

Top of Mind

Corporate Reputation and Crisis Management: The Threat and Manageability of Anti-corporatism

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ABSTRACT

Advances in technology and communication have rendered corporate reputations more vulnerable than ever to criticism and attack from anti-corporate pressure groups, which now have the capacity to reach a global audience and mobilize their protests at a multinational level. This paper will discuss the increasing value of corporate reputation as a source of differential advantage in the global marketplace, and the threats that exist to even the most reputable organizations. Based on this analysis, the paper will investigate the role of reputation in crisis management, and the extent to which the actions of the increasingly influential anti-corporate movement can be managed successfully.

INTRODUCTION

There is a permanent pressure in business to focus activities around tangible factors such as prices, employees or the product itself, as one can easily trace the effects that these tangible aspects have on the bottom line. One might reason that, if these factors are managed successfully, then the business itself will be successful.

The modern marketplace, however, has become a great deal more demanding. Consumers are becoming increasingly busi-

ness-literate and, as such, are sensitive to the role that a corporation plays in society as a whole, rather than simply within its market. Purchasing decisions are based more and more upon 'non-commercial concerns', such as ethics, sustainability and corporate social responsibility (*The Economist*, 1995). As the market and the consumer have become more sophisticated, the value of intangible factors has become apparent, such as corporate reputation, and increases significantly. Indeed, authors such as Haywood (2002) and Sherman (1999) suggest that corporate reputation is now 'the ultimate determinant of competitiveness' (Haywood, 2002: ix).

Although a growing field of study, research into corporate reputation remains in its infancy relative to other aspects of business. The academic literature fails to provide an unambiguous definition as to the constituents and boundaries of corporate reputation and its relationship to other concepts such as corporate identity and corporate ethos. It is difficult, both academically and practically, to discuss the management of corporate reputation without a distinct understanding as to the nature of the concept itself. Therefore, the first sec-

tion of this paper will review the current literature and acknowledge the ways in which various commentators have defined corporate reputation. Having defined corporate reputation, the paper then progresses to discuss the growing importance of reputation management in the modern business environment. There will be a discussion on the advantages of a good corporate reputation, followed by the ways in which such a reputation can be threatened by potential crises.

Among the most important functions of reputation management is crisis management and this will be the focus of the second part of this paper, with specific reference to the increasing power of anti-corporate pressure groups. This section begins with analyzing the role that reputation plays in crisis management. Using Starr's (2000) typology of anti-corporate movements, the rise of anti-corporate sentiment over recent years will then be explored. The final analysis will investigate the extent to which anti-corporatism can be managed by the organization. The conclusion will then bring together the main themes of this paper: corporate reputation, crisis management and anti-corporatism and summarize the key implications that this analysis has for reputation management in today's marketplace.

DEFINITION AND FUNCTIONS OF CORPORATE REPUTATION

In its simplest definition, Weiss *et al.* (1999) describe corporate reputation as 'the extent to which an organization is held in high esteem or regard' (1999: 75). Although not the most sophisticated of definitions, for the practitioner, this is perhaps the least problematic and therefore easiest to base decisions around. Fundamentally, corporate reputation is the perception that stakeholders have of the organization and the way in which this is perceived as 'good' or 'bad'.

Such simplicity is often useful in that there is little potential for misinterpretation. As the importance of corporate reputation has been realized, however, academics have sought a more precise definition. One of the most widely accepted is that of Fombrun (1996), who suggests that corporate reputation is 'a perpetual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describes the firm's overall appeal to its key constituents when compared to other leading rivals' (1996: 72). Fombrun's definition incorporates the notion that corporate reputation is a potential source of competitive advantage for an organization. This definition also highlights the way in which a reputation is constantly evolving, as previous and potential efforts are interpreted and evaluated by stakeholders. Other commentators, such as Podolny and Phillips (1996) and, to a lesser extent, Roberts and Dowling (2002), have emphasized the importance of past performance over future prospects. This, however, is to neglect the way in which a corporate reputation can be managed strategically in the present in order to, first, manipulate stakeholders' perceptions of past events and, secondly, to influence the interpretation of future events.

There are, however, common foundations in the variety of meanings that the academic literature offers, from which one can derive a satisfactory single definition of corporate reputation. *Corporate reputation is the perception of an organization based on its stakeholders' interpretation of that organization's past, present and future activities and the way in which these are communicated.* This definition encompasses the notion that reputation is based on *all* activities performed by the organization, that corporate reputation can be influenced by management, but that, ultimately, it is the stakeholders themselves who choose how to perceive an organization.

