

A View to the Horizon: Managing Reputation Risk



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A famous Peanuts cartoon uses a cruise ship as an analogy for life. In the cartoon, Lucy explains that some people place deck chairs at the back of the boat to see where they have been, while others place their chairs in the front to see where they are going. Lucy asks Charlie which way his deck chair is facing, and he says he has never been able to get one to unfold.

A nonprofit's reputation is affected by where it has been, where it currently is, and where it wants to go. Every touchpoint matters, from what your staff say, to what you do, and how your statements and actions are interpreted. Self-reflection is key to gaining a better understanding of how people perceive your organization. Has your organization unfolded its deck chair yet? This article is designed to help you help your organization take a fresh look at your most valuable, and most vulnerable asset, your reputation.

Examine Your Wake

Let's grab a metaphorical deck chair and pull it to the back of your cruise ship. Settle in! Take some time to ponder the impressive wake left by your organization on its journey to achieve your mission. If you've recently completed a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) or SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results) analysis you have data galore from internal and external stakeholder interviews, benchmarking analyses, and board and staff team conversations. Ask the following questions to bring your receding 'wake' into focus:

- How does our understanding of our value and strengths compare to what we heard from others? Compared to insiders, do outside stakeholders hold a higher, or lower view of our purpose, relevance and accomplishments? Why might that be the case?
- What obstacles, dangers or opportunities have taken us off course thus far? What have we learned from the maneuvers we made to avoid the dangers and leverage the opportunities?
- Does our current direction and planned ports of call make sense given where we've been and the important mission work left to accomplish?

Take a Good Look Off Your Stern

Truly understanding the reputation of your nonprofit requires taking a long look at where you've been and what you mean to key stakeholder groups. A quick glimpse won't do.

- If you have members, chapters, or affiliates, do these stakeholders look to your organization to advance

- certain causes, provide educational resources, or act as a conduit for information sharing?
- How frequently are the resources produced by (and services available from) your organization actually used by the people and groups you're trying to serve? What does the data say with respect to whether your nonprofit is the preferred provider for those resources and services?
 - Are the backgrounds, strengths and unique abilities of the current staff and volunteer team aligned with your values, goals, and mission?
 - Are commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion 'window dressing' or actually reflected in substantive strategies to achieve true DEI?
 - When was the last time your team found itself working outside its collective comfort zone? Did fears related to "stretch" assignments materialize? What were the most important lessons from the experience of being uncomfortable?
 - Are there bold projects that capture the imaginations and enthusiasm of your board? Do these projects hold promise for delivering on your mission, or suggest a potentially costly departure from your nonprofit's *raison d'être*?
 - Beyond the hype of likes and followers, is actual participation in programs and fundraising campaigns increasing, stagnant, or declining?
 - Is your competitive environment getting even more so?

Word gets around when the interests of a nonprofit's leadership and board are misaligned with the community it is trying to serve. Your stakeholders should be invested in your nonprofit's work and find value in the services being offered and inspiration in the campaigns for which your nonprofit is a champion. If stakeholders have lost interest in the nonprofit's handiwork, then your reputation could be in decline.

Feedback Helps You Grow

Listen especially to feedback you receive from your clients, participants, active volunteers and members. Feedback can be sourced from official surveys, customer calls and emails, or anecdotal conversations between members of your team and those on the receiving end of your work.

Of course not all feedback will consist of gushing reviews. Hints of disappointment, disillusionment or dismay are intriguing clues to the puzzle of figuring out how to change your nonprofit for the better. Taking the time to listen to that feedback, analyze it, and loop back to stakeholders with the results, are ways to reinforce your commitment to being responsive to needs, wants and concerns. Even if you ultimately determine that suggested changes in direction or approach don't sync with your current plans, hang on to critical feedback and complaints and resolve to revisit those concerns in the future. Stakeholder suggestions that seem impractical today may be exactly what your mission needs a few months or years down the road.

This is Your Reputation Online

The term *online reputation management* refers to a process by which an organization identifies and draws attention to positive comments and also identifies and quells or responds to negative sentiment. For example, some nonprofits will choose to ignore negative postings on Glassdoor, the popular site for job hunters. Others will post responses to critical comments, either thanking a poster for their feedback or responding to clarify a concern raised by a former or current employee. According to the article and accompanying infographic, "[How to Respond to Negative Reviews on Glassdoor.](#)" featured on www.entrepreneur.com, responses to negative reviews should begin with "thank you," and attempt to address each point made in a critical review by explaining *how* your organization is working to solve the issues raised by the disapproving reviewer. The article also suggests highlighting positive and redeeming aspects of your organization to leave a final, good impression in the mind of the reader.

For example:

"Thank you for your review and your thoughtful comments about the occasional long hours required to support special projects at our organization. Our mission wouldn't be possible without the deep commitment and enthusiasm of the passionate activists who count on us as teammates. We're working hard to show our team appreciation for their above and beyond service by providing extra personal days off, along with extended holidays."

