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**Actors of Corporate E-Reputation:  
The Case of Employees**

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President  
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## **Actors of Corporate E-Reputation: The Case of Employees**

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### **Abstract**

Development of the Web 2.0 in social platforms, cyber-consumers' behaviours, and general usage of tools of online research... companies, their leaders, their brands and products are more and more present on the web in a desired or suffered way.

A major consequence is holding on their online reputation that can be considered as the perception the stakeholders will have regarding online conversations. Impacts on stock prices, job applications, personnel, and sales are such important that companies have to manage at best their digital image.

Therefore, they need to understand that the media landscape has changed, giving an increasing importance to the online media. They can be classified into a typology of three levels according to the communication actions that the company can undertake.

This paper proposes to define the concept of reputation and e-Reputation based on researches in fields of marketing and management. Then we set up the list of the corporate e-reputation actors. Finally we focus on the role played by employees in corporate communication and particularly in the construction of e-reputation. They are the internal and external "image ambassadors" that the company is able to coordinate in order to maximize its own perception, but also to prepare its reaction face to an eventual cyber-crisis. Our study is led on a sample of employees (100). The data analysis (SPSS) underlines a real motivation to take part to the management of e-reputation from the employees.

**Key words:** reputation, e-reputation, employees, companies

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## Introduction

Development of new technologies and the revolution of communities and social networks lead firms to have an Internet presence. This presence can be decided and directed by businesses but also suffered by them. Businesses must cope with their digital reputation. Digital identity is a reality but the practices are still lagging behind.

Google emphasizes the social dimension in its search engine through the creation of the new Panda algorithm and the launch of Google+. The advent of cloud, crowdsourcing, big data, the development of smartphones and tablets are leading to new behaviors of Internet users, becoming active influencers and intermediaries of professional exchanges. With the advent of social, participatory and collaborative web, we have a new element to consider: what others are saying about the company. Intelligence tools are created to identify the statements of all stakeholders (opinion leaders, consumers, influential bloggers, employees ...), posting with different digital formats (comments, ratings, articles ...) and on major virtual platforms (forums, networks, communities, blogs ...) to measure them (value of a fan on Facebook, credibility of content, credibility of the issuer ...) and manage them (recruitment of a community manager, a specialist community ...). All stakeholders that have a direct impact on the ecosystem of the company are expressing themselves on the net, either positively or negatively. We must transform the risks. To achieve this it is necessary to identify all stakeholders that are building this digital reputation and to identify the set of levers that will help us communicate with them and benefit from it. We decided to focus on the company's employees.

Companies must be able to involve employees and encourage them to speak positively on the web. This raises several questions: what are the ways to engage them? On which platforms? It is therefore essential to establish a partnership with a company to determine which support is most appropriate to allow employees to express themselves and make a comparison of different platforms. It is important to conduct a study of employees whether they want to play the game and communicate about their business? In what form? What interest do they get by covering the online reputation of their business? What are their motivations, their conditions? Finally, we must take into account the degree of credibility accorded by the Internet users in the words of employees and to compare the degree of credibility accorded by the various stakeholders.

The objective of this article is to propose, in the field of marketing, a general model for building corporate e-reputation integrating employees. This will lead to improved management of content on digital platforms, a better digital presence and a better integration of stakeholders.

