



A GOTHAM RESEARCH GROUP SPECIAL REPORT

“I’m stepping down to spend more time with my family” – And Other Phrases that Should be Banned from Corporate Communications

Introduction

- Either because of organizational lethargy or an inadequate research strategy (or both), many organizations discover too late that key elements of their messaging are no longer credible to consumer and elite stakeholders.
- When messaging elements reach their expiration date, they not only lose their persuasive power, but can damage the credibility and reputation of the organization that makes use of them.
- Over the last year, we’ve compiled a list of phrases that have clearly lost their ability to reach a wide range of stakeholders, including consumers, voters of all partisan backgrounds, prominent bloggers, and key elite audiences.

Phrases to avoid

External stakeholders are always on the lookout for signs that a company is trying to manipulate them. Use of the following only serves to confirm their suspicions.

- ***“I’m stepping down to spend more time with my family.”***
Whether it’s true or not, the media, financial analysts, and even consumers believe this phrase has become code for an executive who is being forced out of a job, most likely because of a scandal (an ethics violation, an internal power struggle, or an impending downturn in the company’s fortunes). As one financial analyst said, *“When I hear that phrase, I start looking around for skeletons.”*
- ***“We are a green company.”***
Although “green” is still good – its value as a company descriptor is on the decline. Consumers have told us that the more that oil and gas companies use the word, the less meaningful (and less appealing), “green” becomes. As one consumer opinion leader told us, *“How stupid do they think we are? Everyone is saying that now, even BP.”*
- ***“We are an innovative company.”***
The notion of an “innovative” company tests well, but both consumers and elites are increasingly adamant that it has become an empty promise – something that many companies say they stand for, but few (if any) can actually deliver. As one consumer said, *“I hear a company say they are ‘innovative’ and I take that as a really good sign that they aren’t.”*
- ***“We are committed to standing up for, fighting for...”***
Everyone wants a company to vigorously fight for a principle or cause, but the phrases “standing up for” and “fighting for” no longer effectively communicate that commitment. Because these phrases can be found in many (if not all) political ads, they are almost universally viewed as “political” promises which, almost by definition, are suspect.
- ***“Ethical business practices”***
Our survey last month demonstrated that consumers view ethical business practices as a priority, even during an economic downturn. That said, our qualitative work reveals that consumers and elite audiences alike are skeptical of the word “ethical” as a company descriptor. It’s viewed as classic “corporate-speak” and something that very few companies can credibly lay claim to. As one consumer said, *“If you have to say it, I wonder what you’re hiding.”*

ABOUT US

Gotham Research Group is a market research and consulting firm with a unique set of research methods designed to help clients better measure and predict the perceptions and behavior of consumers and elite stakeholders.

Gotham specializes in customized research that informs the development and execution of: branding and positioning initiatives, advertising campaigns, crisis communications, leadership/organizational changes, policy issue campaigns, new product launches, and thought leadership/PR initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

The findings described in this memo are based on several research initiatives conducted by Gotham Research Group between September 2009 and October 2010. They include two national surveys of adults, a series of focus groups conducted in each region of the United States, three panel studies of sell-side analysts, and one-on-one, in-depth interviews with a panel of prominent bloggers.

LEARN MORE

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