



# BUILDING A SOLID REPUTATION

Sophie Hunt explores the six principles of building and maintaining a good reputation in difficult circumstances.

**T**here's no doubt the last three years have been tough for the reputation of the care sector. The sudden demise of Southern Cross, coupled with scandals like Winterbourne View and the more recent *Panorama* programme focusing on the abuse and neglect of older people in care settings, as well as a succession of other negative media stories, have cast a shadow over the industry which is unlikely to disappear in a hurry.

Yet against this challenging backdrop life has to go on. Quality care is prevalent and has a vital role to play in today's society. The sector needs to be able to build and protect its reputation in the face of increased public and regulatory scrutiny.

According to Warren Buffet, a man widely regarded as the 21st Century's most successful investor, 'It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it.'

It's a sobering thought, but it's one that reinforces exactly why it is so important for care providers to focus on protecting and sustaining their reputations.



## → SIX PRINCIPLES OF MANAGING REPUTATION

Successful reputation management requires adherence to the following six principles.

### 1 BUILD AND NURTURE TRUST – ITS VALUE IS AT AN ALL-TIME HIGH

With any given commodity, scarcity increases value and this applies just as much to trust as it does to gold or oil. Given that trust, amongst the wider public, is currently in short supply in the care sector, providers must nurture, cherish and preserve it. This means taking a long-term view when making any decisions which may undermine trust. It also means practising what you preach.

If you say you specialise in providing high quality, personalised care make sure you can tangibly demonstrate how you live up to this claim by showcasing examples of best practice. If you can't, don't say it, as you risk destroying trust rather than building it.

Encourage your staff to view every interaction with another person as an opportunity to build trust. Whether it is carrying out routine daily care or discussing sensitive issues with family members, behaviour gets noticed. By acting and communicating authentically with one person, you will start to build trust and an enduring reputation with many.

### 2 EXPECT YOUR EVERY MOVE AND WORD TO BE PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

Panorama showed that the care sector is susceptible to hidden cameras and undercover reporting - this wasn't the first instance of this happening and it won't be the last. That's why, in a truly transparent world, your organisation needs to act and communicate in a way that you would be proud to see splashed across the front page of every newspaper in the country or beamed into your living room.

From award wins to 100th birthday celebrations, develop a bank of goodwill by actively promoting positive news and celebrating successes in local media outlets. Alongside this, set clear standards amongst staff for expected behaviour, monitor performance against these and take decisive action where necessary. Any other behaviour carries a significant risk of reputational damage.

### 3 PLAN FOR THE CHALLENGES THAT SOCIAL MEDIA BRINGS

Social media has revolutionised the way people interact with each other. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat have become standard tools for communicating snippets of information and in this fast-paced arena it is all too easy for professional boundaries to become blurred.

To preserve reputation in a social media age, care providers need to evaluate and assess carefully the existing resources they have in place. For example, do you have a robust social media policy and are your staff familiar with it? Have you made people aware of the rules surrounding client confidentiality and taken action if people have used social media inappropriately?

As well as making sure your employees understand how social media fits into their professional lives, you also need

to have procedures in place so you can respond effectively if things go wrong.

Comments and rumours can spread like wildfire if they capture people's imagination. Equally, the ability to post unauthorised content in real time is forcing organisations to rethink their attitudes to social media and react even faster.

Faced with a barrage of uncontrolled information, organisations need to be able to move quickly to redress the communications balance and position themselves as the credible source of information, rather than outside observers. However, a timely response should never be at the expense of accuracy, nor should it lead to speculation. In a world where a hard-earned reputation can be shattered in a matter of minutes, it's better to issue an accurate, considered response than a fast, inaccurate one.

### 4 EMBRACE THE OPPORTUNITIES THAT SOCIAL MEDIA PROVIDES

Despite what you might fear, it's not all bad news when it comes to social media. Used well, it can help you build relationships, engage your stakeholders and communicate in the authentic, human way that people have come to expect.

One of the most important things to remember about social media is that it's personal. If you can post interesting content that has genuine value, people will engage with it. It will also help to build trust and provide an ideal platform to showcase good news.

### 5 PREPARE FOR THE WORST

Evidence shows the care sector is highly vulnerable to attack so clinging to a four-leaf clover and hoping that bad things will happen to the next man rather than you is not a prudent strategy.

Effective reputation management is all about preparation. If you have processes in place and a well-trained crisis management team capable of enacting them, you stand more chance of emerging from a difficult situation with your reputation intact. Ensuring operational processes and procedures are effective and staff are fully trained and appropriately managed will also help minimise overall risk.

### 6 BE TRUE TO YOUR VALUES WHEN CRISIS STRIKES OR SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES

A crisis is the acid test of an organisation's leadership. When the chips are down, do you act in accordance with your culture, values and reputation? Or do pragmatism, short-term financial considerations and expedience take precedence? The choice you make will have enormous ramifications for your reputation – and organisational success – in the future.

## OPPORTUNITIES EXIST

Without question, managing and protecting reputation in the care sector is tougher today than ever before. But for those organisations that understand the new context and embrace the principles above, there is a real opportunity to build trust and emerge with their heads held high.

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