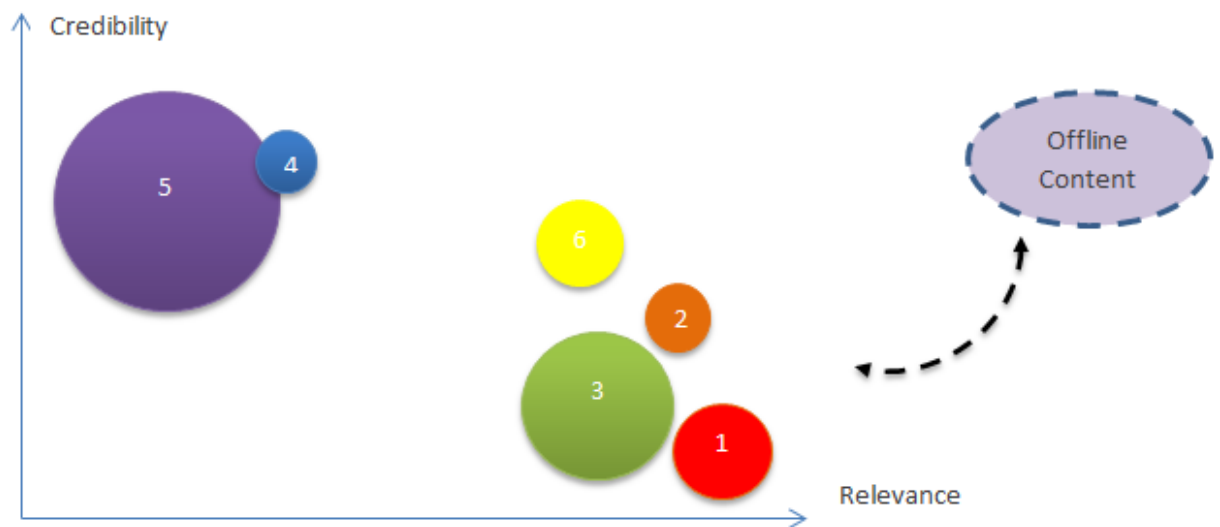
Brands can use different digital platforms to communicate; they need to mix three types of Medias:

- Owned media: virtual storefronts or corporate, thematic sites or blogs, fan pages ... each brand can have its own media. Whereas with traditional media to the press this is strictly limited by law.

Coca-Cola had in late May 2012 42,225,691 Facebook fans to their page. Which news organization has such an amount of exposure? Volume to be combined with other web media owned by Coca-Cola over 43 sites that range from [www.coca-colascholars.org](http://www.coca-colascholars.org), site of the foundation of the brand, <http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com> that references the various brand products, through music sites, YouTube channel, the pages in social networks other than the leader, ... to eventually accumulate hundreds of millions of visitors.

- Paid media: e-advertising allows a presence on the net by posting banners of different sizes which guarantees a brand presence, in media which they does not belong.
- Earned media: general or specialized social networks, communities, forums, blogs ... are places that offer the possibility to users to express themselves and share with other people in a dense social interconnection from which emerge comments about the company, the brand, and its products. These social platforms are numerous. Content creation is made by users (UGC: User Generated Content) who attend them. It is these media that are earning the subject of attention by the Community Manager of the potential they have in terms of credibility in the eyes of Internet users who visit them, and by the volume of total visits that they guarantee.

Figure 1. Dispersion between credibility and relevance perceived by information



The above diagram<sup>1</sup> illustrates the different types of online media dispersion between the credibility and relevance of information on the brand. The corporate website of the brand offers content written by the brand (1), in which users can express themselves on some pages (2), guest books or forums for example. The brand may also produce content that they can control and display

<sup>1</sup> Source : Grégory Pouy, Nurun Paris Agency, January 2011.

or to have it displayed on other website (3). In the same vein, it can also produce and broadcast on general platforms like YouTube, Flickr and Slide share (6) presentations of its products or its services in the form of videos, photos or slideshow. External media to the brand, but guided by the brand identifiably (4) as a sponsored blog for example, they can also be a place that disseminates information on the brand. The content produced directly by Internet users (5) that speaks of the brand and its products, on sites that are totally independent of it, and therefore freely or at least perceived as such, is by far the largest in volume but also in credibility.

The mission of the Community Manager will be to support the brand to capture the sites which it has no property off and, using influence, develop the brand by making friendly conversation.

This is the major difference with the job of webmaster that remains focused on the production of content and formatting properties of the sites of the brand, owned media.

For its internal and external actions, the Community Manager will keep in mind that the more important is not the amount of broadcasting online but it is the commitment of community members who will give us the really value.

Persuasion passes through the Internet, the human side (employees, partners, customers), expressing their experiences online to their entourage, directly or indirectly. They are the ones who build or destroy the reputation of the brand. More than information to be disseminated, it is for the brand to pass on social values and culture. What better ambassadors than employees to testify the authenticity of this plan? That is why companies are imposed a very attentive management and internal communication, so that the stakeholders will be motivated to diffuse a positive communication about the brand on their own.