Among the key explanations for the

increasing value awarded to a good corporate reputation is the growing intensity of global competition. In the global marketplace, differentiation is increasingly the crucial determinant of competitive advantage, rather than price. In seeking a differential advantage, an organization must develop a strategy, both unique and inimitable, which of course becomes difficult as more companies, some with greater resources, enter the market.

A good corporate reputation will allow an organization to attract the best recruits in the market. Studies have shown that graduates are now placing corporate social responsibility (CSR) ahead of starting and potential salaries in their job search criteria (Haywood, 2002: 11). It is now standard for business schools to offer, or insist upon, corporate ethics courses for their students and the issue of CSR is raised in a number of other disciplines. Potential managers are now being trained to question business practices and therefore only those organizations that have good reputations will be able to meet the standards of the best recruits.

In addition to attracting the most talented employees, a good reputation will also attract investors. Although reputation is an intangible asset, the effect of a bad reputation can drastically affect the balance sheet. For example, following a wave of negative publicity regarding Nike's workers' rights record in Asia Pacific, the company's market share fell from 42 per cent to 41 per cent and its share price dropped by over a half between 1997 and 1998.¹ Although the tangible aspects of Nike's operations (the quality and price of its products, for example) had not changed, its damaged reputation directly affected the company's bottom line and therefore the wealth of its investors.

Finally, a good corporate reputation is an invaluable asset for an organization wishing to enter a new market. There is no

better example here than that of Virgin. The company's reputation for quality, integrity and responsibility to the community has allowed it to diversify into an entire range of seemingly unrelated industries. The Virgin name inspires trust and a degree of certainty: the Virgin reputation provides an implicit guarantee to all its products and services. In the same way and also applicable to the Virgin example, a good reputation allows an organization to charge a premium price for its products or services. If consumers can guarantee that they will be satisfied with their purchase, they will be prepared to pay slightly more for that privilege.

It is clear, therefore, that there are many advantages to having a good corporate reputation. Many organizations, however, fail to award sufficient importance to reputation building and maintenance and consequently this vital asset is left unmanaged. This paper now moves on to identify the threats that exist for those companies that choose to neglect the imperatives of reputation management and the consequences that mismanagement can lead to for the organization.

THE ORIGINS OF A CRISIS: THREATS TO A GOOD REPUTATION

The concept of reputation might be used to define a crisis (Ihlen, 2002). A crisis can be seen as an event that brings, or has potential for bringing, an organization into disrepute, which could imperil an organization's future profitability, growth and possibly its survival (Lerbinger, 1997). The demands of building and maintaining a good corporate reputation can often defy conventional business logic. In order to nurture a good reputation, it is necessary to behave according to a long-term vision, rather than to maximize short-term profits.

The fundamental threat to a good corporate reputation is that, although the organization can behave in such a way as

to influence stakeholders' perceptions, there are many other influencers that affect the way in which an organization is perceived. For example, a business might face local citizens, competitors, industry commentators, trade associations, the government, statutory bodies, pressure groups, the media and academics as influencers of its reputation (Haywood, 2002; Benoit, 1997). Each audience potentially has diverse interests, concerns and goals. The crisis manager must identify the most important audience or prioritize important audiences (Benoit, 1997).

Haywood (2002) goes on to suggest that an organization will ultimately always have the reputation that it deserves. To an extent, this supports the argument that a corporate reputation needs to be stable and consistent, if it is to withstand the scrutiny of the many actors influencing it. Haywood's (2002) assertions, however, are perhaps a little misleading, as he implies that corporate reputation cannot be controlled, as it is the result of independent observations of corporate behavior. Although this may be true in some situations, as will be discussed in the second section of this paper, the organization does have control over the way in which it communicates its corporate behavior and therefore corporate reputation is not unmanageable.

Haywood's (2002) influencing factors do, however, provide a comprehensive account of the threats facing even the most reputable of organizations. The media is certainly a substantial threat to any corporate reputation, especially in countries such as the UK, where freedom of the press is both celebrated and taken maximum advantage of.

In many ways, the more respected a firm's reputation the more sensational a corporate scandal will be and so these firms are subjected to the most intense scrutiny. There is also the temptation for journalists to sensationalize any 'corporate gossip' which they might hear, in order to maxi-

mize their own revenues, especially in the powerful tabloid press.

