

Reputation and reality

In this briefing note, we look at distinctiveness in the world of the 'former audience', and the importance of reputation in understanding and communicating our distinctiveness.

What this is

In the age of social and digital media, managing the reputation of your organisation is more difficult than ever; so, how can we communicate and encourage a 'distinct' reputation for our organisations, when influence over reputation is wrested from our control?

Tracy Playle, Director and Communications Consultant at Picklejar Communications, shares her insights on harnessing social media to engage increasingly vocal and marketing savvy HE audiences, and its important role in underpinning an authentic and consistently evidenced reputation for your university.

The "former audience"

In his 2004 book 'We the Media', Dan Gillmore coined the phrase the 'former audience'. He recognised that for the first time there was a public space in which there was no clear divide between content creators and content consumers. That space was the internet, and the growth in social media was in the process of enabling a shift in power over a message towards the direction of consumers. No longer could we think in terms of those who talked and those who listened; instead, everyone who could

listen could also create their own content and broadcast it to the world.

Reputation and distinctiveness

Your reputation has never been what you say it is, but always what others think of you. Google dictionary defines reputation as:

1. The beliefs or opinions that are generally held about someone or something;
2. A widespread belief that someone or something has a particular habit or characteristic.

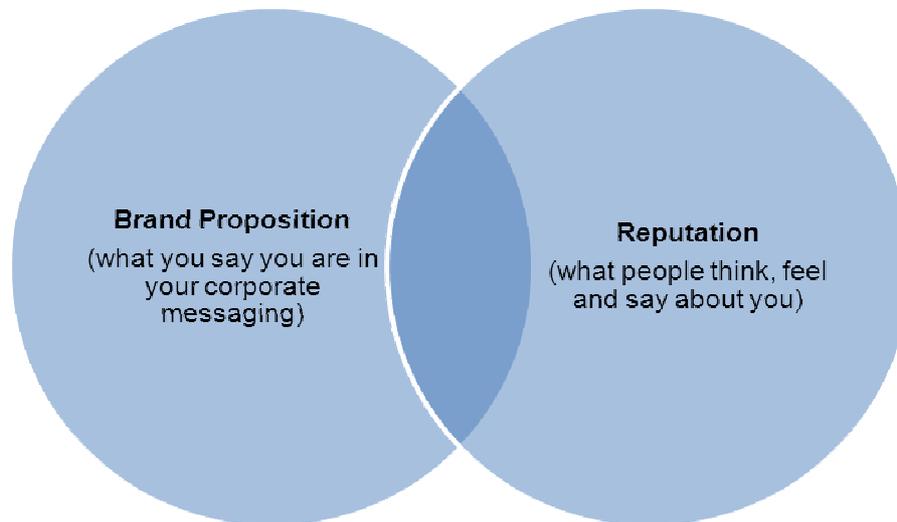
So, no matter what we think we are, or how we perceive ourselves to be distinct, unless our audience also recognises this and thinks the same things about us, then are we truly succeeding in achieving distinctiveness?

The former audience and distinctiveness

Working out the ways in which we have genuine distinctiveness is undoubtedly a significant battle for the HE sector. But if that is the battle, then the war is to achieve a reputation that resonates with what we are. Social media is both our enemy and our ally in winning this war.

Before social media, we had a scenario that could be modelled something like that in figure 1, page 2, (with each element roughly equal in terms of influence):

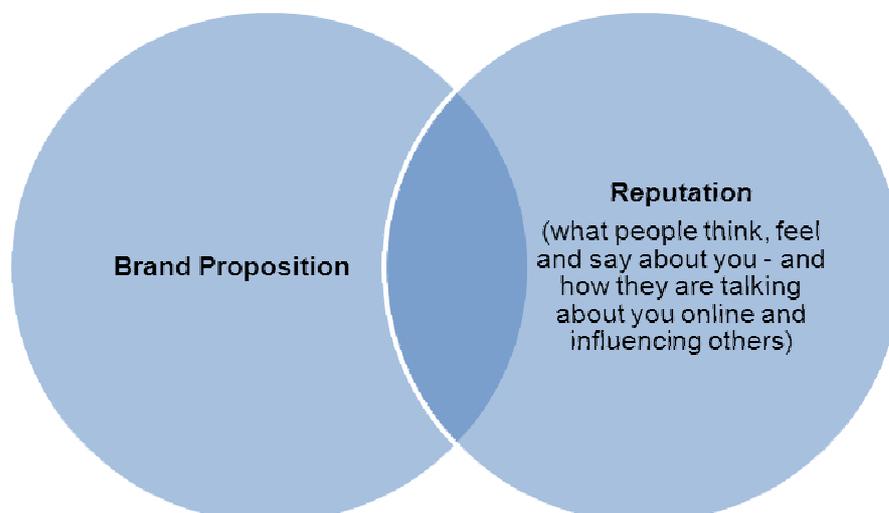
Figure 1:



Now, social media means we have something more akin to figure 2, below, where the volume of content about us significantly outweighs (and potentially out-influences) what we say about ourselves. At the moment, what we in the HE sector say about ourselves is largely under review anyway, thanks to the political, social and economic influences impacting on our 'business'.