## **Literature Review**

### *Companies and employees*

The role of employees in the management process of corporate e-reputation has not yet been processed. This has become a crucial matter since we are entering a digital era, that is why the traditional corporate communication works harder and that marketing has to adapt to new uses and new expectations. As Warren Buffet said, 'it takes twenty years to build a reputation and five minutes to destroy it'. A better understanding of the management process of corporate e-reputation would avoid certain risks relating to Internet and create value. As employees are vectors of reputation, it must treat positively its internal communication to expect an external positive communication and turn employees into ambassadors for the company so they convey a positive message in their digital ecosystem. Chernatony (1999) showed that employees are able to influence the impression that customers have on the company. The more the employees have a positive perception of the company, the more they will positively influence the perception of clients.



This phenomenon, called emotional contagion is presented by Bettencourt, Gwinner and Meuter (2001). It is important to seek to bring together the perceptions of internal and external stakeholders (employees and customers, for example) to avoid crises (Dowling, 1994, Hatch and Schultz, 2001).

All businesses must ensure the socialization of its employees, train them for their missions, coordinating and supervising their activities, guide its employees in the phases of change and adaptation that they could face. We know that personal involvement with the company's projects involves a form of reward (Katz and Kahn, 1966). This reward can be of two kinds:

- Intrinsic, that is to say, it lies in the completion of the project or that is in harmony with the values of the individual;
- Extrinsic, that is to say that his award is resulting from the respect of the rules.

Companies often use a mix of these two forms of reward. Several works are based on the stakeholder theory focused on social relations within the company. The objective is to ensure that its employees accept the activities assigned to them and adopt the appropriate behavior for the sake of coordination and integration. Here we are touching the questions of authority and power, that involve the game of rewards and sanctions. They should know what the employees are willing to accept in this regard.

Etzioni (1961) studied the relationship of the individual to the organization in two basic dimensions: the power or the ability of a party to influence the behavior of others and the degree of involvement of the employees towards the company that developed this powerful relationship. As part of our study, because of the birth of new behaviors associated with the Internet use, and the arrival of Generation Y in the company, the use of normative form of power is recommended. This is to highlight symbolic rewards such as esteem, prestige, recognition. The company can hope a return in a calculated form to the involvement of employee. Hoping to create a community around the project of e-reputation, the company may consider seeking a moral form of involvement by its employees.

According to Etzioni's typology of nine types of relationship within the company, it would be desirable to configure 8 or 9, the latter being described as congruent because the type of power and type of involvement converge .

Employees communication on the company is very hard to contain. The employee may be considered a key to the identify the active of the company as a primary party if the company is associated with the flow of information, but they can also be passive actor's and sometimes negative actor's if the company is foreign to the information placed on the canvas. In addition, digitalisation has greatly complicated the business environment. Indeed, the swap space offered by Internet in general and especially Web 2.0, allows a dialogue between all stakeholders, to new media potentially beyond the control of the company, already facing the risk caused by the flow of digital information.

### *Concept of Reputation*

There is no universal definition of the concept of reputation. Barnett et al. (2006) have made a list of definitions of corporate reputation from 1965 to 2003. This is a complex and multidimensional concept. Davies et al. (2004) provides seven dimensions that are sympathetic, entrepreneurship, skill, elegance, brutality, informality, machismo. To define this concept, it is important to differentiate the concepts of image and corporate identity. For Argenti (2003), 'corporate reputation is not only the result of the image over time but also the result of the image on all stakeholders.' The integration model proposed by Stuart (1999b) sets the corporate reputation after a long process, including corporate identity and corporate image. In summarizing the definitions proposed in the literature review, we adopt the following: actions, behavior and performance of the company since its inception, perceived by stakeholders, particularly in terms of their expectations, beliefs and values, their allow to pass judgment that shapes the prestige, the reputation of the company.

