

# The brand – estimating its vulnerability

Most business continuity managers are aware of the importance of protecting brands, but how do you determine how at-risk your brands are?

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Assuming we can estimate the value of the brand then we should like to establish how vulnerable it might be. The purpose is to determine how much time and effort should be devoted to protecting the brand from the dangers it might face. Many of those threats may be fairly unlikely whilst others may be inherent within the type of product or service. Another factor to be taken into account is the manner in which the company is managed and the associated appetite for risk.

The nature of the risks associated with something as ephemeral as an image are bound to be extremely varied and many will be fairly unpredictable. Every brand will have its own unique set of risks associated with its place and stature within the market. However we may be able to provide some general guidelines about the generic types of risk. Intelligent interpretation of those guidelines coupled with knowledge of the industry, products and services may then serve to develop a risk profile for any particular brand or image.

## **Threats to the brand**

This checklist is designed as a prompt to stimulate further questions. Each of these areas should be considered and explored for potentially dangerous connotations before moving on to look at other areas. The most productive approach would seem to be for the business continuity manager to invite his/her senior executives to examine the list separately and then come together to discuss their findings in more depth. As a part of the exercise I would suggest that they also try to think of specific examples that match each of the categories. This might prompt them to take the idea on board as a realistic possibility rather than a hypothetical concept. We do need to dispel the 'It can't happen to us' mindset, more properly described as the Ostrich Viewpoint.

The list is not exhaustive and any other areas that come to mind should be noted and explored in the same manner.

1. Brand attack: where the brand or image is knowingly attacked by others who might have a vested interest in the demise or decay of your business.
2. Price wars: where competition necessitates narrow profit margins that prove to be unsustainable without compromising other aspects of the product or service.
3. Brand confusion: where one brand is confused with another and suffers as a result of the confusion.
4. Slip of the tongue: where a casual or flippant remark in an unguarded moment leads to a derogatory story or a detrimental interpretation.
5. Health and safety issues: where the brand or image is likely to be associated with what are perceived to be harmful outcomes.

6. Quality issues: where doubts are cast on the suitability of the product or service or the value for money it represents

7. Legislation: can affect the brand or image in all sorts of ways. Infringements of existing legislation are one aspect and changes of legislation are another.

8. Trade barriers: where restrictions are imposed or removed. This may be a direct impact where a company's products are subjected to changes or it an indirect impact where someone else's products or services are subjected to changes.

9. Translation problems: often occur when a name, a phrase or a title has a rather unfortunate meaning in another language. They can also occur when the quality of the translation is poor and the meaning gets lost or distorted.

10. Transcription or transmission errors: those typographical errors that have the unfortunate effect of completely changing the meaning from something helpful to something rather inconvenient.

11. Economic variations: those local or international forces that may have serious financial consequences beyond our direct control. Often the brand can suffer as a result of the response to such variations.

12. Religious issues: where the product or service has a religious connotation. Sometimes this is intentional by the nature or design of a product or it may be purely accidental though incomplete knowledge of others' beliefs.

13. Racial issues: those where the product or services has a racial connotation this would normally be purely accidental through lack of knowledge or it might occur through some change of fashion or custom.

14. Environmental issues: where the public, or sections of the public, have real or imagined concerns about the environmental impact of a product in its manufacture, distribution or its use.

15. Animal rights issues: where the public, or sections of the public, have real or imagined concerns about the impact on animal life. These issues are often concerned with research and development programmes which may, or may not, use animals for experimental purposes.

16. Human rights issues: where the public, or sections of the public, have real or imagined concerns about their rights or the rights of others.

17. Implication by association: where a company, its products or services are deemed to be in league with others who have a poor image some reason or another.

18. Forces of nature: where the destructive forces of nature have a detrimental effect on the way in which a company sources its materials, creates its products or delivers its services. In a long and complex supply chain there are often many opportunities for nature to interfere.

19. Personal issues: where the brand, or image, is liable to suffer simply because of its association with an individual who appears to have offended the public through his or her actions, words or beliefs.

20. Criminal acts: where someone closely associated with the brand or image appears to have committed a criminal act.

Working up a vulnerability profile from this checklist should provide you with a sense of perspective about the potential threats to your brand or image. Unless you emerge with the view that your brand is bullet proof we would expect you to want to take some steps to provide some degree of protection for your valuable brand or image. Those steps are relatively simple. The business needs to think about and practice its response to a brand error or a potential crisis. What sort of messages does it want to put out and how can that be achieved? These questions are not difficult to address, if they are tackled at the right time, which is now. The wrong time clearly is in response to a crisis, an emergency, a catastrophe or a disaster.

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