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Sense-making Reputation: Examining Stakeholders' Assessments of "Good" and "Bad" Companies

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This study explores the concept of corporate reputation from the perspective of stakeholders through conducting a series of focus groups. Through discussion about self-selected "especially good" and "especially bad" companies, participants explained the criteria by which they assessed reputation, the information sources that contributed to those assessments, the influence of Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, and the role that accountability played in their perceptions and behaviors.

There has been a good deal of attention paid to the issue of corporate reputation in recent years, and today we can find regular rankings of reputation in publications such as *Fortune Magazine*, the *Financial Times*, and *Management Today*, each with its own measurement criteria and methodology. We also have seen a burgeoning of academic and professional research on the concept of reputation and how to define it, measure it, predict it, and manage it. Much of the work on reputation is survey-based, and in many cases, data are collected from industry peers (Dowling & Gardberg, 2012). Therefore, this study explores reputation from a more qualitative, grassroots perspective. In particular, it sheds light on the process by which individual stakeholders assess corporate reputation in order to provide guidance to the field of public relations.

Literature Review

Aspects of Corporate Reputation

In a broad sense, reputation can be understood as how a given organization is perceived by its various publics or stakeholders. Walker (2010) defined reputation as a "relatively stable, issue specific aggregate perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects compared against some standard" (p. 370). Barnett et al. (2006) said reputation is "observers' collective judgments of a corporation based on assessments of financial, social, and environmental impacts attributed to the corporation over time" (p. 34). Doorley and Garcia (2011) provided a formula as a definition, stating that reputation = the sum of images = performance + behavior + communication (p. 4). And Davies (2011) defined reputation as "the impression stakeholders have of that organization, accumulated from a range of sources, including actual experience, media comment and content, sponsored communication and word of mouth" (p. 51). These last two definitions are particularly well suited for looking at reputation from a public relations perspective, with the first representing reputation from the standpoint of the organization and the second representing an audience orientation. Together, they serve as the foundation for the study that follows.

Those who value a strong reputation understand it to represent a crucial intangible asset that contributes to a company's bottom line through the loyalty of customers, ability to attract and retain the best employees, boost growth of price and purchase of stocks, and so forth (see, e.g., Agarwal et al., 2015; Doorley & Garcia, 2011; Friedman, 2009). There are varied perspectives in the literature on what elements or dimensions comprise a company's reputation, however. For example, Burke (2011) said that reputation is built on the elements of emotional appeal, vision, leadership and integrity, social responsibility, and a supportive workplace environment. Duhé (2009) posited that the three basic attributes of reputation are management quality, financial soundness, and social responsibility. Eisenegger and Schranz (2011) saw reputation encoded in the

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following six dimensions: products and services, financial performance, vision and leadership, workplace environment, social responsibility, and emotional appeal. Schwaiger (2004) theorized that reputation has two main dimensions, competence and likeability, that are driven by quality, performance, responsibility, and attractiveness. Thus, while there is a fair amount of overlap, scholars have conceptualized and operationalized reputation in different ways. Part of the difficulty of assigning reputational attributes is that different aspects are important to different publics or stakeholders (Jensen et al., 2012). This leads to the first research question:

> **RQ1**. How do an organization's primary stakeholders or publics describe (conceptualize) good and bad companies; i.e., what criteria do they use to assess corporate reputation?

The source of stakeholder perceptions, as Davies (2011) noted, is an important aspect of reputation. Scholars have differentiated types of reputation according to their source (Grunig & Hung, 2002; Yang & Cha, 2015). Those that are first order or primary reputations are based on personal experience and are more likely to influence one's attitudes and behaviors. Second order or secondary reputations are based on what others say or what is learned from media. Secondary reputations are more superficial and tend to conform to prevailing opinions. Reputations also can be based on a combination of the two, both direct and secondary sources. Personal experience, then, is foundational, and those personal experiences affect word-of-mouth testimony and its impacts, especially when the experiences are negative (Hong & Yang, 2009; Williams et al., 2012).

Media coverage can influence and validate (or invalidate) both personal experiences as well as individuals' interpretations of initiatives and communications that come from the corporation itself (Fombrun, 2012). Prior research has affirmed the agenda-setting effects of the media on corporate reputation, such that individuals' awareness, understanding, and opinions about a company can be influenced by news coverage and editorials (see, e.g., Carroll, 2009; Kim et al., 2015; Kiousis et al., 2007). As a result, public relations departments logically focus their efforts on securing positive and mitigating negative media attention.

