

Pointofview



Braaains! – Or, what Zombies Can Teach Us About Corporate Reputation



Ipsos Public Affairs
The Social Research and Corporate Reputation Specialists

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The zombie apocalypse is coming. For years Hollywood has been doing its level best to warn people. In June 2011, a citizen in the UK entered an official Freedom of Information Act request to have the Leicester City Council reveal what provisions the Council had put in place in the event of a zombie invasion. The University of Florida posted procedures for a “Disaster Preparedness Simulation Exercise: Zombie Attack” on its website. October has officially been declared Zombie Preparedness Month in the state of Kansas. And both the US Centers for Disease Control and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) have posted the guide “Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse” on their websites. Regular citizens, major universities, states and even the Federal government have plans in place to prepare for the undead onslaught; the corporate world could reap benefits from a studied examination of zombies as well.

Lesson #1 – It’s All About Trust

You are probably exclaiming a certain degree of incredulity about this claim. But it’s true – surviving the zombie apocalypse is all about trust. When something is as predictable as a zombie, trust is not as important. Zombies will predictably try and separate you from your life (and limbs, and brains, etc.), and trust has little relationship to (or impact on) that particular interaction. But for less predictable elements associated with the zombie onslaught, trust plays an exceptionally important role - you definitely need to trust those other survivors you may come to rely on. Face it – at some point in your attempts to flee the zombie horde, you may find yourself paired with Cleotus, the shotgun-toting guy with four teeth and a lazy eye. Or possibly Biff, the former college quarterback with a firm handshake and a winning smile.

In any case, the most pressing question is whether you believe this individual will cover your back while you are sleeping. Do you trust them? Are you certain? If there was truly a good degree of trust, you could reasonably expect your colleague to demonstrate this trust by not abandoning you, and in fact, waking you up with enough time to gather your belongings and run to (relative) safety when the zombies advance.

So, surviving the zombie apocalypse is all about trust. Likewise, corporate reputation is all about trust. Companies must build trust both as a bulwark against potential crisis as well as to reduce headwinds, improve marketing efficiency, and provide open communications with consumers and other stakeholders.

Trust is the “one measure” of corporate reputation in the Ipsos model. There are a number of reasons for the focus on Trust – trust is something that all individuals seek to build in any relationship, whether with another person, an organization, or a company. Trust leads an individual to be more open to communications from the other party, and give that party the benefit of the doubt in the face of contradictory information. In addition, a solid body of qualitative and academic research points to Trust as the most important dimension of reputation, in part because it operates more independently of product or service attributes.

Using trust as a lever in communications can be particularly effective in the case of implementing new corporate initiatives or realigning corporate strategy. For example, a company wishing to highlight their environmental activities will have a much easier time convincing consumers about corporate credentials and achievements in this area if this is a highly trusted company. The underlying trust in the company helps provide adequate leverage to re-orient consumer attention to the area of environment as well as provide a measure of credibility. Companies without that wellspring of trust may find it difficult to communicate with consumers in areas not directly tied to the company’s core business – if a company is not trusted in its core business area, consumers have little reason to believe or trust new initiatives or communications.

Trust boosts the bottom line through increased marketing efficiency and lowers regulatory headwinds. So, among companies looking to build corporate reputation, Trust is the key, just as Trust is key in surviving the zombie apocalypse. But the focus on Trust begs the question of how to build that Trust. Focusing on familiarity is an important step to building Trust, as people generally find it difficult to place their Trust in someone or something they don’t know.

Lesson #2 – It’s Better to be Known and Relevant

At this point, you may be saying to yourself (or out loud, even), “Seriously?” And the answer is, yes, seriously. Okay, no one really knows zombies – we don’t live in a world where you make introductions like, “Ted, this is Bob. He’s a zombie, he works for Zombicorp and likes to do Civil War reenactments on the weekend. He’s good people.”

