

THE LEADERSHIP PLAYBOOK

Reputation

IN THE WORLD OF HARD POWER



Powered by

PR PUNDIT
HAVAS Red

Part of the Havas PR Network

GEOPOLITICS IS REPUTATION'S JOB NOW



WHAT'S CHANGED

Companies are now judged on supply chain decisions, data sovereignty and geopolitical stance , not just product quality and ESG scores.

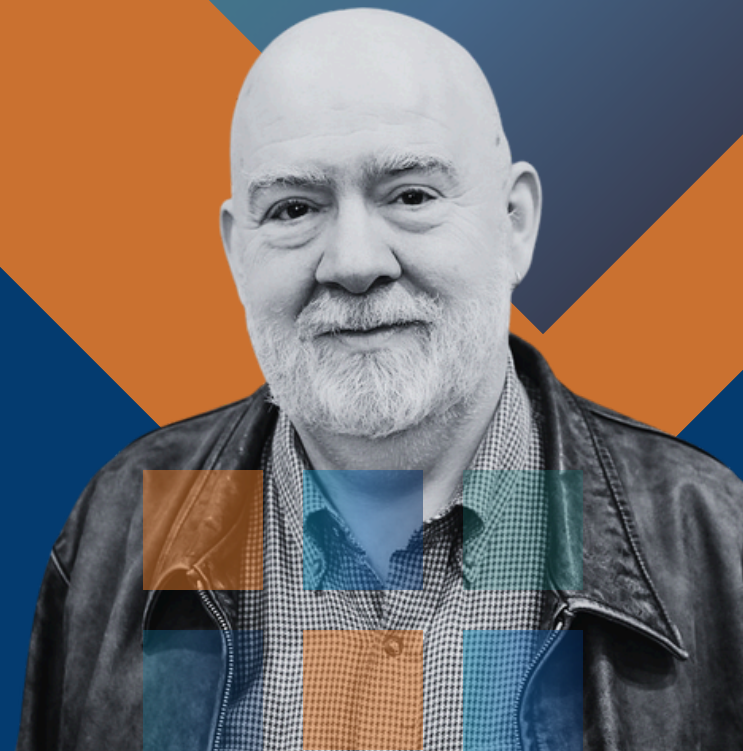
FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Reputation has moved through 3 phases: product trust → corporate citizenship → strategic trust
- 2 Government trust may now matter more than public affection
- 3 Accept you can't satisfy every stakeholder group at once, the real job is legitimacy-building, not consensus-building

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

You now need geopolitics and public policy literacy alongside media craft. That intersection is the job now.

HARD POWER HAS LIMITATIONS



WHAT'S CHANGED

Hard power looks strong. It isn't always. Iran humbled the US militarily; AI data centers are facing real pushback.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Hard power and soft power aren't a choice, the strongest players use both
- 2 CFOs and legal counsel default to hard power. That's exactly why comms needs to counterbalance it
- 3 Win-win stakeholder relationships cost less than domination, financially and reputationally

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

You're not the messaging layer. You're the boardroom's reminder that domination is expensive.

TRUST HAS DECOUPLED FROM PROFIT



WHAT'S CHANGED

Reputation and the bottom line have decoupled. Some orgs absorb scandal with zero financial impact. Global trust is still falling.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Principle 1: Be right. Integrity is your strongest defense against AI-driven misinformation
- 2 Principle 2: Speak about the good you do. Silence creates a vacuum someone else will fill
- 3 Principle 3: Build credibility through others' voices , media, analysts, employees , not just your own channels

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Stakeholder management is outdated language. You need geopolitical and regulatory fluency now.



ATTENTION ISN'T TRUST

WHAT'S CHANGED

Military budgets and GDP rankings don't decide who wins anymore. Trust does, and it's measurable.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 96% of comms leaders say reputation builds investor confidence and customer loyalty.
- 2 AI is being used everywhere (research, content, meetings), but it's making authenticity the real differentiator
- 3 India's PR industry grew 11% to ₹3,230 crore in FY26. Scale isn't the story anymore, strategic influence is

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Reputation isn't an outcome of business success. It's an input to it. Report it that way.

KUNAL KISHORE | PRESIDENT, PRCAI
GROUP CEO, V360 GROUP

05

TRUST IS THE ULTIMATE INFLUENCE



WHAT'S CHANGED

Power is getting harder. Trust is getting rarer. And it's the only currency hard power can't manufacture.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Stop managing perception after the decision. Get in the room before it's made.
- 2 Visibility is losing value. A trending topic today means nothing by Tuesday.
- 3 Build communicators who read business, policy, tech and risk, not just media.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Your job isn't explaining decisions anymore. It's shaping them before they're final.



DIGITAL REPUTATION IS THE NEW POWER PLAY

WHAT'S CHANGED

Your brand story isn't written by your press releases anymore. It's written by search results, employee voices and everyday digital noise.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Employees are your most credible storytellers , more powerful than any polished campaign.
- 2 Social listening and predictive analytics mean anticipation beats reaction
- 3 Sustainability and ethics can't live in annual reports. They need to show up in daily digital behavior

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Reputation isn't a campaign cycle anymore. It's built or broken every single day, at the speed of technology.