Crisis situations create a particular reputational threat. As Coombs and Holladay (2014) noted, when negative events occur, individuals make assumptions or attributions about the cause. To the extent the company or organization itself is perceived to be at fault, the risk to reputation increases significantly. Additionally, how—and how quickly—the company responds to the crisis will affect the subsequent media reports and public perceptions, underscoring the importance of the communication function and the role of public relations (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007; Falkheimer & Heide, 2015). The second research question, then, is about reputational sources:

> **RQ2**. What information sources do an organization's primary stakeholders or publics use to assess corporate reputation?

Contextual Factors

The most important stakeholders are arguably those who have a direct monetary exchange with companies, including consumers, employees, and investors (MacMillan et al., 2005). These key relationships represent the mechanism through which reputation impacts corporations. As such, it may be especially useful to focus on the perceptions of individuals' experiences in these relationships rather than broader financial performance or executive leadership. As suggested above, within these key groups the role or identity of the stakeholder affects the nature of the organizational relationship and one's reputational assessment (Foreman et al., 2012). For example, in assessing a company's reputation, a consumer may be concerned with customer service, while an investor may be focused on stock prices.

Public relations scholars have long acknowledged the importance of building and maintaining organization-public relationships, and positive long-term relationships have been found to benefit an organization's reputation (Grunig & Hung, 2002; Kim et al., 2013). Ledingham and Bruning (2000) defined an organization-public relationship as "the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" (p. 62). Hon and Grunig (1999) noted that relational satisfaction is determined by the consistency of actions and the extent to which expectations about the relationship are positively reinforced. Thus, for example, one of the factors affecting reputational threat in a crisis is the duration and quality of the relationship and the incidence of prior similar issues or crises (Coombs, 2000); another is the actions of intermediaries, such as the media and activist groups (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015).

Although largely unarticulated in the organization-public relationship literature, the ethical underpinning of these relationships is understood (Bowen et al., 2016). For example, the roles of trust, authenticity, and mutuality in the organization-public relationship model assume that ethical values will drive the parties' behaviors and affect their relationships. The concept of two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) that emphasizes a balance between an organization and its publics and the dialogic model in public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002) are both inherently ethical. The prioritization of two-way or dialogic communication can lead to positive organization-public relationships through mutual understanding and respect (Chen et al., 2020).

Neher and Sandin (2007) defined ethics as a "systematic method for making [moral] judgments concerning voluntary actions of people" (p. 6). Especially for more involved publics, what an organization does is more important than what it says. The behaviors of management affect organization-public relationships, and the type and quality of those relationships affect stakeholders' perceptions – i.e., the organization's reputation (Grunig & Hung, 2002).

Farmer (2018) noted that reputation management must be based on trust and truth. Ethical public relations practice is about the fair treatment of stakeholders or publics, and it relies on communication that is transparent, open, honest, and respectful (Toledano, 2017). Unfortunately, there is increasing cynicism and distrust of all our social institutions, including business and government, based on a growing sense of systemic inequity and unfairness (Edelman, 2020). Furthermore, we have entered a "post-truth" world, where truth is relative and "personal values, beliefs and emotions take precedence" (Ihlen et al., 2019, p. 2). Both of these conditions are detrimental to democratic society and make reputation management both more difficult and more crucial.

At its foundation, the concept of reputation is based on social norms and moral judgments, resting on questions of what is "good" and what are the "right" actions to take (Terravecchia, 2017)? Moral principles are part of our culture and embedded in our understandings of appropriate behaviors in all realms of life. Indeed, the free market system itself is grounded in assumptions about the nature of a good society (L'Etang et al., 2011). The economic rationality of free trade assumes a cooperative system based on common understandings whereby the seller has something of value to the customer, each party treats the other fairly, and through a monetary or barter exchange, each party benefits. There exists a social contract of sorts between the seller and those with whom he or she transacts business, based on such social virtues as honesty and reliability. Thus, there is (at least theoretically) a self-enforcement of responsibility on the part of the seller or business in the interest of customers and other stakeholders (Sacconi, 2007).