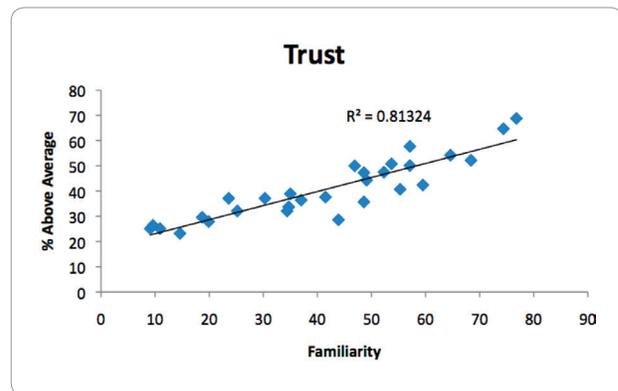
But in order to survive the zombie apocalypse, you DO need more than just a simple awareness of the zombie phenomenon. Ignorance will only get you killed, as in, “Hey Bob, you believe all this zombie nonsense?” “Mmmmmnnuuuhhh.” “Me neither. You’re looking a little under the weather, man. Do you feel alright?” “ Mmmmmnnuuuhhh.” “Sorry to hear that. Umm, Bob, why are you chewing on my arm?” “(CHOMP).” In addition to the basic knowledge about zombies that you need to stay alive, you really need to know something about your companions.

For example, you might find yourself fleeing the zombie onslaught with a person whom you just met – after all, you can’t always control the composition of your traveling party in a time of extreme crisis. But the first time you get into a tight spot, chances are better than average that your new traveling companion will try to save their own skin by running into a room in that deserted house and locking you outside to serve as a snack and momentary distraction. That behavior could possibly have been predicted if you had known this person a bit better. And not to worry – when he locked himself in that room, he missed the passage in the basement which led you to safety; and, by the way, there was already a zombie waiting for him in that room he locked you out of.

Companies can leverage this knowledge to their benefit even before the zombies arrive. At its most basic level, corporate reputation is what people believe about a company. In order to really believe positive information about a company or to Trust a company, there needs to be some basis for this belief. Familiarity is one of the fundamental stepping stones for building up a solid foundation for corporate reputation and providing an anchor for higher order beliefs.

Relevance is intrinsically linked to familiarity – people generally find it difficult to establish a connection to a company that leads to feelings of familiarity if the company is not relevant to their everyday lives. For example, consumer-facing industries and companies (such as consumer packaged goods, banking, food and beverage) are generally more relevant to consumers on a day-to-day basis, making the process of building familiarity comparatively easier.

Data from Ipsos’ Global @dvisor platform demonstrates the importance of building up familiarity (defined as knowing a company “very well” or “fairly well”). Chart 2 displays the relationship between familiarity and Trust for 29 companies (from a variety of sectors) at the global level (NOTE: Global @dvisor surveys 500-1000 online consumers in 23 countries monthly). The strong linear relationship corroborates the assertion that the better known a company is, the more likely consumers are to Trust that company.



However, while relevance and familiarity permit building corporate reputation, this process does not take place in a vacuum. Companies need to be actively involved in building and maintaining their overall corporate reputation. In cases where a company is both relevant and familiar, “benign neglect” is not sufficient regarding corporate reputation. If companies do not actively manage their reputation, consumers will do it for them.

So, to recap the second lesson zombies can teach us about corporate reputation, it certainly is better to be known and relevant. On the whole, however, this is not really good enough to survive the zombie apocalypse. Zombie attacks are highly charged, fluid situations – to help ensure survival, we move to lesson 3.

Lesson #3 – Play To Your Strengths

What strengths can zombies utilize in their quest for brains, you might ask? At face value, zombies don't really seem to have that much going for them – they are just reanimated rotting corpses, after all. Unless a zombie is very, very lucky, the circumstances under which they can pass for human are rare. This might be seen as a distinct disadvantage of zombieism, given that their overall goal is to get close enough to humans to eat their brains.