### *Concept of e-Reputation*

Regarding the concept of online reputation, it is difficult to establish a universal definition because it is a complex concept and emergent. There are several names: cyber reputation, Web reputation, online reputation ... We retain the term e-reputation because it is most used in the academic and managerial backgrounds. Chun and Davies (2001) define it 'as part of the reputation that is derived from electronic contacts'. It follows from the definitions that all stakeholders of the ecosystem of e-business builds corporate reputation. We retain the following definition: 'e-reputation is the art of managing digital identity, strategy to the act of communication, through the study and the previous image, to deploy a lasting impact on and within internet' (Fillias and Villeneuve, 2010).

## **Methodology and results**

We conducted a quantitative study to understand the support and involvement of employees in a process of building corporate e-reputation. We know that for a business project to be successful, employees' involvement is essential (Igalens, 2009).

The quantitative study was conducted among 100 employees, men and women from four countries (France, Turkey, United Kingdom, Spain) and being in different departments. We used three scales to determine the motivation of employees to participate in the e-reputation project: a scale to measure behavioral intention (conative) from Machleit, Allen et Madden (1993), a scale to measure commitment from Sager (1994) and a scale to measure value judgment (attitude) from Homer (1995). These three scales are

unidimensional and are based on a Likert scale of 7 points. The questionnaire was administered online on two professional social networks: Viadeo and LinkedIn. There are 16 items issued from the three scales and 4 items on personal information (age, sex, country and service).

The results show that people who adhere to their business are more likely to participate in this project and consider it positively. The majority of respondents would be willing to participate. The company and the leaders must then take this opportunity to co-create and try to involve them in the decision making. There is also a relationship between work performed and the intention to participate in the project. Marketing, Communication and Human Ressources services are most favorable to the project while the Finance & Administration and R & D services are less motivated. The analysis between the items and countries revealed that France seems to be the country where workers are the most likely to participate.

## **Conclusion**

The sampling method for which we opted is not probabilistic. The sample is not representative of the population studied in the statistical sense (Malhotra et al., 2011). We wish to generalize the results of this study based on a sample of employees of one or more companies interested in collaborating on the theme of integration of employees in the management of corporate e-reputation.

These companies can provide a field of great value, each in a different industry that involves a single connection to the Internet. The objective is to work on a sample of 500 to 1000 employees per firm. A multinational company will give us the ability to work on a global scale because of its different headquarters.

We may also seek to reduce the number of variables of the scale of commitment. Indeed, items called AD3 ('I would accept almost any type of job assignment in order to keep working for this organization'), AD4 ('I find that my values and the organization's values are very similar'), AD8 ('I really care about the fate of this organization') and AD9 ('For me this is the best of all possible organizations for which to work') can explain a very small percentage of the variance. The scale will then have five items instead of nine, which will reduce the response time. It will take into account the reflections of Churchill Jr. (1979), on the one hand, which emphasizes policies by several items in order to calculate the correlations between them and gather more information. On the other hand, Bergkvist and Rossiter (2007) propose to focus on measures for a single item.

The methodology was indeed validated by this study; we seek to know the motivation of employees of each company to participate in the e-reputation project. Do employees wish to play the game and communicate about their company? In what kind of form? What is their main interest regarding in corporate e-reputation? Why? Under what kind of conditions?

It will be interesting to compare the results by function, country and company. In the case of a function stands out in a positive or negative in relation with the motivation to participate in the project, it would be interesting to conduct qualitative interviews to determine the motivations and barriers, and then look for levers to operate. So we could be able to bring together all the employees around the project. We will use the framework of corporate communication to define the construction of corporate e-reputation, initially based on managerial communication, and organizational communication (Stuart, 1999) and taking care to maintain consistency in our communication to the stakeholders.

Once we have studied the involvement of employees, we will turn our attention to the company, then to the Internet.