This leads us to accountability and the idea that corporations should be answerable to someone, that they should be legitimate social entities (Habermas, 1975; Wæraas, 2007). Suchman (1995) defined legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (p. 574). Stakeholders are theoretically capable of responding to companies who do not act in compliance with agreed upon norms and ethical standards. In practice, however, individuals do not always exercise this power, most often because corporate infractions are not widely known or there is a lack of alternative options available (Valor, 2005). Recently, a growing corporate accountability movement concerned with global inequality, working conditions, and other perceived injustices has employed various tactics to "name and shame" companies in an effort to force accountability (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Smith, 2012; Utting, 2008). With the help of social media, activist groups have affected the reputations as well as the bottom lines of numerous well-known corporations. The third research question, then, is about accountability:

> **RQ3**. What role does accountability play in individual stakeholders' engagement vis-à-vis their reputational assessments?

Armed with information about corporations' socially responsible actions, consumers and others can make morally based decisions about companies with whom they wish to engage. In turn, we see companies using Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs and other signals of good citizenship as a means of competitive distinction. Carroll (1979) referenced CSR when he stated that "the social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations" of society (p. 500). More recently Ozdora Aksak et al. (2016) noted that it is a challenge to define CSR "because it entails many different approaches and because it changes according to the context, era, and culture," but implied in the concept is the idea that companies have a moral obligation to society (p. 79). This idea also is reflected in the principle of legitimacy and the notion that corporations will not survive if they do not meet the social norms and expectations of shareholders (Lee & Carroll, 2011; Tao & Ferguson, 2015). In recent years, for example, such concerns as environmental stewardship have become standardized as criteria against which corporations are judged (Kennedy et al., 2012).

The literature is replete with caution about the use of CSR programs and initiatives for competitive edge, however. Individuals are understandably skeptical about such efforts, so they must be transparently communicated (Kim & Lee, 2018) and seen as genuine and integral to the company's mission and operations, lest they be viewed as cynical, self-interested tools for manipulation of public perception (Dowling & Moran, 2012; Eisenegger & Schranz, 2011; Elving, 2013; Kim & Ferguson, 2014; Rim, 2018; Shim & Yang, 2016). This leads to the fourth research question:

> **RQ4**. What influence do CSR activities have on stakeholders' or publics' perceptions of reputation?

To gain a better understanding of how key stakeholder groups assess the reputations of companies with which they have relationships, this study sought to explore the decision-making processes of individual stakeholders. By looking at how individuals made sense of their relationships with corporations, it was possible to analyze the criteria they used to evaluate, the sources of information from which they made their judgments, the contextual factors that affected those assessments, and the conclusions and resulting behaviors that followed.

Methodology

To learn more about reputational assessments, it was necessary to select a methodology that considers the situational context of individual decision-makings. The study utilized Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003, 2013). Dervin's methodology conceptualizes humans as moving through time-space stepping (cognitively, emotionally, physically, spiritually) from one moment to the next, often drawing on habit or routine to guide them, but also capable of responding in other ways. The methodology assumes individuals are able to articulate their thoughts and feelings as they move through, and make sense of, a given moment, thus making them co-theorists in the research process. Sense-Making interviews use this metaphor of movement from a situation in context across a gap in time-space, whereby the sense-maker creates a bridge (from habit, thoughts, feelings, etc.) to an outcome (consequence or impact).

As a communication-based methodology predicated on a dialogic worldview that is compatible with the two-way symmetrical theory of public relations, Sense-Making provides a useful research framework for the field (Walker, 2006). Based on a series of philosophical assumptions and taking a process-oriented "verbing" approach to communication, Sense-Making provides a crucial procedural link between larger social organization and individual actions (Foreman-Wernet, 2003). As such the methodology is designed to bridge the gap between organizations and their publics, utilizing a dialogic interface that focuses on listening to understand the informant's perspective (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2006).

Although Sense-Making studies have most often employed individual interviews, the methodology also can be the basis for focus group research. What is different from typical focus groups when using the Sense-Making Methodology is that rather than spontaneous exchanges between participants, the turn-takings are more disciplined and include both reflective preliminary prompts and the use of self-journaling during the sharing rounds (Dervin & Devakos, 2010).

