

Since we are naked, let's try to look good

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BIOGRAPHY

Michaela is a graduate in journalism at the Faculty of Arts of the Comenius University in Bratislava. After graduation, she worked in Chirana Export Import Piešťany as the Head of Promotion Department, where she was in charge of corporate communication not only in Slovakia but also abroad. In 2002, she graduated Webster University, USA as a Master of Business Administration (MBA). Michaela has worked in Seesame since 1997. For a number of years, she has been providing services to clients from healthcare and pharmacy and she is also a leading Slovak specialist in reputation management programs, corporate, internal, and crisis communication. Michaela is a Vice President in AmCham's Board of Directors.

In a way, almost every brand is naked nowadays. That is, at least virtually: on the Internet and in social media, in comments under the individual posts. Brands and their stories are constantly scrutinized for their correctness and integrity as well as values. Thanks to the Internet, no brand can hide anymore. Even if deleting a social media profile may be relatively easy, there are traces that remain, there is history, metadata, statuses of fans on Facebook, etc. Nakedness is a natural state in today's world of communication. Therefore, any brand should care about making sure it doesn't have to be ashamed when the clothes come off.

And since we are naked, let's try to look good while we're at it. So where do we start?

Building of brand reputation doesn't only take place externally among the brand's customers, ambassadors or bloggers. In fact, it starts with the employees and colleagues. If they don't trust the narrative that the brand is telling about itself, people from the outside won't either. When it comes to brand stories, it is true that the best critics are the people who actually work for these very brands.

Stories have always been here to help us learn and understand the world. From the moment when we are born we learn to differentiate between the good and the evil through storytelling. As children, we do so through fairy tales and as we grow older

it can also be through positive stories of various brands. In this sense, the story may enable the whole community centered around the respective brand to embrace the values that the brand leans on.

Customers are increasingly often turning into their heroes. Unlike before, they are not just passive observers anymore. Communication in the online world enables people to express their opinion – whether using their personal profiles or under the posts of other people – which is transforming the customers' role in brand stories. As such the role of the whole stakeholder community is also transforming. They are no longer just minor characters but assume the lead roles in the storylines.

And it cannot be any other way, unless the brand wants to come across as living its story in an empty bubble, with no real impact in the real world and thus no potential to change it. If a company boasts thousands of likes on its Facebook page, but these virtual "thumbs up" don't translate into an audience willing to communicate, it shows that nobody is interested in what it has to say. And this does not only mean that the brand may have lost the interest of its fans; it also failed to attract potential talent.

The American Chamber of Commerce in Slovakia announced this year to be the Year of Human Capital. The replaceable workers may really be replaced by robots sooner or later. But brands will have

to clash fiercely for those that remain. For some time now, people from the marketing and HR departments in many organizations are moving their office chairs closer to each other. Employee engagement or employer branding are listed among the new tasks of the marketing teams. And here, the stories also play an essential role.

Employees want to be proud of their work and the work of their colleagues. The difference between those who see their current position just as a temporary stop on their career paths and those who want to work for the brand in the long-term lies in the fact that the latter group finds real meaning in the story of the respective brand.

By meaning I understand a purpose not only in what the brand produces and sells but also in terms of what it does and what change it strives to achieve in the society. A detailed description of these values can be found in corporate manuals and guidelines but it is always the brand leaders who must get the phrases from a noticeboard in the office kitchen, into the actual story of the brand. This serves to show their potential collaborators and colleagues that there will be nothing to be ashamed for when they are exposed naked.