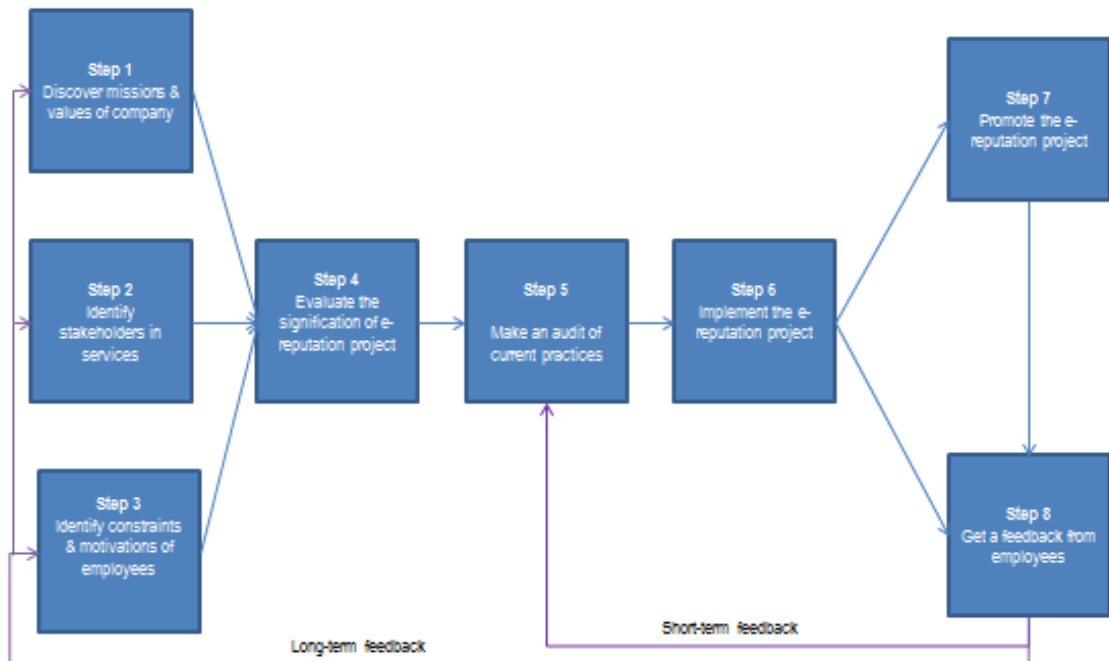
First, companies must be able to motivate, to involve employees to talk to about them online. The issues raised are: how? What type of platforms is relevant? What kinds of results are expected? Which targets does the company want to take into account?

On the other hand, we have to define the framework for managing corporate e-reputation: is it an overall goal of fame? Is the objective to increase online and offline sales? Does the company want to improve the customer relationship? Does the company try to improve its attractiveness by setting on the first row the employer brand? Then, the study should define the most appropriate support to allow employees to express themselves. A comparative study of different digital platforms will be needed, we think particularly to the following areas: blogs, wikis, web TV, social networks, mobile applications ... or the video formats, augmented reality and 3D will be preferred because they are more innovative, interactive and impacting. Finally, it is appropriate to consider a charter of corporate use of social media that employees must abide by. This charter, involving the Human Resources Department, will enable the company to better manage and control what employees say about it by clearly defining the information confidentiality. This task is complex because it must navigate between corporate data (sensitive information, intellectual property rights, disparagement, and disclaimer) and freedom of expression. It should guide employees, tell them the consequences of what they say even when intervening in a personal capacity. The Ministry of Defense and the army in France have also set up such a charter which highlights the rules of prudence to be observed.

Finally, we must study how much of credibility the internet users gives to the statements of employees and what information they expect. Once that information is collected through an online questionnaire, it should be compared to the degree of credibility of the result given by internet users to different stakeholders (employees identified as such, individual, anonymous bloggers ...). The objective is to find what will be the impact of the reaction towards the employee's expression or comments on the internet in the frame of a new way of communication. It involves integrating the employees in the communication strategy of the business to become influencers, specific ambassadors.