Recruitment

The IRB-approved study included 16 different focus groups from the Midwestern U.S., totaling 115 participants. A convenience sampling method was employed using volunteers from among the university student population as well as from several community groups to which the author reached out. Substantial efforts were made to include a broad range of participants, who were divided fairly equally female to male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 85, although the ages skewed younger based on the greater accessibility of students. Approximately two-thirds of participants were aged 18-25, about 20% were 26-49, and about 13% were 50 and older. In keeping with the demographics of the region, the majority were white, with 19% African American, 6% Asian, and 3% Hispanic. By nature of the study's design, which asked respondents to focus on companies familiar to them, the respondents represented the most influential stakeholders: customers (or, in a few cases, potential customers), employees, and investors. In order to provide maximal participant flexibility, there was no effort to identify these specific stakeholder roles in advance. Some of the members of the various groups knew each other, but that was not necessarily the case overall.

Procedures

Each focus group began with a scripting worksheet for participants to complete. First, each participant identified a company he or she believed to be especially "good" (self-defined) and wrote words or phrases to describe that company. Next, participants wrote reasons they thought the company was good and the source(s) (experience, person, media, etc.) they recalled supporting that reason. Then the same was done for a company the participant identified as especially "bad." Mapping the Sense-Making Methodology, the prompts functioned by focusing respondents on a situation (i.e., history with a company) paired with an outcome (i.e., conclusion the company is especially good or bad) and then having them provide the sense-making bridge (i.e., criteria and sources) that connected the two. In keeping with the Sense-Making principle of limiting the researcher's intrusion on the process, participants were given the freedom to conceptualize reputation, i.e., "good" and "bad" companies, in their own terms.

Focus group members were then seated in a circle or around a table, depending on the setting, and a strict sharing procedure was employed. During the first round of reporting, each participant, taking turns, shared what was written regarding the "good" company selected. Continuing around the circle, participants took turns sharing their thoughts aloud until none had more to add. A second, similar round of reporting followed, focusing on the "bad" companies, with participants taking turns and sharing their comments as long as necessary. Throughout the process, those listening (i.e., all participants who were not speaking at the time) were asked to use their journaling sheets to write down: 1) similar and dissimilar experiences; 2) things they had never heard before; 3) things they agreed or disagreed with; 4) confusions or things that challenged them; and 5) things that helped them. This provided a way to capture information that respondents were either not able to share due to the turn-taking process or not comfortable sharing aloud.

The focus group sessions averaged 50 minutes in length, with the first 10 minutes or so used to complete the scripting worksheets and the remaining time spent in sharing rounds. All sessions were audio recorded, and all participants consented to be part of the study.

Content Analysis

In order to analyze the results of the focus groups, the scripting sheets (pre-focus-group reflections) and journaling sheets (during-focus-group reflections) were read several times, and the focus group recordings were reviewed to catch any additional comments. A content analysis was then performed using these data sources. First, employing a grounded theory approach, coding schemes were developed using the constant comparative method to identify both criteria (reasons) and sources for participants' conclusions about "good" and "bad" companies based on the thematic thrusts of the data while also reflecting relevant reputational elements identified in the literature. Because of the large overlap between the scripting prompts requesting company descriptors and reasons given, responses for those prompts were grouped together during analysis.

Once the coding schemes were developed, the scripting sheets were reviewed again, and the contents were coded into a spreadsheet according to the various thematic categories for both "good" and "bad" companies. A second researcher[1] independently coded the responses, and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved. These final coded data were then tabulated to derive frequency counts for each category. While results are not necessarily generalizable, the frequency counts proved helpful to see patterns in participants' responses.

Finally, the journaling sheets were reviewed again in order to attend to points where differences in perception and understanding played out through the focus group process. These incidents provided an opportunity to look more deeply into some of the issues affecting reputation assessment. The consideration of these specific case examples shed light in a way that is not possible when looking at quantitative aggregates.

Results

The focus group participants identified 68 different companies they considered to be especially good and 72 they deemed to be especially bad, with multiple people choosing some companies on each list. The companies that participants named ranged from local grocery stores and restaurants to major multinational corporations. Most of the participants' comments related to their roles as customers or potential customers; however, in some cases, they responded as employees or investors.

Reasons

The reasons why participants chose their good and bad companies fell into the following categories: quality of products, quality of customer service, business management and performance, responsibility, and communication. The nature of responses in the groups led to combining into one category all references to economic performance as well as comments about management. Frequency results are displayed in Table 1 below.