BRIDGE TRUST, I DON'T JUST BUILD IT



WHAT'S CHANGED

India has a trust advantage , but it's unevenly distributed. There's a 16-point trust gap between income groups, and trust is turning inward.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Stop only earning trust from people who already agree with you
- 2 Actively bridge trust with people who see the world differently , that's the harder, more valuable work
- 3 Use the workplace as the training ground: daily interactions are where dialogue across difference actually scales

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Trust-building protects your base. Trust-bridging is what builds resilience and legitimacy.



REPUTATION IS NOW A TEST OF JUDGEMENT

WHAT'S CHANGED

64% of communicators say AI is a serious reputational risk. Messaging can't save a bad decision anymore.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Shift 1: From messaging to consequence , embed comms before the decision, not after
- 2 Shift 2: From visibility to discernment , some moments need silence, not a louder voice
- 3 Shift 3: From stakeholder management to stakeholder understanding, the same decision lands differently with regulators, employees & investors

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Reputation is now a leadership discipline. It doesn't sit in the comms department anymore , it sits at the table.



REPUTATION IS THE ONLY CURRENCY THAT HOLDS

WHAT'S CHANGED

You can't control geopolitics, tariffs or trade policy. You can control how stakeholders respond when those forces hit.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Strong reputation generates up to 5% in additional shareholder returns (Burson's "Reputation Return" model)
- 2 Audit against the 8 pillars: financial strength, products, innovation, citizenship, employer culture, integrity/governance, leadership, creativity
- 3 Don't try to excel at all 8 equally , find your weakest pillar and fix that one first

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Reputation isn't a soft metric anymore. It's a quantifiable, defensible line on the balance sheet.



REPUTATION DECIDES WHO WINS

WHAT'S CHANGED

Strong capability with a weak reputation still loses. Allies hesitate. Partnerships stall. Deterrence loses credibility.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Build reputation into strategy from day one , not as a patch after the fact
- 2 Link reputation to purpose: stakeholders increasingly back organisations with a demonstrated sense of responsibility
- 3 Treat digital missteps as high-stakes , real-time platforms mean small errors escalate fast

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

*Standing determines whether strength can actually be used.
Capability without credibility just sits there.*



REPUTATION IS NO LONGER A SOFT ASSET

WHAT'S CHANGED

Strong capability with a weak reputation still loses. Allies hesitate. Partnerships stall. Deterrence loses credibility.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Build reputation into strategy from day one , not as a patch after the fact
- 2 Link reputation to purpose: stakeholders increasingly back organisations with a demonstrated sense of responsibility
- 3 Treat digital missteps as high-stakes , real-time platforms mean small errors escalate fast

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

*Standing determines whether strength can actually be used.
Capability without credibility just sits there.*



NARRATIVES ARE THE NEW BATTLEFIELD

WHAT'S CHANGED

72% of digital conversations around a recent geopolitical conflict carried negative sentiment, shaped more by memes and AI content than by facts on the ground.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Treat reputation as strategic infrastructure , same investment tier as cybersecurity and compliance
- 2 Build continuous monitoring and intelligence capability, not reactive crisis statements
- 3 Reframe the conversation early , a labor dispute case study shows shifting focus from "exploitation" to "governance and reform" cut narrative volatility fast

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Emotional resonance is beating factual accuracy at shaping opinion. Lead the narrative or someone else will.

EVERY DECISION IS REPUTATIONAL NOW



WHAT'S CHANGED

Routine business decisions , a new plant, a supplier switch , now carry reputational weight they never used to.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Bring communications into the room while the decision is still forming, not after it's signed off
- 2 View every decision through three lenses at once: employee stability, investor confidence, customer values
- 3 Remember: trust is built in the quiet moments nobody's watching, not the announcements everyone sees

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

The best question at the right time is worth more than the best words later.

QUIET STRENGTH OUTLASTS LOUD POWER



WHAT'S CHANGED

Nations once competed to be admired. Increasingly, they're competing to be feared. That shift changes what reputation is worth.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Reputation is a residue of repeated honest action, not a communications output
- 2 Look to century-old institutional legacies for the model: conviction sustained over generations, not campaigns
- 3 Judge conviction by what it costs, not how well it's phrased

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

The job isn't managing narrative. It's building the kind of reputation no narrative can substitute for.



CREDIBILITY IS THE NEW REACH

WHAT'S CHANGED

"How many people saw our story?" is the wrong question now. The real question: will AI cite it when someone asks about your brand?

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 84% of AI-cited sources are earned media. Paid and advertorial content accounts for just 0.3%
- 2 Stop chasing circulation-based media lists. Build authority in the handful of publications that define your sector
- 3 Trade and specialist media aren't a supporting tactic anymore , they're a pillar of long-term reputation strategy

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Reach has been overtaken by relevance. Consistent credibility in the right publications beats one big headline.

SILENCE IS THE REAL RISK



WHAT'S CHANGED

A conflict in West Asia hit oil prices, shipping and Indian grocery bills within days , and it landed on the CEO's desk with zero warning.

FROM MY PLAYBOOK

- 1 Say more, not less , explain your thinking, not just your decision. That's what builds real trust
- 2 "Not yet" or "not at all" is a legitimate strategic answer, not silence
- 3 Use AI for real-time sentiment monitoring and first-draft speed , but keep a human deciding the tone

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Evasive silence is the actual risk now, not transparency. The CCO's job is enterprise strategy, not message polishing.