Given the power of the media to damage a good reputation, other influencers themselves have become more powerful. The headline-hungry media provides a voice for those who may otherwise have gone unheard and their claims often go unchallenged if there is a possibility to create a sensational story. As a result, the potential for a reputation crisis is significant, even among the most responsible organizations. The organization must therefore maximize the influence that it does have in order to prevent, and if not recover from, a crisis.

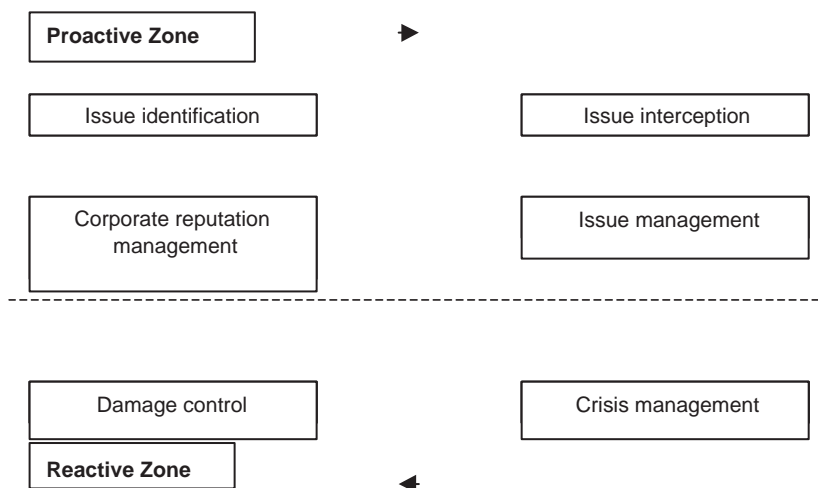
Having understood the nature and benefits of a good corporate reputation and discussed the threats that even a good reputation can face, this paper will now discuss the ways in which reputation management can be used as a tool to shield an organization against a crisis. The next section begins by discussing the role that corporate reputation can play in times of crisis and later apply this to the increasing threat posed by anti-corporate pressure groups.

THE ROLE OF REPUTATION IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

John Garnett, former manager at Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI), described a good corporate reputation as providing the organization with a 'reservoir of good-will', from which the firm can draw in times of crisis (Morley, 1998: 13). He argues that an organization's response to negative publicity and damaging claims against it is more likely to be accepted if the company has formerly been held in high esteem. On the other hand, if an organization has a poor reputation, it will be assumed guilty of harmful allegations regardless of the legitimacy of its response.

The 'reservoir of good-will' implies that a good reputation alone will resolve a crisis. Certainly, a solid reputation will

Figure 1: *The cycle of action* (Morley, 1998: 69)



allow an organization a more credible platform from which to defend itself. It is reputation *management*, rather than simply reputation strength, that will determine the outcome of a crisis, however.

Morley (1998) provides a model which links corporate reputation management to crisis management, as shown in Figure 1. Morley's (1998) cycle of action demonstrates how corporate reputation needs to be actively managed even during times of calm. The model suggests that, if an organization seeks to identify any potential issues that may escalate into a crisis, a crisis itself can be managed and eventually controlled.

The key to this model, and hence the link between reputation and crisis management, is the identification of issues that have the potential to negatively affect the way in which an organization is regarded. As mentioned earlier in the analysis regarding the definition of corporate reputation, it is tempting to think that an organization's reputation is based solely on stakeholders' perceptions of its past behavior. With this in mind, a manager might reason that reputation management involves com-

municating past events in a favorable fashion, rather than foreseeing future events. It is for this reason that some organizations fail to have an adequate plan in place to manage a future crisis should one arise.

In the case of South African Breweries (SABMiller), the senior management team stated that one of the best ways to protect the company's reputation was to avoid potential crisis, or at least limit the damage by putting in place predefined procedures to deal with crisis situations. This was done by linking SABMiller's reputation risk assessment directly to a crisis management program (Chaloner and Brotzen, 2002).

The process of issue identification often becomes more complicated than it is, as it requires managers to shift focus away from commercial concerns. With an adequate reputation management plan, however, whereby individuals are specifically responsible for identifying potential crises, the process is actually relatively simple (Haywood, 2002). A sensitive media monitoring system will allow managers to identify any of the organization's past, present or future activities which may be scrutinized by external parties and then communicated to

other stakeholders to the detriment of the firm's reputation.

Some crises develop over a long period of time, such as the Nestlé baby milk debate. The issue began with a journalist's suggestion, in 1974, that powdered milk formulas sold by western manufacturers were contributing to the deaths of Third World infants (Morley, 1998: 90). The journalist claimed that powerful companies were encouraging illiterate mothers to believe that the powdered formula was preferable to breastfeeding. Given the conditions in these poor countries, mothers often over-diluted the formula in order to make it go further, leading to malnutrition. Furthermore, the formula was made up using dirty water and in unsanitary conditions, leading to deadly digestive disorders. A Swiss activist group reprinted the journalist's claims and singled out Nestlé as a target. Now, almost 30 years later, the debate continues and activist groups maintain a boycott on Nestlé products.

It might be argued that Nestlé managed this crisis badly, in that the organization did not foresee the potential for their activities in the Third World to be scrutinized to such an extent. As such, the issue became a crisis and was seized upon by the media. The crisis itself threatened the short-term prospects of the company and so the company reacted to the issue with only short-term vision: by suing the activist group. This course of action, however, rather than being a source of damage control, only served to increase publicity surrounding the issue and so inflict further damage on Nestlé's reputation.

Whereas this crisis threatened Nestlé's short-term prospects, the mismanagement of the crisis resulted in long-term damage to the company's reputation. If an organization is prepared for the possibility of an issue becoming a crisis and so has planned how to react should it occur, the amount of damage caused by the crisis can be lim-

ited to the short term only. Indeed, if managed correctly, a crisis has the potential to improve an organization's reputation in the long term.

There is perhaps no better example of successful crisis management than that of Johnson & Johnson. Managers discovered that consignments of their best-selling analgesic product, Tylenol, had been purposefully contaminated (Haywood, 2002). One might consider this crisis inevitable, as the management were not able to entirely control the actions of one individual within the organization. Although not prepared for this specific crisis, however, Johnson & Johnson had prepared for an event of this nature and so were able to react swiftly and in the most effective manner. A total recall of all Tylenol products was issued. This may have resulted in significant short-term losses for the company, yet in the long term, Johnson & Johnson's crisis management gave the firm a reputation for acting in the best interests of its consumers, rather than its own profits.

It can be seen, therefore, that corporate reputation is both a factor and a consequence of crisis management: successful reputation management leads to successful crisis management and successful crisis management leads to an improved reputation. The modern business environment is rendering organizations, especially large multinational firms, more susceptible than ever to crises, however. In the past, many issues identified by companies as having crisis potential have not in fact impacted, because, first, pressure groups have not had the resources to uncover the issues and, secondly, these groups did not have the communication capacity to organize a campaign attacking the activities of an organization or industry. Advances in technology and communications, notably due to the increasing popularity and capabilities of the internet, have now granted considerable power to these pressure groups and as

a result their numbers and influence have grown enormously.

THE INCREASING INFLUENCE OF ANTI-CORPORATISM

The academic literature regarding anti-corporatism is very much in its infancy. Events over recent years, such as the protests at the World Trade Conference in Seattle, however, have significantly raised the movement’s public profile.

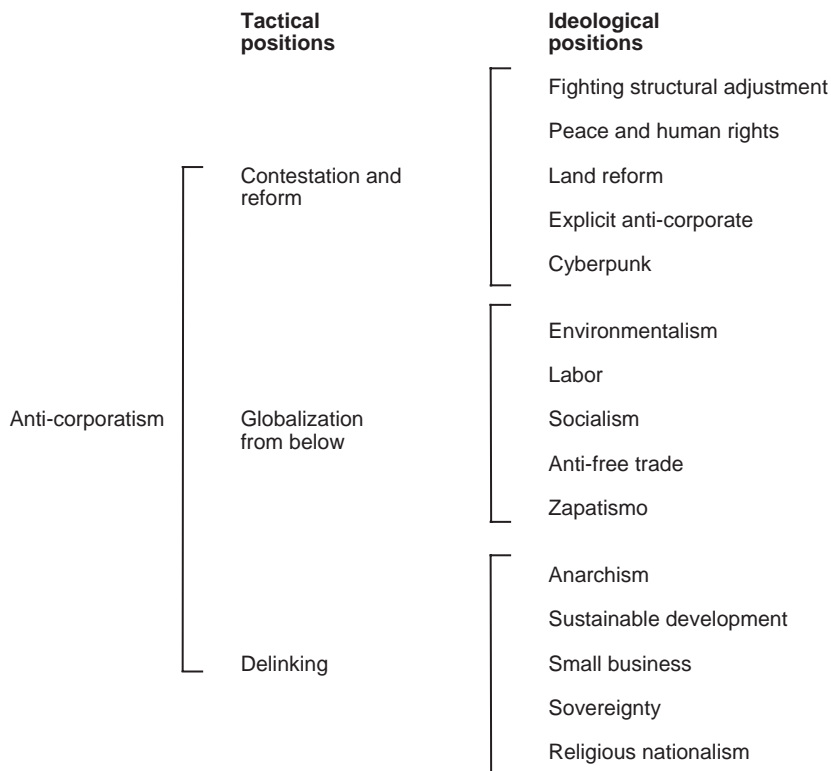
The increasing power and impact of anti-corporate pressure groups, such as ‘Adbusters’ and ‘Space hijackers’, is largely due to the communication capabilities presented by the internet. These pressure groups are now able to express their anti-corporate sentiments on a global level, regardless of their legitimacy. The internet has come to be considered as something of a ‘secondary news agency’: a cheap, quick,

accessible means to information (Kochan, 1999). In addition to allowing pressure groups a medium through which to express their opinions, the internet is also a useful tool in coordinating the activities of supporters and sympathizers. For example, the annual May Day Protests in London are planned, coordinated and communicated via the internet.

In order to explore the effects of the recent trend of anti-corporatism, Starr’s (2000) typology of anti-corporate pressure groups will be used to identify the variety of ideological perspectives that make up the anti-corporate movement, as shown in Figure 2.

It is clear that anti-corporatism cannot be regarded as a single movement. Although all pressure groups are gaining power and influence for the same reasons (ie advances in technology and communications), they

Figure 2: *Typology of anti-corporate pressure groups (Starr, 2000)*



are not all fighting for the same cause. As such, an organization cannot identify or manage the effects of all anti-corporate pressure groups in the same manner.

Given the authors' understanding of corporate reputation, crisis management and the nature and influence of anti-corporate pressure groups, this paper now moves on to its final piece of analysis. It so far has been assumed that all crises and their effects upon corporate reputation are manageable. It has been suggested that successful reputation management will identify potential issues which may lead to a crisis and therefore an organization can prepare for these crises in order to react in the most effective manner should the crisis arise. The recent increase in the power of anti-corporate pressure groups, however, poses new threats to the success of crisis management and so the organization's power to maintain control of a crisis brought about by these groups must be reassessed. Starr's (2000) typology of anti-corporate pressure groups will now be used in order to investigate the extent to which different aspects of the movement can be managed.

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN ANTI-CORPORATISM BE MANAGED BY THE ORGANIZATION?

This paper has suggested that a crisis can be managed if, through the process of reputation management, the issue has been identified by the organization before pressure groups and the media seize upon it. With so many aspects to the influential anti-corporate movement, however, one might argue that it is impossible to consider the concerns and demands of all its actors.

The ideological scope of different anti-corporate pressure groups varies: for example, explicit anti-corporate campaigners (such as 'Adbusters') will focus their efforts against a specific organization or group of organizations, whereas campaigners for the ideals of socialism (such as the Socialist

Worker Party) have a much broader perspective.

The more specific the aims of a pressure group, the easier it is for an organization to identify which of its activities may come under attack from that group and so the easier it is to manage that crisis should it happen. Examples of these groups from Starr's (2000) analysis include explicit anti-corporate campaigners, human rights campaigners and small business campaigners. The principles on which these pressure groups are founded are relatively unambiguous and therefore the issues on which they will act are more obvious. Although an organization cannot always prevent an issue becoming a crisis, it can at least be prepared for criticism from these groups, as it is simple to identify if any of the organization's activities conflict with the ideals of the pressure groups.

It follows, therefore, that the more wide-ranging the ideals of the pressure group, the more difficult it is for an organization to identify potential crises arising from the actions of these groups and therefore the harder it is to formulate an effective crisis management plan. An example of such a group from Starr's (2000) analysis is that of 'cyberpunk', such as the internet-based activist group 'UK Electro Hippies'. This pressure group campaigns against issues as wide-ranging as the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan to the World Trade Conference in Seattle. It is therefore difficult for an organization to know which of its activities might ignite a campaign from such a group. The most extreme pressure group on this scale is the 'anarchists', such as the UK political group 'Class War'. This group proposes the dismantling of the entire authority structure on which modern society is built. Their aims are so far-reaching that almost any area of an organization's business may potentially conflict with this group's ideals. Referring back to Morley's cycle of action

(Figure 1), this makes issue identification, interception and management almost impossible.