[1] Special thanks to Deanna Fry for her assistance as second coder.

Good Companies

The most often cited reason for choosing a particular company as good was because of its products (70.4%). Participants said the companies they thought were good had products that were of “high quality,” described variously as “top-notch,” “classy,” “well-designed,” with “cool features,” and offering a “lifetime guarantee.” Some described high-quality products as “made with natural ingredients” and “no harsh chemicals,” and for restaurants and grocery stores, food was “fresh” and “delicious.” Price also was an important consideration, with participants saying the company has “great prices,” products are “affordable,” and you “get your money’s worth.” Another aspect of quality mentioned by some participants was the availability of a “wide variety of products” from which to choose.

Table 1. Percent of participants choosing reason for good and bad companies. Multiple responses possible for each participant.

Reason	Description	Good Company	Bad Company
Quality of Product	Product is good/bad quality, value, design; offers variety of products or not	70.4%	51.3%
Quality of Customer Service	Service is quick/slow, responsive/unresponsive, helpful or not, friendly/unfriendly	52.2%	42.6%
Management and Performance	Company is successful/failing, continued growth/losing business; places of business are well run/chaotic, clean/dirty, organized or disorganized	34.8%	46.1%
Corporate Responsibility	Company is principled/unprincipled; cares/doesn’t care about environment; treats employees and others well/poorly; promotes charity and community support; shows concern for diversity and inclusion	53.9%	58.2%
Communication	Company is honest/untrustworthy, open and transparent/deceitful	15.7%	16.5%

Customer service was mentioned as a reason for identifying a company as good by 52.2% of participants. They noted that employees were “helpful,” “informed,” “friendly,” “thoughtful,” “willing to give advice,” and “very customer oriented,” and they “did more than asked” and “directed me to what I needed.” Participants also said that customer service was “quick” and return policies were “easy” and “convenient.”

Business management and performance were among the reasons for 34.8% of participants. They mentioned good companies as being “profitable,” “professional,” “global,” “forward-thinking,” and “pioneering,” and they are able to recruit and retain a “high level of talent.” Participants also noted that good companies’ “stock prices have risen,” and they have “strong financials,” “remained strong through the recession,” and “have been in business a long time.” In a few cases, participants also addressed local management issues stating, for example, that stores were “clean and organized.”

More than half of the participants (53.9%) mentioned aspects of corporate responsibility for their good company choices. Within this category, while some participants spoke broadly of companies as “socially responsible,” having “strong values,” or being a “good corporate citizen,” many others were more specific, with significant mention of worker treatment, concern about the environment, charity and community support, and diversity.

Finally, in selecting good companies, 15.7% of participants included communication-related criteria. Good companies, they said, were “genuine,” “credible,” “trustworthy,” “honest,” and had “an authentic message.”

Bad Companies

When discussing their chosen bad companies, 51.3% of focus group participants gave product quality as a reason. For the most part, participants' responses mirrored the good company product reasons. They described products as "cheap," "easily broken," and "not made to last," and they also mentioned frequent product recalls. Grocery stores and restaurants were identified as having food that was "greasy," "unhealthy," "fake and disgusting," "spoiled," and "expired." Pricing concerns were related to products being "expensive" and "over-priced," with some companies engaging in "price gouging."

Discussions of customer service also largely reflected the opposite of descriptors for good companies, with 42.6% of participants identifying bad customer service. For these participants, employees had a "bad attitude" and were "rude," "unwelcoming," "inconsiderate," "unhelpful," "slow," "unfriendly," and "careless." Focus group members also discussed bad service in terms of companies using a "robot answering service" and having "no loyalty to long-term customers," and they complained of stores being "poorly staffed" with "long lines to check out." One participant, explaining the choice of a local restaurant as especially bad, said, "The order is never correct, and they seem mad when told."

Business management and performance was indicated by 46.1% of participants as a reason for evaluating companies as bad. Corporate performance was described as "behind the times," "short-sighted," "not visionary," "unprofessional," "unprofitable," and "losing market share." Participants noted bad companies' "failure to capitalize opportunity" and "to innovate," and that they used an "old business model," "lost focus on mission," and "let stockholders down." Several participants mentioned the problem of companies operating as virtual monopolies, implying that competition helps to reign in excesses. Others noted "bad marketing" and "poor judgment," and several talked about the annoyance of "up-selling" by trying to get customers to buy extra products or services. Management concerns were referenced by describing stores as "cluttered," "cramped and dirty," "messy," "unorganized," and "poorly run," with "things lying on the floor" and "boxes everywhere." One participant discussed a generally "unpleasant in-store experience, cluttered, loud, disorganized."

