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Title: Reputation Monitoring

Year: 2016

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Vos, M. (2016). Reputation Monitoring. In C. E. Carroll (Ed.), SAGE Encyclopedia of Corporate Reputation (pp. 657-659). SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483376493.n251

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Vos, M. (2016), Reputation monitoring. In Carroll, C.E. (Ed.), The SAGE Encyclopedia of Corporate Reputation - section Research, Measurement and Evaluation, pp. 657-659. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

REPUTATION MONITORING

Reputation monitoring is the gathering of information in order to check the reputation of an organization and follow changes in reputation over time. It is a form of environmental scanning. Nowadays the social environment of organizations is volatile. By collecting data and analyzing these, an organization can understand changing stakeholder views on its performance. In this entry, the purpose of reputation monitoring is explained, what media monitoring can focus on, and which tools can be used. Furthermore, big data problems are addressed, ways in which monitoring supports decision-making, and the importance of monitoring in times of crisis.

The purpose of reputation monitoring is two-fold, to listen to and understand stakeholder views and, in addition, to be able to anticipate on developments that affect the organization's reputation. The latter includes brand protection, brand values and overall performance of the organization. Monitoring cannot be seen separate from evaluation of the data gathered, as the observations require interpretation. In this way monitoring and carefully evaluating the data gained, support decision-making on communication strategies, for example, if and how the organization should react to the insights gained in its own social media activities.

Traditionally, reputation is measured by asking questions of a sample of stakeholder groups. This is done by surveys with a quantitative approach that made comparison or ranking of organizations possible, for example, the Reputation Quotient of Fombrun and Van Riel. Complementary, custom-made qualitative interviews are used to gain in-depth information. The latter can, according to Vos and Schoemaker, next to perceptions and opinions concerning the focal organization also include impressions and the position of the organization compared to competitors. Such measures still bring useful insights for a more full understanding of organizational reputation. However, the current media environment is so turbulent, that the emphasis is now on continuous monitoring of media discourse to gain an up-to-date overview of how an organization is discussed in the media.

Media monitoring

By media monitoring organizations try to identify who are talking, about what, and with what tone of voice. The focus can be on particular stakeholder groups and their opinions or needs in relation to the organization. One can look into the frequency in which certain topics occur and if they go together with other topics or with a certain sentiment or mood of the conversation. The topics can directly concern the organization and its products or services, or be social issues that relate to the organization. It has been suggested that most people do not have a stake in an

organization, but rather in an issue that mean something to them personally. Issues management focuses on those issues that people associate with the organization and thus affect the organizational reputation, or have the potential to do so in the near future. Monitoring activities can identify issues that may grow and subsequently track the development of these issues. In this way continuous monitoring can serve as an early warning system for organizations.

The monitoring activities may focus on different media. It is customary to follow news media content and include print, online news media or a combination of both. This is can be done in house or through communication agencies. In addition, the interaction on the organization's own online platforms is often analyzed. However, it is the continuous monitoring of other social media discourse that is considered most demanding. While it has obvious advantages, it also incurs considerable costs as it is time-consuming and involves the use of analytics.

Monitoring of social media discourse, calls for specific competences in collecting and interpreting data. The activities consist of a number of steps:

Preparation—deciding on the aims and choosing the focus and method

Gathering data—manually through samples, using tools for large qualities of data, or a combination

Analysis—using statistics, textual analysis or network analysis

Reporting—including visualization of results.

Often the method of textual analysis is chosen that may include keyword search and machine learning. For example, when the brand name is used in a search one takes into account that the name could also be differently spelled. One can check if the name goes together with certain sentiments or is connected with particular issues. Values important for the organizational identity can be emphasized in the observations. Changes over time need to be noticed, especially if negative sentiments or issues are on the rise that call for attention. In addition, positive attention can be noted, for example when tweets on the organizations with a positive sentiment are often re-tweeted or receive many 'likes'.

Network analysis focuses on how messages disseminate. It provides a snapshot at a particular moment in time or shows spread patterns on the longer term. Network mapping clarifies which linkages are effective in the spreading of information and potentially cause viral spread of messages. For example, some bloggers function as 'influentials', individuals that reach many others.