Two startling statistics in the Headway Capital infographic featured in the article should be convincing

reminders that ignoring snarky reviews on Glassdoor could mean trouble when you're trying to fill a key opening:

- 32 million monthly users use Glassdoor to job search and research employers, and
- 69% of job seekers are more likely to apply for a job if the employer actively manages its brand by responding to reviews.

Many nonprofit leaders understandably feel that monitoring an organization's reputation online is like trying to play whack-a-mole. To counter the vastness of the search field, a number of companies have developed services that use powerful search features and algorithms to help them efficiently learn what people are saying. A variety of web applications with different structures and price points are available to help you monitor the vast world of Internet chatter, including the products featured in "[15 Leading Online Reputation Management Tools For 2020](#)," on the website www.influencermarketinghub.com.

Two of the 15 products profiled in the article are:

- [Brand24](#) which allows users to create multiple projects, follow more than one brand, or specific campaigns related to one brand. The tool offers myriad ways to filter data, including the ability to get granular by filtering by day, week, month, source and sentiment.
- [Mention](#) searches 1 billion sources daily to help its customers find mentions of their nonprofit brand in online conversations. You can monitor competitor brands as well as your own, and the tool features integrations with popular social media platforms that help you quickly respond to social media posts, good, bad or ugly.

Jump In: Start with Your Web Browser

If you haven't already searched for your nonprofit's name on your browser of choice, what are you waiting for? Keep in mind that unless you choose the "incognito" search option, your results are likely to be a customized list, based on your search history. While these results may give your nonprofit pride a boost, they don't reveal a true picture of what others see when they try to find your organization. The authors of "[15 Leading Online Reputation Management Tools For 2020](#)," caution that we shouldn't be "too upset if the Number 1 result in Google isn't about you. Only 50% of people can claim ownership of the first result for their name. Indeed, only 2% of people can claim all the items on the first page of the search results."

Whether your nonprofit's good works are described in the top spot on page one or your labors draw a more modest search engine result, take time to read and understand what others are saying about you. As Anthony Fitzsimmons and Derek Atkins deftly explain in their terrific book, *Rethinking Reputation Risk*, "Your reputation is the sum total of how your stakeholders perceive you. Without stakeholders you could have no reputation, only self-esteem."

As you delve into what others are saying about you (in social media posts, articles, or elsewhere), ask:

- Is the portrait others paint of your mission and good works consistent with the way that you think about the organization?
- Are perceptions of your nonprofit generally accurate, or off base?
- What possible reasons are there for outsiders to view your organization differently from the way you see your efforts, impact, missteps and successes?
- Do external parties—supporters, partners, watchdog groups, media, etc.—question the motivations, structure, size, compensation of executives, or other aspects of your nonprofit?

Ponder Patterns

Like our counterparts in other industries, today's nonprofit sector leaders have a voracious appetite for data. Bring on the numbers! With respect to reputation risk, a single critical Tweet is unlikely to erode the reputation you've built over decades, unless it is an opening salvo followed by an onslaught of comments and criticisms on the same topic or theme. An important part of reputation risk management is looking for patterns: similar feedback, concern or experiences shared by individuals from disparate parts of your service area, chapter network, or supporters. Writing off an angry or frustrated client as an "outlier" is dangerous in our hyperconnected world.

Get to Know Your Nonprofit's Changing Landscape

Managing reputation risk may begin with understanding the wake behind your nonprofit's cruise ship, but it definitely shouldn't end there. Our history provides insights—but far from a clear picture—of what the future holds. So it's time to bring your deck chair past the midship section of your boat to the bow. In this new position, look out into the future and ask:

- What are some of the differences in what we see ahead compared to the water we've already crossed? What is changing in our operating environment? How are those changes necessitating changes in our approach, our values, prospective partners, and our sense of urgency about our core mission?
- Have our programs and services evolved to suit the new reality we see ahead, or are we stuck in a time warp offering a traditional menu of services to a clientele with a different appetite? Is our mission still relevant to what is happening in the world today?