Comments in the responsibility category received the highest percentage of participants' reasons (58.2%). Broad terms such as "unethical," "corrupt," "irresponsible," "immoral," and "greedy" were used, and a couple of participants mentioned actual or alleged criminal activity. In one case, a focus group participant explaining company choice, said, "Despite high prices and profits, I don't see them trying to make the world a better place." As with the good companies, most participants' responsibility-related comments fell into several different themes, including worker treatment, concern about the environment, diversity and inclusion, and animal welfare. It is interesting that participants' discrimination concerns addressed not only ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation but also body type. Several group members mentioned clothing companies' discrimination against larger sized women, which "excludes average people from buying and promotes judging."

Finally, 16.5% of participants pointed to companies' communication. General descriptive terms included "bad" or "awful" communication, "fake," "not genuine," "disrespectful," and "arrogant." One important theme that arose in multiple focus groups was companies' failure to take ownership of crises or problems, expressed as "nonresponsive," "blamed others," "doesn't take responsibility," and "never really apologizes." A second theme in this category was deceit, whereby companies were said to be "manipulative," "deceptive," and "secretive," and they "hide the truth," "claim to be awesome but have dirty secrets," and "market [harmful or unhealthy products] to younger audiences."

Sources

Sources, or means by which focus group participants gained information to support their reasons, were broken into the following four categories: personal experience, corporate communications, media, and word of mouth. Most participants relied on personal experience, at least in part, to base their evaluations of good (78.3%) and bad (65.2%) companies. Usually this experience was as a customer, but often it was as an employee, and in some cases it was as an investor. See Table 2 below for results.

Table 2. Percent of source mentions for information about good and bad companies. Multiple responses possible for each participant.

Source	Description	Good Company	Bad Company
Personal Experience	Encounter or engagement directly experienced by the individual	78.3%	65.2%
Corporate Communication	Communication directly from company; e.g., commercials, company websites, public statements, in-store information	18.3%	10.4%
Media	Communication through news media, documentaries, TV shows, social media, other non-company media	24.3%	28.7%
Word of Mouth	Communication from friends, family, others personally known	10.4%	8.7%

Corporate communication directly with stakeholders was indicated as a source by 18.3% of participants discussing good companies and 10.4% of those referencing bad companies. In the case of good companies, participants singled out commercials (both generally as well as during the Olympics and Super Bowl), e-mails, and in-store information about social responsibility. For bad companies, the direct company sources identified were commercials, websites, and corporate social media responding to crises.

News and other media sources were mentioned by 24.3% of participants discussing good companies and 28.7% for bad companies. For good companies, focus group members saw newspaper, magazine, and television news stories. Additionally, several of those who chose Toms had read a book by the founder, and one person was favorably influenced by the TV show *Undercover Boss*. For bad companies, sources similarly were newspaper, magazine, and television news stories along with social media reports, books, and documentaries. Several of those identifying McDonalds as a bad company mentioned watching the documentary *Supersize Me* and another was influenced by the documentary *Food Inc.*

Word of mouth information was relatively infrequently mentioned for either good or bad companies, at 10.4% and 8.7%, respectively. For the most part these sources were friends and family members who shared their work experiences.

Varied Perspectives

A review of the journaling sheets showed that focus group participants had many similar experiences and agreed with much that was reported by others. However, the use of the journaling sheets also made possible consideration of points at which perspectives diverged, understandings changed, and struggles occurred – many of which were thoughts not vocalized in the group.

Participants noted a number of things they had never heard before. These broke out into several distinct groups of comment. In some cases, not surprisingly, group members reported they were unfamiliar with certain companies or products mentioned. Some were not aware of positive information, such as good wages and benefits provided by Starbucks and Costco, how Jeni's ice cream supports the community, and Home Depot's discounts to veterans. In other cases, participants had not heard negative stories, such as Johnson & Johnson testing its products on animals and Nike using sweatshop labor.

