



Say it ain't so, Mo

Added 32 hours ago by Jonathan Hemus , Be the first to comment

I was struck by the words of Sky News' Simon Bucks at PRWeek's crisis communication conference when he said: "A crisis is a drama, and every drama needs heroes and villains."

Opinion



Say it ain't so, Mo, pleads Jonathan Hemus

Recent crises such as those faced by FIFA and Virgin Galactic illustrate the truth in his words.

Just this month, Merlin's CEO Nick Varney has emerged as a hero for his pitch perfect response to Alton Towers' Smiler accident while Thomas Cook CEO Peter Fankhauser (and his predecessor Harriet Green) have had the villain role foisted upon them in the aftermath of the tragic incident in Corfu.

In the corporate examples above, the individuals in question were largely unknown before the crisis broke. The dynamic is a little different when someone already perceived as a hero finds themselves at the heart of a

crisis.

Lance Armstrong is a case in point: lauded for his superhuman sporting achievements, his fightback from cancer and charitable endeavours, he was revered around the world.

This lofty position made his fall from grace following doping allegations all the more dramatic. I vividly remember visiting a Nike store in the States the day after his confession and seeing his Livestrong clothing range marked down by 70 per cent. And still no one was buying.

And now we witness a British sporting hero battling to save his reputation. As one of the lucky people at the Olympic Stadium in 2012 when Mo Farah won his second gold medal in the 5,000m, I certainly count him as a personal hero.

Despite his iconic status, he now faces a battle to protect his good name in the light of doping allegations against his coach Alberto Salazar. There is no suggestion Farah has been involved in doping and he denies any wrongdoing, but the association itself is damaging.

Farah's position as a much loved and admired individual gives him some protection in the same way that reputational credit in the bank can help to sustain a commercial brand through a difficult crisis.

But being a hero makes the potential fall from grace even more dramatic and newsworthy – for the most extreme example of this, look no further than Oscar Pistorius.

Farah's unwillingness to follow two of the golden rules of crisis management – take swift and decisive action; fill the information vacuum – leave him vulnerable as others continue to set the agenda.

I cling to the hope that true heroes can face and overcome serious reputational challenges.

When David Beckham was sent off for aiming a petulant kick at Argentina's Diego Simeone in the 1998 World Cup, a reputation that had been painstakingly built came under sustained attack. Through his subsequent deeds, behaviour and words, Beckham not only preserved his hero status, but enhanced it.

In a world which lacks heroes, but has more than enough villains, I sincerely hope that Farah's drama has a happy ending.