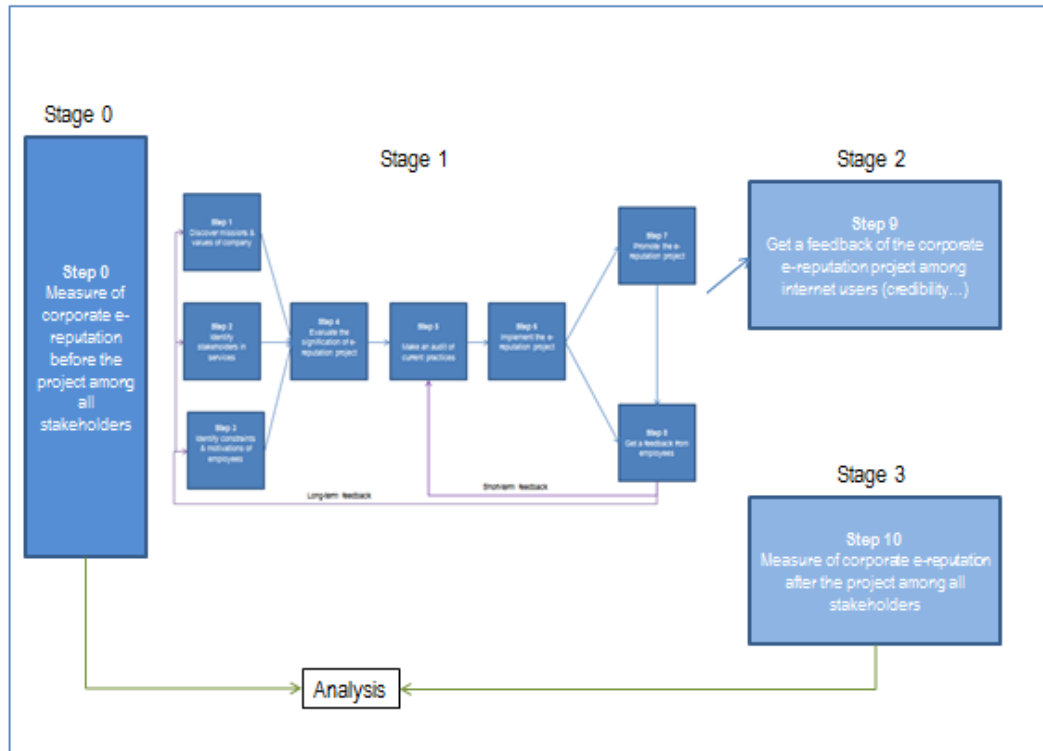
We propose a model for the construction of corporate e-reputation (stage 1, see p.8), by referring to the model developed by Maignan, Ferrell and Ferrell (2005). These authors relied on stakeholder theory to propose a marketing strategy incorporating CSR. We keep the eight proposed steps and we adapt the content according to our research.

Figure 2. Stage 1, Model of construction of corporate e-reputation, according to Maignan, Ferrell and Ferrell (2005)



We present a general model for the construction of corporate e-reputation which has four stages, segmented into 10 steps (see p.9). This model will be relevant for measuring corporate e-reputation before and after the project started (step 0 and 10). Step 9 consists in measuring the degree of credibility accorded by Internet users, segmented in different types of stakeholders.

Figure 3. General model for the construction of corporate e-reputation



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**Appendice**

*Questionnaire*

Rate the probability that you would take part to the e-reputation activity of your firm:

Unlikely	Likely
Improbable	Probable
Impossible	Possible

Listed below are a series of statements that represent possible feelings that individuals might have about the company or organization for which they work. With respect to your own feelings about the particular organization for which you are now working please indicate the degree of your agreement or disagreement with each statement by checking one of the 7 alternatives below for each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree
I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help this organization be successful.		
I talk up this organization to my friends as a great organization to work for.		
I would accept almost any type of job assignment in order to keep working for this organization.		
I find that my values and the organization's values are very similar.		
I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization.		
This organization really inspires the very best in me in the way of job performance.		
I am extremely glad that I chose this organization to work for over others I was considering at the time I joined.		
I really care about the fate of this organization.		
For me this is the best of all possible		



organizations for which to work.

Please express your attitudes toward the project of your firm's e-reputation management:

Negative	Positive
Unpleasant	Pleasant
Unfavorable	Favorable
Useless	Useful

Personal Information

Gender:

Male  Female

Age range:

[20 - 30]  [41 - 50]  [60+]  
 [31 - 40]  [51 - 60]

Country:

Department:

Please precise: