

## Fashion forward: thinking ahead to protect reputation and brand

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Fashion: it's about how we look on the outside, turning heads and making a statement without opening our mouths. At the same time, fashion is about how we feel on the inside, enveloped in confidence when wrapped in our favourite item.

Reputation and brand too, are about how we look to others without, and feel about ourselves within. Reputation is how others perceive us, based on what they know, what they think they know, what they have read, and seen and been told. Brand, on the other hand, is in my view more akin to how we want others to see us, based on the external image that we project – albeit that image may have come from deep within.

Reputation and brand are both of vital importance in a busy and competitive market place. But how we appear to the outside world and how we present our brand, can make us or break us; and they can be made or broken by the activities of others.

### Protecting reputation

We need to ask ourselves, does our reputation proceed us like a fine, perfumed aroma or does it hang around like a bad smell? If the former, we are bang on trend; if the latter, we have some serious make-over work to do. That vital remedial work, or the work to preserve a fine brand, is difficult in today's data-heavy world, where information anywhere, is information everywhere and where damaging allegations or private and confidential information can spread quickly like a ladder up a fine stocking.

According to Benjamin Franklin: 'Glass, China and reputation are easily cracked and never well mended'. So to maintain a high quality brand, those who created it, endorse it and are associated with it, need – as far as possible – to guard that reputation carefully. Problem is, there are numerous reputational potholes out there on the catwalk to success, likely to trip us up and cause the odd crack or two:

- Inaccurate reporting
- Negative media attention
- Anti-social social media
- Catty commentators
- Mud-slinging competitors
- Once shining-star brand ambassadors, tarnished by their own slip or trip, and threatening to bring you down with them....

### Online threats

Whether we are an individual designer, a model, a brand ambassador, a business brand creator or a corporate sponsor, every time we put our head above the metaphorical parapet of the Internet – Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, fashion blogs, corporate ads, online brochures, mainstream media – we risk reputation enhancement or brand destruction. So we cannot be reckless in the way in which we allow others to view us, or in the manner in which information about us is published, and remains online. The odd inaccurate statement online, or a line of negative media reporting might, we think, be OK to ignore. After all, the great fashionista himself, Oscar Wilde, said that the only thing worse than being talked about, was not being talked about.

But it is not as simple as that. Uncorrected inaccurate online information about how you created your latest line, how you source your materials, how you treat your staff... will get picked up and reported every time a story is written about you. Soon enough, the tiny needle-sized misreporting

on one site, becomes a huge thorn in your reputational side across the broadsheets and the airways.

We all know the almost hurricane-like wind of negativity that can be blown up when a story starts to trend on Twitter. While it is certainly inadvisable to provoke a social media storm by complaining too soon, if it looks as though damaging and defamatory comments may get out of control, it is important to take action to put across your side of the story and protect your brand.

**Are we what we wear?**

What if you are being portrayed in a way that is entirely contrary to your ethics, for example? Allegations that you use real fur, if you are against it; or leather when you are a committed vegetarian; or that you use shoddy goods of any sort... The lyrics of the late, great, David Bowie told us: "Fashion! Turn to the left; Fashion! Turn to the right; Oooh, fashion!..." While fashion knows no political boundaries, it is certainly the case that fashion can define us and the way in which we are perceived by the outside world.

Dark suit, white shirt, blue tie? Turn to the right Tory. Jeans, t-shirt, beard? Turn to the left, leftie. Well, a simplification perhaps, but whether you are on the left or on the right; East or West; part of the establishment or railing against it, you want your fans and buyers and other members of the fashion community to have an accurate view of who you are and what you stand for, not an inaccurate view mis-sold by others.

**A bruised brand**

Activities completely outside our control can negatively impact our brand. At the end of January, it was reported that the sportswear giant Adidas intended to end its sponsorship with the athletics world governing body, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF). This was due to continue for another year but the company has, despite what should be the prime time of the run up to the Rio Olympics, seemingly had enough of the negativity surrounding the various high profile doping scandal stories of late. Indeed, its lawyers are reportedly claiming that the doping revelations constitute a breach of contract. It's not surprising if the knock-on effect of negative publicity surrounding drug use outweighs the benefit of being associated with great sporting achievements.

We all remember when Kate Moss caused a scandal by 'powdering her nose' in 2005. When pictures of her appeared in the mainstream press sporting 'white' not 'rouge' on her fine features, the 'face' of Burberry and Chanel risked reputational disaster and brands shrank away like cashmere sweaters in a hot wash. But some names are too big, and some faces too valuable, to fail. Anyone waiting interminably for their baggage at our airports can gaze up and see a smiling 20 foot high Ms Moss, clutching her own familiar chequered bag, still proudly a face of Burberry.

Other brand ambassadors have got themselves into trouble by being unfaithful. In 2008, actor Charlize Theron – the 'wrist' (if not the 'face') of watch designer Raymond Weil – stepped out sporting a Dior watch. Her horological choice cost her dearly when a New York judge ruled that she would have to pay damages to the designer for violating her \$3 million endorsement deal. Singer Nicole Scherzinger didn't learn from Charlize's mistaken and in 2014 lost her endorsement deal with yoghurt brand Muller, when pictures of her buying rival brand Total were posted online – by herself! Both ladies did little to enhance the brands they were endorsing with their activities, or to enhance their own reputations in the process.

Anyone involved in any aspect of the fashion industry – those who have conceived, created, nurtured and launched a brand into the world – need to protect themselves from the slings and arrows of outrageous attack, of which there are many.

And with so many hostile potential saboteurs out there, poised to strike at the heart of fashion, from the jealous, to the competitive, to the negligent, or just the careless, in my view, everyone in the fashion world should guard their brands and their own reputations, as fiercely as a tigress guards her cubs. [Please click here to view as PDF.](#)

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