

## "THE INTERNET CAN SERVE AS AN EARLY WARNING SYSTEM TO THE CEO"

Harold Burson, founding chairman, Burson-Marsteller, talks about the importance of reputation management in a networked world



**HAROLD BURSON**

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**What role does the internet play in influencing a company's reputation? This is something that is not as easy to 'control'.**

The internet has both positive and negative aspects. The internet makes it easier for disgruntled employees to complain publicly about a grievance. On the other hand, it can also serve as an early warning system to the CEO and those who are responsible for compliance. So I think a company must constantly monitor the internet and take seriously the statements and claims that are made to find out whether or not there is any truth in them. This is burdensome but if there is a violation

and if it transpires that the CEO is warned about it by some anonymous person on the internet and he did not act, there could be trouble.

**Isn't it harder to figure out who your stake holder is in a networked world?**

The internet is context- and character-neutral. You never know if the person who is on it is a good character or a bad character. It is a transmission device, and it can be used for good or for bad. It's a bit like anonymous letters — in the pre-internet days people would send a letter on a sheet of paper that was typed, no signature, sometimes posted from another town. Complaints on the internet are often like that.

**Do you think CEOs are taking the internet seriously enough as a reputation-building and protection tool?**

Some are and some aren't. Many are still in the learning process. But the medium is still so young and immature that we are just learning about the impact it has on recipients. We do know that it is powerful. I am a big believer in Marshall McLuhan's maxim that the medium is the message. The internet has yet to establish how much credibility it will have in future.

**Some CEOs seem to consider blogs a popular way of communicating. What would you say are the risks and dividends of CEO blogs?**

The blog is a form of communication. The important element is the content. If the content is considered relevant by the recipient it will have an impact. If it is not considered relevant it will have little impact. It's no point for a CEO to say, I'm going to have a blog if he has nothing to say. A blogger is like a newspaper columnist or an editorial writer. The success of that editorial writer and his readership is dependent on what he says. The one great differentiation is that the blog automatically provides a method to react. It is much more difficult to get a reaction in a magazine or a newspaper. The blog is instantaneous. This makes it easy to gauge opinion very quickly. You don't have to wait until 1,000 people respond. Over a period of time you can find out from the first 10 or 20 responses. Usually there's a predictability. You know if the first three responses are negative, that the overall reaction is going to be negative. It gives CEOs writing a blog an opportunity to know whether their policies, statements, beliefs or vision have an acceptance or not. 📌

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