



# PROTECTING REPUTATION

Dean Enon examines the dilemma of managing corporate reputation

**T**here can't be many professions that have been around for longer than security. Well before commercialisation and capitalism ruled nations, keeping people and places secure has been a territorial priority for centuries. So why does today's security sector have one of the toughest reputational challenges when it has honed its skills over hundreds of years, and how does it tackle them?

Breaches come in many forms, especially in today's ever connected world; almost every element of our

lives has security attached to it, somewhere. Businesses and governments, the military and border control organisations have stringent manned and cyber control, while us consumers will secure our homes, cars and possessions, and password-protect our online identities.

However, despite robust measures at every stage, physical gateways and cyber portals continue to be under constant threat. We'll never know the true extent to which successful, or near successful attacks on our government's systems are, albeit MI5 director general Ken McCallum highlighted in October 2024, that since

Organisations such as Just Stop Oil or Extinction Rebellion seem to be intent on causing disruption to create news headlines

2017: "the security agencies, with the police, have thwarted 43 'late-stage' terror attacks". And, GCHQ is well documented as having employed and endorsed 'ethical hacking' over the years in a bid to improve its, and our, security.

And let's not forget human intrusions that made headlines over the years, including Michael Fagan finding his way into Queen Elizabeth II's bedroom in Buckingham Palace back in 1982, proving that anywhere and everywhere is a target for controlled or opportunistic infringement.

Private security, however, which for many acts as the intermediary between the public and the police, with lines often blurred, has experienced a somewhat turbulent reputational journey. It has, for many years, been labelled with a poor reputation, fuelled by negative press headlines, reporting of unscrupulous firms acting unethically and not operating to the standards required.

The highly reported undercover BBC story highlighted the ease in which operator licences may be obtained fraudulently, ironically coming at a time when the Security Industry Authority (SIA) and security sector as a whole were rebuilding public trust and reputation. Likewise, certain sections of the media not only report on high-profile breaches, but they seek a 'sting', with one Daily Mail journalist actively reporting upon how he: "breached Wembley's £5-million 'ring of steel' at the Champions League Final in June 2024.

Likewise, we are increasingly seeing a new style of intruder with sports events, stage shows and public places of interest infiltrated by organisations such as Just Stop Oil or Extinction Rebellion, intent on causing disruption and news headlines to impact change. While searches can be carried out for weapons or any contraband, it's unreasonable to ask security personnel to check to see if anyone is wearing an orange T-shirt under their jacket, and expel them.

As far back as 2006, the Security Industry association introduced a quality standard, the Approved Contractor Scheme (ACS), aimed at improving standards and protecting the public. It assesses 78 different areas of a security company's business across topics as diverse as staff training, financial management and health and safety policies.

As a result of improved processes and practices, security organisations are now better managing their own corporate reputations through meaningful engagement with stakeholders, through the recognition of their workforces, and by adopting real living wage and EDI policies to encourage inclusion and staff development, and much more.

That many security companies were born from, and owner-managed by, former police or military personnel, has meant that this 'softer' side of managing a business has been met with some resistance. But it's certainly working, and improved internal cultures are being mirrored in external relations, brand awareness and improved corporate reputation.

In addition to the media, security companies need to engage with governments, MPs, clients, investors, partners, local communities and employees, to underpin commercial objectives. This should not be a vanity project, empathy is key to engaging with stakeholders and for maintaining a robust corporate reputation.

What's equally important is that security organisations really do take their communications efforts seriously, regardless of size, because a communications strategy supports business objectives – not least when tendering for contracts. A collective responsibility is required by forward-thinking security organisations, particularly against a backdrop of public misunderstanding.

While a ready-made response strategy will help a CEO having to front up a crisis, it shouldn't be the only weapon in the armoury. Should a major violation occur at a site managed by a private security company, the impact is doubled in that both client, and security provider, are under the media spotlight. Both could face huge financial, economic and reputational damage, and potentially worse in life-critical situations, now exacerbated by social media not only spreading information, but also spreading targeted disinformation. Therefore, a strategic communications plan is critical, especially for an industry exposed to so much high risk.