We therefore know that your reputation isn't what you say it is, but what others think, feel and say about you. And we also know that those 'others' are now empowered to broadcast (if they wish) those thoughts and feelings to the rest of the world. With this knowledge, how do we succeed in being truly distinctive?

Figure 2:



There is a unique tension here: a two-pronged attack that is challenging the HE sector. On the one hand, political, social and economic factors affecting the sector are forcing a more competitive sector. This means that we must be clear, as individual institutions, on our offer and how we differ from the competition. On the other hand, we have less control over our reputation than we have had at any period before. That power rests with our audience.

Be distinctive

We are now aiming achieve the position illustrated in figure 3.

The only way to achieve this is to actually *be* distinctive. Reality now has to match and deliver on the promise of our marketing materials. Without this, it will become quickly apparent on The Student Room, Facebook, Twitter, and many more sites and spaces, that projection and perception are poles apart. Of course, this isn't just an issue of social media.

It has always been the case that people talk about you to other people, and they will continue to do so. However, social media amplifies those conversations and creates a permanent digital record of them.

Achieving distinctiveness isn't an exercise in branding and marketing, even though that is an important part of it. It is an exercise in being what you say you are. Otherwise, through the use of social media, others will quickly realise that you are not. To some extent, we must begin to accept that perception is reality. And even if it isn't reality, it is certainly more influential than ever before. Given how influential it is, we and our 'ambassadors' absolutely have to be in those sites and spaces where our reputation is influenced.

When we achieve this and are confident in the sustainability of our distinctive proposition, then it is fine (indeed, preferable and more powerful) for this to happen.

Figure 3

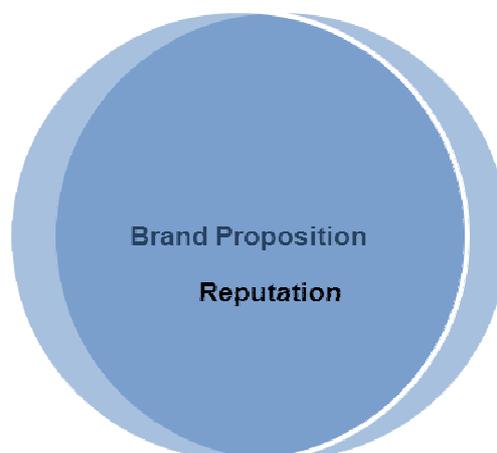
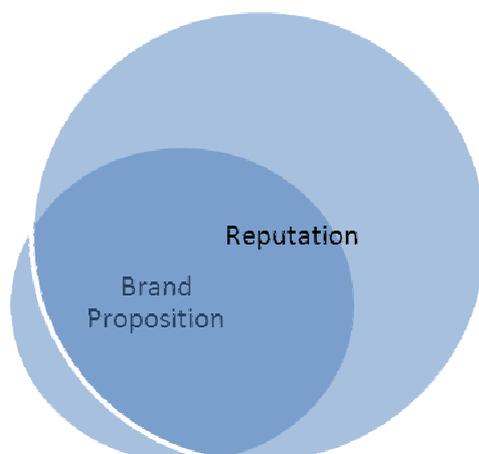


Figure 4

Illustrated above, in figure 4, is what happens when social media is working well for us.

Turning online media to your advantage

Your existing internal audiences (current staff and students, alumni) are going to become your most important influencers since they have such powerful control over your reputation. They are likely to be trusted by others since they are perceived to have had or have a real and authentic experience of being part of your organisation. (They are also going to be a key starting point in uncovering what your distinctiveness actually is; and will be far more enthusiastic ambassadors if they have been included while you are working to identify your distinctiveness.)

Start by listening, and use social media as just one of a whole range of tools and tactics (online and offline) to aid that process.

A starting point should always be to understand your current reputation. This is where social and digital media becomes our ally, as it enables us to listen to our audiences in order to understand what their perception of the organisation is. We need to:

- See if there are positive trends and patterns in what your audiences say about you online.
- Use that knowledge and insight to identify the things that make our organisation distinctive. This will help you to understand strengths and thus define your brand in a way that is already aligned with your reputation.
- Identify where there are consistent complaints or concerns that might contradict the brand you are trying to portray and deal with them (not as a marketing or PR exercise, but actually dealing with and eradicating the problems themselves).
- Identify the people online who are most vocal about your

organisation and those who are significant 'influencers' over your reputation, then involve them in the process of defining your brand and vision for the organisation.

Summary

Conversations that take place online are now so influential over our reputation, that to ignore the conversations that take place through these channels is to miss an opportunity at best and, at worst, is potentially dangerous and damaging to your institution's reputation. Rather, we need to use these unique insights and develop the critical relationships that will enable us to nudge our brand proposition ever closer to our reputation. It should be used first and foremost to help define that proposition.

Perhaps, instead of asking how social media can help us achieve something, we should start thinking about how social media can help us define what we are trying to achieve. On its own, social media is not the answer to finding distinctiveness in HE; but it certainly plays an important role in helping define what is perceived as distinctive and understand where there is a misalignment between perception and reality.

Guest contributor

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Find out more

www.distinct.ac.uk has a growing resource section.