It can be seen, therefore, that the scope of an anti-corporate group's ideological position determines the ease with which an organization can identify and control any issues which may develop into a crisis, if seized upon. Referring back to Morley's (1998) circle of action again, it can be concluded that an organization can *proactively* manage its reputation and potential crises posed by anti-corporate pressure groups, providing that the group's ideals are specific enough to allow for issue identification. If a pressure group's ideals are too broad to allow for issue identification to take place, however, any crisis brought about by these groups can only be *reactively* managed.

To give an example, if a workers' rights pressure group is known to criticize working practices in Asian factories and an organization operates several factories in Asia, the management can anticipate the potential impact that the group could have which might turn the issue into a crisis. Therefore, managers can intervene and manage this issue (by communicating directly with the pressure group or involving its members in their decision making, for example) and so control the extent to which the group's concerns are brought to media and public attention. On the other hand, an organization cannot include groups such as anarchists in their decision making, as their ideals are completely contradictory to the aims of the business and therefore no compromise could be made. Hence, an organization cannot control crisis development in these situations. Management, however, can be prepared to *react* to a crisis from these types of anti-corporate pressure groups, providing that they have an efficient reputation management plan, which has identified the group as a potential threat.

Benoit (1997) highlights how theory can

guide practitioners and critics, by emphasizing the importance of preparation before the crisis occurs, identification of the nature of the crisis and suggestions for coping with crises. He delineated the following steps: preparation of crisis contingency plans; analysis of the crisis and the accusations; identification of the relevant audience(s) (in this case it will be the anti-corporatist) and repairing the tarnished image.

A theory on situational crisis communication (SCCT) offers a way in which to explain and to practice organizational reputation protection during a crisis. SCCT models the crisis process in terms of crisis responsibility and organizational reputation and develops a prescriptive system for matching crisis response strategies to the crisis type (Coombs and Holladay, 2002).

In managing its reputation being attacked by an anti-corporatist movement in relation to the Exxon Valdez oil spill, Rawl, Chair of Exxon, 'blamed state officials and the Coast Guard for the delay, charging ... that the company could not obtain immediate authorisation on the scene to begin cleaning up the oil or applying a chemical dispersant' (Matthew and Peterson, 1989). This is in a sense shifting the blame, arguing that another organization is actually responsible for the offensive act. Shifting the blame, however, cannot be viewed as a certain solution to reputation problems (Benoit, 1997).

CONCLUSION

This analysis has shown that a good corporate reputation is an incredibly valuable asset for an organization, whereas a poorly managed reputation can lead to a crisis. Indeed, as Rebecca Madeira, former vice president of public affairs at Pepsi has suggested, 'your reputation can be your biggest asset or your biggest liability' (Morley, 1998: 13).

It has been seen here that a solid reputation is an important and sustainable source of differential advantage, which is becoming more and more valuable as globalization creates an increasingly competitive marketplace. Managing a reputation, however, is now a more complex task than ever, as anti-corporate pressure groups have the resources to communicate and coordinate their activities on a global level. Paradoxically, as a good reputation has become more critical to the success of an organization, the process of maintaining a good reputation has become more problematical.

The key implication for management, therefore, is that reputation needs to be managed, where possible, proactively and, if not, then at least reactively. It has been seen that some anti-corporate groups have such far-reaching aims that it is impossible to anticipate the issues upon which they will campaign and therefore even the most effectively managed reputations are threatened by crisis. Hence all organizations must make provisions for crisis management, regardless of the strength of their reputation.

This discussion highlights the need for formal reputation management, which is often overshadowed in organizations by more commercial concerns. As has been seen, in situations whereby potential crises can be identified, effective reputation management can offset a crisis before it impacts on the organization. Alternatively, careful reputation management can identify those groups which pose an uncontrollable threat to the organization and, therefore, although managers will be unable to prevent the crisis, they will be able to prepare the best ways in which to react to it. Finally, reputation management is a self-serving function. Responsible and efficient reputation management will lead to effective crisis management, which can in fact enhance corporate reputation itself.

NOTE

- 1 <http://finance.yahoo.com/q/finance.yahoo.com/q?l=NKE&a=00&b=01&c=1997&d=11&e=31&f=1998&g=d&z=66&y=-1>

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FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information regarding the pressure groups named in this paper, the relevant internet addresses are as follows:

Adbusters: www.adbusters.org
Space Hijackers: www.spacehijackers.co.uk
Socialist Worker Party: www.swp.org.uk
UK Electro Hippies: www.fraw.org.uk/chippies
Class War: www.geocities.com/nowar_buttheclawar