

Rewriting the African narrative on reputation

The recent ethics and reputation study conducted by Reputation Matters on behalf of the African Public Relations Association (APRA), has highlighted many opportunities for the continent to take charge of its narrative.



Figure 1: Countries participating in the APRA | Reputation Matters 'Do ethics matter on the African continent' survey.

"There are massive opportunities for our continent to rebuild, reposition and represent itself to the world," says Regine le Roux, managing director of Reputation Matters.

Why is a reputation so important, especially for a continent?

"Let's take a step back; what exactly is a reputation? It is something that is built on consistency, you are either going to be consistently good or consistently bad at something and that behaviour will impact how you are perceived by others.

"So, why is a reputation important? As a company your reputation impacts the people you attract to work for you, which in turn impacts your outputs, be it a product or service. The quality and perceived value impacts the willingness for people to part with their hard earned cash to buy your offering, which ultimately impacts your bottom line.

"The same goes for a country or continent; countries with a positive image generally have a much stronger economy, which makes foreign direct investment a lot more appealing, this can also positively impact tourism further stimulating the economy allowing for investments in social upliftment and education programs, all taking the country and continent's wellbeing to the next level, explains Le Roux.



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"Reputations are built on perceptions, it is not necessarily the truth, it is however someone's reality, and it is that reality that becomes that person's worldview and what they communicate to others," adds Le Roux.

"For too long we've allowed the narrative of Africa to be determined from those outside the continent, looking in. It is time that we start changing perceptions and start rebuilding the reputation of Africa; we can only do that if every single person takes responsibility for what they do and communicate on a daily basis," said Yomi Badejo-Okusanya, President of African Public Relations Association (APRA), at the recent annual conference held in Gaborone, Botswana.

Lessons from Botswana

A reputation is driven by consistent behaviour. Behaviour is driven by following a set of core values that guides the decisions that you make and actions you take. This was confirmed in the research, says Le Roux. “Ethics is a key driver for reputation management on an individual, company and continent level.”

Botswana was identified as the most ethical and reputable country in Africa. “What made this result very interesting, was that there were no respondents identified from Botswana who answered the questionnaire,” says Le Roux. “Both the Botswana flag and national anthem reflect a peaceful nation, and you can truly see and feel it when you arrive in Gaborone. There is a great sense of dignity amongst the people who embrace the country’s core values of peace and harmony, and live out the values on a daily basis. It is no wonder they have such a strong and stable economy.”

There were 119 respondents; of which 53% were women, 28% were between the ages of 41 and 50; 43% work in the field of communication (including marketing and PR) and 39% hold an executive position.

Twelve countries were represented in the survey: 71% of respondents reside in South Africa with Ghana, Nigeria, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Namibia and Angola also being represented (as per illustration below).

On an individual and company level, ethics and reputation scored a very high average of 86.5%. In contrast, at a country level the score was an average of 34.5% for both ethics and reputation. “The research confirms that it is at this level where the most work needs to be done. These results do however indicate a huge opportunity for growth. Now we have a base line in place from which we can measure and track annually,” adds Badejo-Okusanya.

Vice President of APRA, and CEO of Burson Cohn & Wolfe Africa, Robyn de Villiers, who facilitated an interactive workshop at the conference on ethics indicated, “It is no longer just about ‘walking the talk’, we need to be talking the walk too; our behaviour impacts what we say, and what we say impacts what we do.”

The question we are left with is, what can we do to re-write the African narrative?

“The first step is to go back to the basics and get the internal messaging right. We need to make sure that core values are in place and reflected in our daily behaviour. This will help to make our communication initiatives more authentic. As communication professionals, we should strive for a code of ethics which resonates with the real and positive story we’re here to tell about Africa to the world,” said Badejo-Okusanya.

“With a population of 1.216 billion people spread across 55 countries, imagine if each person chooses to share one positive story about their country or Africa every day; there will be 365 stories per person, per year! Imagine what that will do for the narrative on the continent! We can change the African narrative, one individual, organisation and country at a time,” concludes Le Roux.

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