Strategies to Manage Reputation Risk

1. **Anticipate and prepare to steer clear of icebergs.** From time to time the NRMC team hears naïve nonprofit leaders boast that “we've been around a hundred years and nothing terrible has gone wrong.” Is a century of relatively good luck likely to be followed by another? While some organizations have been very lucky to avoid serious controversy or a true crisis, many leaders conveniently forget the storms once they have passed. Seasoned leaders know that disaster can strike well-run organizations as well as poorly run groups. Discounting the role of luck in your success thus far is dangerous; it may cause you to be less attuned to the convergence of events that could be devastating to your mission, your work and your survival. One approach to identifying potential icebergs—existential threats to your mission—is to ask: What could destroy our reputation?
2. **Plan your route and ports of call, and a backup plan (or two), just in case.** One of our team members eagerly set off on a cruise in 2009 without first checking on weather conditions at the cruise ship's destination port in Turks and Caicos. Once the ship got underway the crew explained that hurricane winds in the Caribbean meant that it wasn't safe to follow the advertised route. But no worries, the crew had a contingency plan mapped out that involved additional days safely “at sea,”—far from the area most impacted by the storm. Is your nonprofit prepared for circumstances that could push you off course? Examples include new opposition groups seeking to undermine your cause, or new competitors who believe that they can do what you do but more effectively *and* more efficiently. Ask: what is our contingency plan should circumstances change such that we have to abandon or deviate significantly from our original mission route?
3. **Put yourself in a critic's seat.** A familiar but sometimes oddly surprising finding from employee engagement surveys is that the nonprofit is staffed by team members who believe passionately in the mission of the organization. Passion, fervor, commitment and excitement act as fuel for teams that must work with fewer resources than they need to beat incredible odds. There is power and value in coming together around a shared cause. But there's also danger in believing your own press. Managing reputation risk requires that we look critically at our operations, our impact and outcomes, and even our deepest worries. Ask: what would a well-informed critic say about how we're run? About the conduct of our highest leaders and those on the frontlines? If an outsider was trying to find an opening to cause us grievous harm, where would they most likely find that opening?
4. **Take in the full picture.** Is your nonprofit opportunity-minded or opportunity-blinded? Sometimes, you can be so close to something that you only see a small part of it or only what you've trained your eyes to focus on. Is your team wearing blinders that obscure the true picture of how you are perceived? Valued? If you pull the blinders off and take a good look around, what do you see? Are you hanging on to programs and services with minimal impact because you don't want to have to deal with pushback? Are you consistently stopping to learn from missteps, mistakes and failure or scrambling to put those difficult experiences in the past without a second thought?
5. **Resolve to master your domain.** Every nonprofit can take measured, thoughtful steps to better control its online presence and optimize how the nonprofit is seen in search engine results. By creating specific web assets you can increase the likelihood that stakeholders and prospective supporters will see what you want them to see when they search for missions like yours. A nonprofit's web assets include its main website, social media profiles, any organizational affiliate websites (fundraising, careers, special projects, blogs, etc.) and any articles written by supporters about the nonprofit. Resolve to learn more about your “domain authority” or “website authority.” These terms refer to the strength of your website/domain. These tools can help predict your website ranking. To learn more about these websites type “how to look up domain authority” into your search engine (e.g. Google, Bing, DuckDuckGo, etc.).
6. **Adjust your field of view.** NRMC recently consulted with a nonprofit team that has been very

successful growing its base of social media fans; an uptick in the total base of supporters has happened while the base of tried-and-true long-time members continues to shrink, year over year. Some of the long-time members have complained that the nonprofit wants to be all things to all people, and has strayed from its historical roots. Organizations that put too much energy in any one facet of reputation (e.g., growth in likes and followers on social media) may inadvertently neglect their reputation in another, and in some cases maneuvers to broaden support may alienate long-time fans.

Unfold Your Deck Chair: Be Inspired By What You See

During our visits to some of our consulting clients and Affiliate Members we occasionally observe a high-energy atmosphere where the sense of mission urgency is striking. An environment like this—with colleagues moving around to attend meetings, clustered for conversations in huddle rooms, and plenty of buzz in the common areas reminds us of the mood aboard a cruise ship that has just left port. After stowing your bags in your cabin, it's fun to explore the ship, end-to-end, and check out the people, activities, dining options, etcetera.

Managing reputation risk requires a good sense of the many ways that your nonprofit serves and interacts with stakeholders, but it also requires taking time to sit down, unfold your deck chair, and take a good look around you. The view from your stern—looking back at your wake of accomplishments and outcomes—will be quite different from the midship view. And the view from the bow—looking out at the alternate futures on the horizon and possibly an iceberg or storm in the distance—is different yet.

In her book, *The Reputation Risk Handbook*, Andrea Bonime-Blanc writes that “Reputation risk is an amplifier risk that layers on or attaches to other risks . . . adding negative or positive implications to the materiality, duration or expansion of the other risks.” The NRMC team agrees with Bonime-Blanc’s perspective, that reputation risk isn’t a separate category of risk facing a nonprofit. Reputation risk is an element, an aspect, and a facet of many risks in your path. Striving to understand and monitor your nonprofit’s reputation is an investment in your mission’s present and future. It will require humility to accept that despite your legions of fans, there are determined detractors. Understanding what moves stakeholders as well as what concerns or offends them is key to sustaining the strong, positive reputation your nonprofit needs and deserves, once it is earned.

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Resources

- “Protecting Against, Preventing, and Planning for Online Reputation Attacks”: Lorman.com
- “The Art of Asking Open-Ended Questions,” by Bill Cates, <https://blog.hubspot.com/sales/the-art-of-asking-open-ended-questions#sm.0001osp6uw7eyejjriw1u7voo3xm0>
- *Rethinking Reputational Risk*, by Anthony Fitzsimmons and Derek Atkins
- *The Reputation Risk Handbook: Surviving and Thriving in the Age of Hyper-Transparency*, by Andrea Bonime-Blanc
- “How Can You Manage Negative Facebook Comments?” by Ernie Smith, Associations NOW, September 24, 2019