Although there was much agreement within the focus groups, there were many things said that participants did not agree with and wrote about on their journaling sheets. There were many cases where participants indicated that although others reported bad experiences with products or services, they had good experiences, and vice versa. There also were several companies about which numerous participants expressed disagreement with other group members. For example, while McDonalds was identified by many as bad, several defended the restaurant, with one writing, "I don't think they're trying to be healthy; they're cheap and convenient," and another writing, "You get what you pay for." Similarly, while Walmart was among the most frequently cited bad companies, several disagreed, with one person arguing that while there are some bad quality products, there is a whole range from which to choose. Another disagreement was related to BP, which many concluded was bad because of the Gulf oil spill and how BP handled the aftermath; however, one group member noted that as an investor, BP was good, because it continued to pay dividends throughout the crisis.

Focus group participants identified a number of statements that led to confusion for them. Most of the time, this confusion was based on conflicting or mixed opinions and experiences. One participant, for example, was confused by others thinking Nike is a good company, because it has a "problem with sweat shops, is overpriced, and treats workers poorly." And in the group where General Motors was chosen as a bad company because in the process of the 2009 auto bailout stockholders lost out, one participant was confused as to whether it was the company or the government who was at fault.

The focus groups were helpful to participants in four basic ways. For some, it was simply interesting to hear others' opinions and "personal testimony" and to better understand people's perspectives regarding a range of companies. For a few participants, it was helpful to get specific information that was shared, such as knowing about selling books back to Amazon. A number of participants said that the discussions confirmed their support and continued patronage of given companies or – in a couple of cases – caused them to change their understandings and intentions for future purchases. Finally, several participants mentioned that the focus group sessions caused them to think more about the companies they support and to ensure there is alignment between the companies' values and their own.

Discussion

The focus group sessions provided insight into the various factors that influence reputation and, thus, guidance for public relations practitioners. The norms of good business included expectations of high-quality, affordable products as well as responsive, friendly, and knowledgeable customer service. Participants also expected companies to be successfully run and well managed, ethical and caring, and open and honest in their communication. Thus, with regard to the reputational criteria used to describe good and bad companies, the study generally validated what other research has found (see, e.g., Fombrun, 2012). As touched on in the section above, the importance of certain criteria – and thus individual assessments – at times varied depending on the focus group member's stakeholder role as a consumer, employee, or investor.

With regard to sources, it is interesting to note that relatively few participants mentioned word-of-mouth. This is likely a factor of the request for especially good or bad companies and the preponderance of other, more direct sources, but it may be an artifact of the sampling method. Not surprising is that for both good and bad companies, participants cited personal experience most often as the source of their perceptions. This is in keeping with the literature on primary reputation (Grunig & Hung, 2002), since participants were asked about companies they deemed to be especially good or bad, and the strongest impressions would come from personal experience. Media were the next most influential sources. Videos, especially documentaries, appear to be quite effective in highlighting perceived injustices and malfeasance, and people are more inclined to pay attention to and remember these. This supports the agenda-setting theory of the media and its role in corporate reputation (e.g., Carroll, 2009).

The study underscored the risk inherent in corporate crises. One prominent theme with bad companies was failure to take responsibility for their actions. This is in direct support of the crisis communication literature and the need to immediately address crisis situations, take responsibility when at fault, and promptly remedy the problem or issue (Coombs, 2007).

On the positive side of corporate communication, participants mentioned a number of effective tactics, including emails, company websites, in-store displays, and commercials. These were more often mentioned as sources for good companies, likely because of positive relationships already established between the organization and its stakeholders. These individuals would likely be more open to receiving corporate messages and may even request information or seek it out. It is interesting to note the apparent effectiveness of commercials, especially those that aired during high-visibility sports events like the Olympics and the Super Bowl. Participant responses would suggest that despite the high cost of such commercials, their placement may be effective, especially for communicating about corporate values and CSR.