## COMPANIES THAT COMMIT TO HIGH STANDARDS BENEFIT FROM STRONGER PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Breaches can occur at any time, and to any organisation, and while these can't always be anticipated, communications processes should be put in place to mitigate, or at least manage the potential fallout.

Crisis management teams should exist within any organisation dealing in high levels of risk, with processes in place, and spokespeople at the ready to review and respond quickly and efficiently in any given situation. And like any corporate entity, it's good practice to hold an annual 'fire drill', which allows you to work on a programme of dealing with a major crisis at a venue, site, or company that you are employed to protect. Even hire an ex journalist or PR agency to run it for you or at least test you on your media preparedness.

This not only helps private security organisations to share information with immediate stakeholders, but also enhances reputation with the media – in that they will recognise the process and transparency, and comply accordingly. The media asks for statements, you have statements ready. The media expects a press call, you have a spokesperson available, primed, and on message.

It's also critical, in a crisis, to be open and accept responsibility if culpable, and transparent with intentions. The reparation of reputation begins with honest and open communication, and by keeping all stakeholders, including employees, partners and anyone else impacted up-to-date at all times throughout what may be a lengthy process.

The private security industry has been actively working to improve its reputation through professionalism, transparency and accountability. Likewise, industry bodies and associations, such as the SIA, are establishing higher standards and certifications, which encourage companies to adhere



to best practices. An SIA survey in January 2024 found that 6 in 10 people: “agree that they trust security professionals”, with 7 in 10 agreeing that: “security professionals are necessary to maintain order and improve public safety”.

## IT'S GOOD PRACTICE TO HOLD AN ANNUAL 'FIRE DRILL', TO WORK ON DEALING WITH A CRISIS

Another incident that made positive headlines last August was when a security guard intervened to save a young girl with her mother, being attacked by a man wielding a knife. Not only did 29-year-old Abdullah thwart the attack, he and his colleagues administered first aid, with Abdullah saying: “It’s my duty to just save them”. As it happens, it’s possibly not his duty, but his guarding and first aid training meant that he was skilled enough to do so.

Many companies are investing in training programmes to ensure personnel are well-prepared to handle complex situations, and that guards are trained to the highest standards required from corporate security in high-risk environments.

Successful security companies hold transparency at the heart of their operations, which is not only enabling trust in their partners and clients, but also with the public. In addition, monitoring social media comments, online reviews and public perception through polls and surveys is informing how companies are perceived, and shaping internal, and external communications, accordingly.

Likewise, innovation in security is moving at apace and brings reward. Access management has been boosted by AI, with facial recognition commonplace now and new biometric advancements on the horizon to not only spot a person of interest through characteristics such as gait for authorised entry, but also for the wider law enforcement organisations for spotting persons of interest. This bolsters trust and also gives further opportunity for positive PR.

Security companies are also endorsing ethical behaviour and corporate responsibility – essential for building a positive reputation. Companies that commit to high standards of ethics and social responsibility benefit from stronger public perception. Businesses should not only align their practices with these values, but proactively communicate their commitment to them.

Finally, active community involvement and awareness of public perception are integral to maintaining a positive reputation in the private security sector. Those that support social causes and contribute to their communities are generally viewed more favourably. By implementing a social responsibility policy, and consistently engaging with stakeholders to adjust strategy based on feedback, corporate reputation is enhanced over time.

There will still be an element of negativity around private security, as with all law enforcement organisations, given the often high-risk environment. But the SIA survey referenced above shows a definite shift, and in general the public views the profession as trustworthy. Despite the odds being stacked against private security, it’s winning the reputational challenges that has for so long been a thorn in its side ●

**DEAN ENON** is director at Catalyst PR and a seasoned communications practitioner in the security, defence and emergency services sectors.

**Crisis management teams should exist within any organisation dealing in high levels of risk, with processes in place and media spokespeople at the ready to respond quickly and efficiently in any given situation**

