in many cases, deservedly so).

But even more distressing is the fact that many of the employees of these companies, even though they were just doing their jobs to the best of their ability and were innocent bystanders to the business shenanigans, had their professional reputations harmed simply because of guilt by association.

Positive reputations are difficult to build and take a long time to become established. Yet, unfortunately, they are quickly and easily destroyed...and a bad reputation is long lasting and even harder to reverse. Reputations, good or bad, are earned, not given.

How easy will it be for Kmart to overcome its reputation for being the "polyester palace," not having a viable differentiation plan to position itself against Target or Wal-Mart, or for its historical lack of systems and distribution infrastructure? How easy will it be for Enron and Worldcom, both segment leaders in their heydays, to regain the trust of stockholders, shareholders and regulatory agencies? How easy will it be for the Arthur Anderson accounting firm and the entire auditing community (a prima facie case of guilt by association) to regain their former stature and trustworthiness? And, although not yet proven guilty of any legal wrongdoings, will Martha Stewart and the company that bears her name ever be able to recover from the allegations against her?

Maybe they can turnaround their reputations, but it's not going to happen overnight and not by continuing in a "business as usual" mode because people have a tendency to remember the negative more than they

give credit for past performance or positive change. I recall a young woman in my high school class who gained a "bad" reputation. At our 20 year class reunion, she showed up in a religious habit — she had become a nun — yet everyone kept referring to and talking about her as her old self, remembering the reputation rather than focusing on the positive changes she had made in her life and the contributions she was making to the lives of others.

## GOOD REPUTATIONS

It's easy to see how some companies and individuals earned mediocre or poor reputations, both inside and outside our industry. Yet there are some companies and people in our industry that have earned outstanding reputations, many of them withstanding the test of time through multiple generations. And some of them put their personal reputations on the line everyday because they share the name of their companies. I'm referring to companies such as Hicks Nurseries, a family business in New York that is celebrating their 150th anniversary this year. And Paul Ecke III of the Paul Ecke Ranch and The Flower Fields. And the Wenke Greenhouses family. And the Proven Winners team of propagators. And Gary Mangum and Mike McCarthy of Bell Nurseries. And the Bachmans and the Ellisons and the Baileys. And there are many more like these that share the same high levels of esteem and respect from us, their customers and consumers.

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So what are some of the things these individuals and companies do to earn and maintain their excellent reputations? Though all of these companies are distinctly different businesses and evolved to their current status in different ways, they share some very common attributes and traits.

**Consistency.** It's almost impossible to separate personal, professional and private personas; they are consistent, true and genuine in all aspects of their lives and programs. These companies, their leaders and employees all share the same vision and mission, without exception. They have the innate ability to imbue positive character traits and attributes into the culture of their companies.

**Honesty and integrity.** None of these companies or individuals are perfect. But when things go wrong, be it internally or with customers or consumers, they readily admit fault, make the situation right and put actions or programs in place to ensure the problem doesn't re-occur.

**Credibility.** They've proven over time that they speak the truth or encourage dialogue to seek the truth...and then act upon it.

**Ethics.** They all share the highest ethical standards in their personal, professional and private lives and those of their companies. They take the high road, not willing to accept mediocrity or take the easy path if it is not the right thing to do for their stakeholders.

**Caring.** They genuinely care about people, be they employees, suppliers or customers. That's not to say they are pushovers in negotiations or on their expectations of their people, but they are fair and look toward the well being, growth and satisfaction of the people they work with and for.


**Trustworthy.** They are people and companies of their word; when they promise something, consider it done.

**Sharing and openness.** Yes, they operate in the same highly competitive arena you and I do. But they are first in line to share their successes and methods with others in the industry to try to raise

the bar for all of us, taking on leadership roles in associations, ad hoc industry work groups and educational programs. And they readily volunteer their resources — time, facilities, staff and finances — for industry causes for the betterment and benefit of the collective whole.

**Innovation.** They continuously challenge themselves and others they work with to improve the status quo.

**Passion.** And most important of all, they are passionate. Passionate to be the best, to offer the best, to have the best. Passionate about our industry and the products we deal with.

There's a lot we can learn from these individuals and companies and the many others like them that enjoy high reputations. Reputations, good or bad, are earned, not given...what's your reputation quotient? 

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