Corporate Social Responsibility

This study brought to the forefront discussion about how to define CSR and what distinguishes normal and expected corporate behavior from what is noteworthy and exemplary. As mentioned above, participants expected good companies to have quality products, responsive and friendly customer service, and successful management. They furthermore expected good companies to be honest and caring and to treat employees, customers, and investors well. These were the norms by which companies were judged. The study indicated that CSR initiatives for competitive distinction must rise above what is normally expected. As an example, one focus group participant cited the inclusion of in-store placards that Starbucks displayed to inform patrons about its sustainability efforts while customers waited in line. Beyond this and a few similar examples, there was a surprising lack of awareness among participants of what we would usually consider to be CSR efforts. The results highlighted the need for CSR initiatives to align with the mission and values of the company and also to be effectively communicated (Foreman-Wernet, 2019). One interesting finding was with charity or philanthropic activity. While charity was identified as a theme for good companies, respondents did not mention lack of charitable giving as indicative of a company bad.

This study illuminated some areas where what companies have identified as socially responsible behaviors may not align with their publics' expectations. In environmental stewardship, for example, focus group participants, especially younger Millennials and early Gen Z, seemed not to be content with simply not polluting but expected companies to initiate sustainability efforts. Millennials are considered to be those born between 1981 and 1996, while those born in 1997 and after are Generation Z (Dimock, 2019). Similarly, there was frequent mention among those groups regarding diversity and inclusion and, to a lesser degree, animal welfare. These results reflected the concerns of Millennials and Gen Z surveyed in larger studies and point to changing societal norms and, in turn, expectations for corporate behavior (see, e.g., Cone Communications, 2015; Porter Novelli/Cone, 2019).

Accountability

With regard to accountability, there are several points to be made. First, in acknowledging the obvious, because of the Internet, positive and negative information about companies and their actions is today readily accessible and also easily distributed via social media. That fact itself lays the groundwork for corporate accountability. As this study revealed, however, the evaluative process for individuals is complex; multiple criteria are weighed and some normative judgments are contested. Participants' responses showed, in part, the power of the media and of activist groups, and many of the issues that were mentioned as problematic were those brought to the public's attention through awareness campaigns and other coordinated efforts. Finally, there is indication that people are holding companies accountable, at least to some degree. Focus group members said they utilized the criteria above in determining what products and services to purchase. Additionally, a number of participants mentioned their intention to patronize those companies whose values they shared and to avoid those with whose values they disagreed. To the extent that participants' perceptions were changed during the focus group process, it was the result of receiving additional information such that they were encouraged to try something new or to look into a concern mentioned. For example, one participant wrote that the focus group's discussion of Facebook privacy issues "helped me to think more deeply about the company."

Participants' discussions of "what not to do" may have shed more light on the topic of reputation than discussions of what good companies do. This is no doubt because good actions often go unnoticed while bad actions, because they are normatively different and noteworthy, catch our attention more easily. The effect is amplified when consumer complaints and incriminating videos can quickly go viral. Thus, this study underscored the importance to corporations of transparency, ethical business practices, and effective crisis management, and it provides guidance for corporate communicators.

Limitations

There were several obvious limitations to this study. First, the use of focus groups limited the ability to generalize results, especially since the groups were skewed toward younger participants. Additionally, by asking respondents to identify extremes of good and bad companies, the study excluded reputational consideration about the bulk of less exemplary or objectionable companies and emphasized personal experience over other information sources.

Future studies might delve further into participants' responses to learn more about their perceptions and to clarify the terms and descriptors they used. For example, it might be helpful for respondents to expound upon statements such as a company has "strong values" or an "authentic message." Such knowledge would enable public relations practitioners to ensure better alignment between the organization and stakeholders. The study also uncovered the need to further investigate whether lack of charitable giving is perceived in a neutral or negative way when assessing corporations. Future studies might focus on specific stakeholder groups and/or information sources. Specifics on the devices participants used to access videos and other information might also be helpful. And research could be conducted with certain demographic or consumer growth segments in order to gain more in-depth perspectives from those populations.

Conclusion

This exploratory study looked at corporate reputation from the perspective of stakeholders. Focus group members provided written and verbal responses. The results offered the opportunity to consider more deeply how people make sense of their engagements with corporations vis-à-vis reputation.

The study suggested that beyond their traditional communication role, public relations professionals and departments can positively contribute to an organization's product development and customer service, as well as to overall management practices, when practicing reputation management in the role of public relations counselor. The study examined the roles of personal experience, direct corporate communication, the media, and to a lesser degree word-of-mouth testimony in helping to shape people's perceptions. Overall, attention to the voices of individuals in key publics or stakeholder groups and how they assessed good and bad companies illuminated the reputational decision-making process and its ramifications for the field of public relations.

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