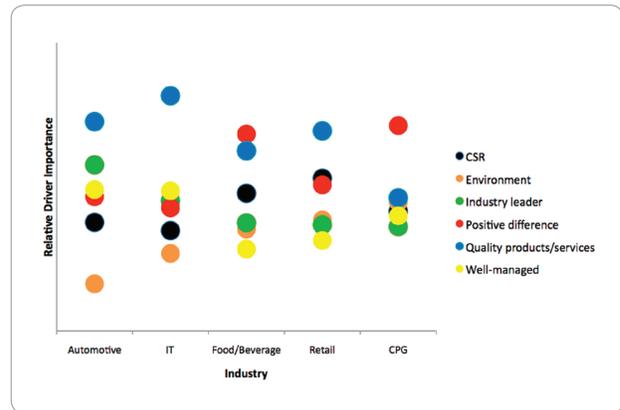
But zombies don't fret over this minor detail; instead, they focus on the strengths they have. They turn disadvantages into advantages. As anyone familiar with zombies can attest, the disadvantage of being easily identified during daylight hours is turned into an advantage by waiting until nightfall to hunt for brains in earnest. Humans are more likely to mistake a zombie for one of their own kind in the dark.

Barring the ability to limit brain hunting to a nocturnal occupation, zombies have two other potential advantages that they leverage to their best effect. First, zombies use their naturally frightful appearance to panic their victims into making poor decisions or simply paralyze their victims with fear. Second, zombies use sheer numbers to overwhelm their intended victims (this becomes exponentially easier as the zombie apocalypse progresses, given that each victim will then rise as an additional zombie).

Focusing on strengths is a strategy that companies should also adopt when building corporate reputation. Companies often have pre-conceived notions about their strengths and weaknesses based on sales, advertising, marketing activities, stock prices, etc. Certainly, these can provide some insight into a company's overall strengths and weaknesses. Ipsos' reputation model, however, focuses on the key metrics that drive of Trust, and provides a framework for understanding areas of strategic advantage, ways to leverage less impactful (but desired) attributes, and potentially hidden drivers of corporate reputation. Understanding the reality of what drives reputation provides a powerful toolbox for companies to utilize in building overall corporate reputation.

In general, the drivers of Trust tend to fall into three broad categories or "pillars: core business attributes (such as product quality), business management and ethics (such as industry leadership) and corporate social responsibility (such as caring about the environment). However, Ipsos works with each client individually to ensure the components uniquely address the client's business needs and belief structure.

Rather than looking at stated importance of attributes, Ipsos' reputation model looks at derived importance and structure of corporate equity attributes in order to provide the greatest degree of clarity and strategic direction regarding factors that are most impactful in driving corporate reputation (vis-à-vis Trust). For example, Chart 4 shows the relative importance of a set of overarching image metrics drive Trust globally across several companies from different industry sectors, in order to highlight the differences among a common set of drivers.



In looking at the six drivers, conventional wisdom might suggest that product quality would be the top driver for all of these industries – and for some industries (automotive, IT, Retail) this holds true. However, as the results above show, in the food and beverage industry, making a positive difference is as important to driving Trust as product quality. So in this instance, products are important, but not overwhelmingly so; consumers want food and beverage companies to show a greater degree of caring and social responsibility. Strategically, this would guide a company in a very different direction in terms of initiatives and communications than a focus on product quality.

The drivers of reputation complete the basic picture of reputation building activity and help identify the ways to play to one's strengths – first, focus on becoming known and liked (familiarity and favorability). Next, look to increase Trust. Third, use the levers identified through driver analysis to impact Trust in the most efficient and strategic fashion. So, with all these tools in place, the next lesson to take away from zombies is how to pursue your overall goal.

Lesson #4 – Pursue Your Goal With Purpose

Perhaps one of the most overlooked, but important, lessons we can learn from zombies is their pure, unrelenting “stick-to-it-iveness.” While a more philosophical discussion of “purpose” in relation to Zombie-kind might be an amusing diversion, in point of fact, zombie observation points to the conclusion that the undead don’t really devote a significant proportion of their “life” to existential musings about their purpose on this earth. Zombies eat brains, and they are doggedly singleminded in that purpose.