Tools

As social media interaction generates a large volume of data, there are tools and solutions to ease collecting and analyzing such data. New tools are constantly being made, and the rapid developments in this field make it hard to overview the possibilities. They differ from limited to

more advanced systems. Tools and solutions can be open access, require client payment or are custom-made for a particular client. Unfortunately, many tools are for commercial reasons not fully opened up, so that their accuracy is difficult to evaluate.

Often search engines and dashboard services, that provide an overview of current discourse in various social media, are used. Less often geo-mapping features, that show locations of social media posts, are included; these are especially useful for emergency organizations. Sentiment trends are investigated by machine-based algorithms that track positive and negative phrases to identify changes in opinions. There also are tools specific for one particular social medium, such as for Twitter, to gather and analyze this type of social media content. In addition, there are tools for the further processing of data and the creation of visualizations of outcomes, for example the visualization of the intensity of the discourse or of the main themes shown in the discourse. Full services listening platforms are offered at a price by communication or research agencies that can include related consulting services. However, many organizations prefer to (also) have analytics and competences for their interpretation in house, to benefit of staying in touch with consumer feedback.

Big data

Social media data are voluminous and very diverse. It has been said that the big data investigated in social media also bring big accuracy problems. If data are taken out of context conclusions can be wrong. Therefore, to reduce errors, a search can best be focused and limited. The representativeness of samples, and similarly of the social media users for the population as a whole, has been questioned. Social media data could also be prone to manipulation of data or malicious use. In addition, there are language borders that often limit the messages investigated or complicate their interpretation. The interpretation of messages, especially when using computer-assisted methods, is often not subtle anyway.

Privacy problems exist as people who place messages in social media publicly, may still not intend them to be used for organizational purposes. Currently, there is a tendency that people turn away from open messaging towards closed systems, for example by moving from Twitter to WhatsApp, rendering their messages invisible for those that are not linked by them. Therefore, not all social media exchange is available for monitoring. Furthermore, some social media, such as Twitter, have limited archiving capacity and can only be followed in real time as there is no function that allows going back in time. In addition, internet companies may limit the access to data, and there could also be outages and losses of data.

Even though there are major challenges involved, the possibilities that social media monitoring offer seem to clearly outweigh the difficulties for organizations. It should also be added, that nowadays public groups often expect organizations to read their messages and respond to them. The expectations have risen, and not answering to matters voiced online may lead to a negative social media and search engine reputation.

From monitoring to action

Monitoring activities bring together diverse views from diverse people exchanged in diverse media. Communication practitioners need to make sense of all this input and prioritize what needs attention. Positive results will reinforce decisions taken earlier and are likely to lead to continuation of strategies set. Negative results call for new decision-making which can result in diverse actions.

Diverse input derived from monitoring activities is brought together in the decision-making process, where alternative strategy options are considered that usually include a variety of (social) media. The results of monitoring provide feedback on organizational behavior. Monitoring results can indicate 'hot' issues that are often addressed, and which social media platforms are active on these issues. They can also show the tone of voice is and level of urgency. These matters can be taken into account in strategy-making.

Monitoring results clarify the current communication climate. In this way, monitoring also allows for reflection on the basis for future communication strategies. After adapting the strategies, the effects on the discourse can again be monitored, rendering the sequence of monitoring activities, decision-making and the implementation of strategies, a continuous rather than linear process.

In crisis times

When the organization is involved in a crisis situation, continuous monitoring ensures that one stays up-to-date concerning stakeholder views. During a crisis the volume of online messages often peaks as related posts gain more attention. Various issues may pop up during the life-cycle of a crisis and they may overlap or be visible in different peaks in frequency graphics of social media messages. Stakeholders may express information needs but also disappointment or anger related to the organization. Rumors need to be addressed. Social media offer positive opportunities for interaction, but also have the potential to let crises grow. Issues addressed during crises spread fast in the social media, and often travel from social media to news media or vice versa.

Conclusion

Monitoring aims at a better understanding of stakeholder views and enables organizations to anticipation on developments that may affect organizational reputation. Points of attention are:

1. Reputation monitoring can serve as an early warning system, in ordinary as well as crisis times; but in order to do so it needs to be continuous process.
2. Media monitoring focuses on interaction concerning the organization and related issues in the news media, an organization's own online platforms, and other social media.

3. Monitoring activities support decision-making by showing feedback on organizational performance, and also allow for reflection on communication strategies.

Marita Vos

See also: Feedback, Indicators of Reputation, Issues Management, Measurement, Organizational Listening, Reputation Crisis, Social media.

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