

In cricket and reputation crisis, pork pies and greased piglets demand a stony heart

By [William Smook](#)

12 Sep 2019

I was fortunate enough to watch the final climactic hour of that innings by Ben Stokes a few weeks ago; the one where England's cricket team beat Australia to level the Ashes series; the one being called the greatest innings of the greatest test match.



Image credit: Alessandro Bogliari on Unsplash.

Ball after ball, over after over, Australia was a wicket from victory. Then came the moment that – as someone who once living from photography – I wish I had in my portfolio: shot from a low angle, Stokes rearing back and punching the sky as the Leeds crowd erupt in euphoria and spilt beer.

It was a moment as atavistic and orgiastic as you'll find in sport and, for me, doubly pleasing that it was at the expense of Australian cricketers.

Stokes's gladiatorial performance was worthy of every accolade and the hyperbole that flowed.



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William Smook 20 Jan 2014



As in cricket, so too in reputation management

Lots of people can whack a ball with a piece of willow. I'm not among them. Neither am I a sports writer. But I recognise when something is epochal enough to have metaphor and simile wrung from it. And so to my day job, of reputation management.

Building a successful brand and a good reputation demands hard work, and hard work usually involves an emotional commitment. That's a good thing: as a custodian of a reputation, an emotional connection stimulates creativity and energy.

But a communications professional – in-house or consultant – must also have a heart of stone, an emotional distance, especially with crisis communications. An example: the company I work for was contacted by a fence manufacturer – which had been named in a weekend newspaper's lead story.



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On the defence

The company's fences, the paper reported, had been installed at Nkandla – the country estate of a now-former president, Jacob Zuma.

The fences were collapsing. The problem was that the fences weren't theirs, but a competitor's. The damage was that not only was his business now synonymous with the Nkandla debacle, but the product was seen as shoddy.

My colleagues and I were summoned to an urgent meeting. The fence manufacturer's legal team was out in force and there was the bellicose talk of damages, of summonses, of full-page advertisements decrying the outrage.

But wait: The paper has its ombudsman. Before lawyering up, their office should be contacted. We did just that. The ombudsman quickly conceded the paper had erred and the paper published a correction.



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On the offense

I was more directly involved in a second example, where a union threatened a strike. The union claimed that the company had practised apartheid-style employment policies.

However, the hiring policy was by legislation – based on tenure and job description. A minority of personnel were members of the bargaining unit and, importantly, the union couldn't strike until the company's application for an interdict had been heard.

The client's communications could have had a wounded tone and railed about slander, libel and "fake news". Instead, my

team and I opted for responses to media queries that were almost haiku-length. We politely declined invitations to spittle-flecked on-air debates with the union and instead provided recorded soundbites.

The lack of tit-for-tat rhetoric made the issue a little less salacious and we avoided making our client's reaction the story itself. In the end, the interdict was granted and the strike averted.



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Back at the stumps

So, back to lessons from the cricket: each batsman knew what they had to do. Among all the richly deserved plaudits heaped upon Stokes and batting partner Jack Leach was the observation that both remained stoic and focused until Stokes smote the winning runs.

Leach's task was simple: Don't get out. He scored just one run and he and Stokes limited his exposure to fearsome – but increasingly frustrated bowling – so he faced only 17 balls in a 62-ball stand.

“ Was this the best innings ever? 🏏🏏🏏🏏🏏🏏 ”

Full highlights: <https://t.co/OdIENBPKsX#Ashes> pic.twitter.com/LiGzECFvc— England Cricket (@englandcricket) [August 25, 2019](#) ”

In reputation management, your role is, sometimes, the still small voice pointing out that it's best to avoid being the headline this time around.

- Lesson one: clinical focus on every moment, inching towards the goal, taking opportunities when you can, and then tea and medals, or in England's case, the roar of the crowd and the thunder of champagne. And then that feral, victorious roar, possible only because of the grim, bloody-minded concentration of two cricketers who hung on as their opponents' focus faltered.
- Lesson two: take your victories where you can. Stokes's innings, sublime as it was, has been superseded by that of Australia's Steve Smith hit 211 and 82 at Old Trafford, to seal his team's Ashes quest. But Stokes will always have that moment.

ABOUT WILLIAM SMOOK

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