Zombies always find a way around obstacles in the path of brains (refer to Lesson #3 about playing to their strengths). Put up a barricade – zombies will tear it down or go around it. Take off a limb – the zombie will not miss an arm or leg, and in fact you have now compounded the problem because the excommunicated body part will likely try and come for you as well. Set the zombie on fire – now you just have a flaming ball of brain-eating machine headed your way. Double-tap to the head – okay, that will probably stop the currently advancing zombie, but now you have probably made enough noise to attract others.

The point is – zombies will find a way to succeed. Companies looking to build and/or manage their reputation must bring the same discipline and focus to the task. Knowing where you stand is one piece of the corporate reputation puzzle (benchmarking vis-à-vis competitors and comparators); knowing where you want to go and how to get there is another piece. But once a company has the roadmap and tools to build reputation, the key is execution. Companies cannot afford to say “Our corporate values are XXX; consumers should recognize this”; concerted efforts must be undertaken to communicate with stakeholders in order to reinforce being known for the attributes that will most impact corporate reputation.

In the absence of communications, consumers and other stakeholders will turn to other sources of information on which to base their opinions – in the simplest terms, if a company isn’t defining and managing its own reputation, others will do it for them. Google provides an excellent metaphor for the human mind in this respect; what people believe (i.e., the top results) is not necessarily what a company is communicating to the public. Communications need to leverage company strengths while addressing the weaknesses of both the company and its industry.

Once a company is working with purpose toward building a positive reputation, they are headed in the right direction, armed with the tools to reach their strategic objectives.

Conclusion

Zombies are creepy, they’re kooky, they’re mysterious and spooky, they’re altogether ooky, they’re...wait, no. Zombies are not soft and fuzzy, they are completely terrifying, out for brains, and the zombie apocalypse is coming. So, as the CDC advises, it’s best to be prepared. This point of view has provided, hopefully, some insights into surviving the coming of the zombies.

More importantly (at least until the zombies actually show up), this point of view demonstrates how companies can leverage a better understanding of the zombie menace towards the goal of building and maintaining a better corporate reputation. While Ipsos can’t really help once the zombie apocalypse begins, we can help you improve your company’s corporate reputation. Contact us to find out how.

Written by Michael Gross and Trent Ross.

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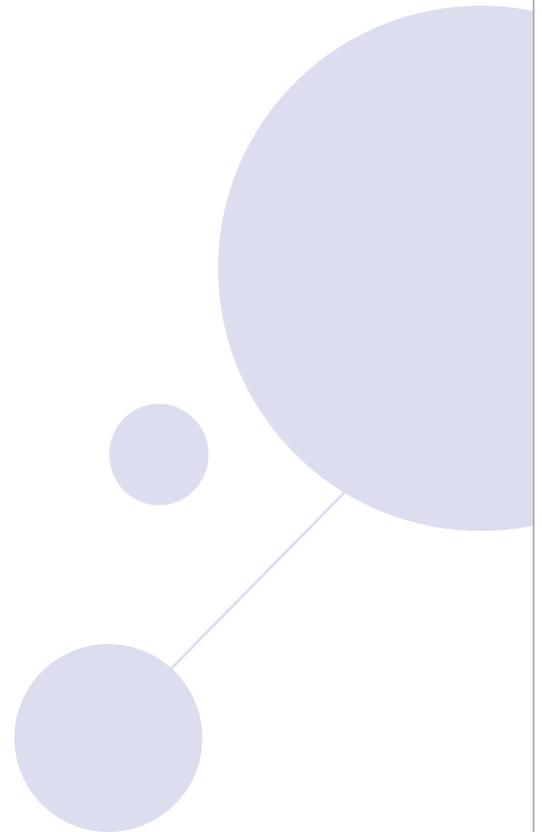
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The Ipsos Global Reputation Centre helps its clients to identify the issues and actions that build corporate reputation and deliver corporate brand equity. Together with our clients we identify and engage with their key stakeholders including customers and employees as well as influencers such as government and the media – individuals that can impact business performance, license to operate and market competitiveness.

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