

RADICAL UNCERTAINTY

BUILDING TRUST IN A TIME OF



PHIL RIGGINS is the founder and CEO of the Brand & Reputation Collective, an independent consultancy that provides strategy, opinion research and digital analytics for brand, reputation and issues management.

A brand is a promise. It is the story a company tells the world about itself and why it matters. It tells this story in everything it does and says. In the past, brand building was considered important primarily to increase sales and market share. Now, it is clear that it is equally important for gaining the trust and support of everyone the company needs for its success – investors, employees, civil society groups, the media, and government.

By *Phil Riggins*

Every organization faces the same three challenges when explaining why investors should invest, employees should stay, customers should buy, NGOs should partner, the media should be positive, and regulators should go easy.

How to:

- Grab and hold their audience’s attention
- Build credibility and trust, and
- Compel their audiences to act

However, the world has changed in ways that make it difficult to meet these challenges and deliver a compelling brand story. We are in a time of “radical uncertainty”, where trust in established values and institutions is low, old ways of doing things are being questioned and people’s attention spans are shorter than ever. Technology is a big driver of these changes. It is having a revolutionary impact on people’s behaviors and expectations of business. People can access nearly any information instantaneously – but are overwhelmed by the amount and trustworthiness of what they find. They form online communities or “tribes” around issues that matter to them which can transcend geography and demographics. And in addition to that, they filter out information that doesn’t conform to their worldview.

In a survey we conducted in 2018 with senior communication professionals at some of the biggest companies in the world, 92% thought that consumers’ and stakeholders’ expectations have changed in a variety of ways, including:

- Expecting companies to have a social purpose – and to provide evidence that it is being delivered
- Demanding transparency from the companies they engage with
- Expecting companies to take positions on controversial social issues, such as climate change
- Expecting to play a role in creating the brands, reputations, products and policies of the companies they interact with

Communicators said their audiences are unsettled, cynical, and ever observant – willing to reward or punish a company instantaneously if expectations aren’t met. Radical uncertainty makes business uncomfortable. It is unpredictable by definition. How can you build a brand and tell a story that engages, differentiates, and compels stakeholders to support you when there is so much turbulence in the world?

In our research with senior communications professionals, we found that organizations are working hard to adapt to the new communications reality by creating a culture of purpose built on clearly articulated values that make them more agile and effective. Elements of a culture of purpose include:

- Clearly articulated sense of what the organization stands for beyond profit
- Leadership’s support in terms of resources and their time
- Radical transparency
- Involving audiences in co-creating ideas, policies, programs, and products
- Being aligned and consistent. When everyone and everything communicates, it’s important that the message is consistent across the organization
- Being data-led. Listening to relevant online conversations to spot emerging issues and concerns as well as measurement to evaluate impact
- Taking a people-centric approach and advocating for what matters to your audiences, not just yourself

The first step for any organization in building trust and a compelling brand is to change your center of gravity. You are not the center of the universe, they are. Your audiences are very unlikely to listen to your message if it is not relevant to their concerns and speaks to them in a way they can hear.

In terms of corporate reporting, success requires deep and regular engagement with stakeholders to design and deliver content that tells your story in a way that is relevant, credible, and compelling to them. The pace at which issues can become reputational risks or opportunities is astonishingly fast. Organizations need to understand their own values and “tribes” expectations so that they don’t get pulled in all directions when issues arise. The risk for organizations that do not adopt a culture of purpose is possibly irrelevance and rejection from the audiences they depend on for their survival.

ABOUT THE STUDY
The Brand & Reputation Collective, in collaboration with the European Association of Communication Directors, conducted a multistage research project with senior communicators, including in-depth interviews, roundtables, and an online survey of 118 senior in-house communicators across a variety of organization types and sectors in 2018. For a full copy of the report, please contact: info@corporate-reporting.com.



Session powered by Martin et Karczynski

Brand as a strategic advantage
Learn from Phil Riggins why strategic brand management is gaining in importance and what significant role the annual report plays. Patrick Farinato explains why even a firmly established brand needs to continually reinvent itself and how with clear positioning and at times thought-provoking messaging you can boost your brand profile internally and externally.

7 PRINCIPLES TO TURN BRANDS INTO A STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE



Stakeholders expectations have changed in the VUCA world. Their trust and support are critical to an organizations’ success. Therefore, it is essential that companies have a social purpose, act consistently according to it, take a stand, be transparent and enter into a dialogue with them. Start turning your brand into a strategic advantage with the help of these 7 practical guidelines:

- 1 Create a foundation for your organization’s purpose. Promote “purpose” and get a first impression of the reactions to it. Advocate for purpose, for transparency, for the support among leaders and for anchoring the purpose within the entire organization. Start with your own team.
- 2 Tone from the Top. Provide proof that purpose is critical for an organization’s success e.g. with the help of the study mentioned by Phil Riggins. Look for allies in the organization. Win the top-leaders’ full support.
- 3 Define or redefine the purpose with the leadership team and beyond. What does the organization stand for beyond its profit? Make sure that the purpose is meaningful for the organization’s stakeholders.
- 4 Explain the defined purpose internally and why it is crucial. Ensure alignment and consistency. It is important that an organization talks with one voice and acts accordingly.
- 5 Express and proof your organization’s purpose in your reporting. Use reporting to align the organization with its purpose. Tell the story around your purpose. Select the most relevant proofs for different stakeholders and communicate actively. It is not about reporting. It is about your most relevant story.
- 6 Be radically transparent. Walk the talk. Provide evidence.
- 7 You do not need to do everything alone. Get advice. There are plenty of external experts for branding, identity, purpose and cultural change. Use their expertise to drive change from the inside