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## Reputation and Credibility. Mistakes in... Mistake Management

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### Abstract

The core value and ultimate purpose of the image policies is Credibility. Unfortunately, nothing is more mysterious in the public communication field than the subject's credibility. The credibility formula is the "cornerstone" of Public Relations and if it were a scientific formula we would teach it in schools. Should someone discover this formula he/she would master the world or at least would control his/her own life horizon. For starters, two things must be said regarding credibility. First of all, it is an excellent strategic reserve for possible image crisis; in other words, credibility represents a sort of "save money for a rainy day". Second of all, it is never gained once and for all, we cannot anchor it on solid ground; its world resembles the moving sands. If we represent a player in the public arena, it is a crime not to have a damage limitation strategy that is a mistake management strategy. Mistakes can be made in any field of activity but its management implies the same elements. When a mistake is acknowledged, the first steps must be taken towards its management. We shall see that this may lead us to a credibility gain.

*Key-Words:* Public image; Reputation; Credibility; Mistake management.

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### 1. Introduction. Save money for a rainy day; a world of moving sands

Specialists in public image management speak of two basic coordinates: the "visibility" of the subject and its "reputation". The subject may be a public person, a company, a political party, an institution or a country. It is common knowledge that visibility *per se* does not contribute to the fulfillment of managerial, political or geopolitical objectives of the subject; for this purpose, visibility shall go hand in hand with a good reputation. But what does good reputation actually mean?

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The core value and ultimate purpose of the image policies is *Credibility*. Unfortunately, nothing is more mysterious in the public communication field than the subject's credibility. When entering the reign of credibility, we cross the border between chemistry and alchemy. The credibility formula is the "cornerstone" of Public Relations and if it were a scientific formula we would teach it in schools. Should someone discover this formula he/she would master the world or at least would control his/her own life horizon.

For starters, two things must be said regarding credibility. First of all, it is an excellent strategic reserve for possible image crisis; in other words, credibility represents a sort of "save money for a rainy day". Second of all, it is never gained once and for all, we cannot anchor it on solid ground; its world resembles the moving sands.

He who has a considerable credibility capital is able to make a stand not only against unfortunate events that may affect its public image but also against a negative campaign aiming at denigrating its image. The advisors of the Romanian president, Emil Constantinescu, have failed to take this into account when they persuaded him to launch the two negative campaigns against the former President, Ion Iliescu, namely the „Costea” affair and the „Red telephone” scandal. This happened in 1999, one year before the elections in 2000, and Constantinescu hoped to get rid of his main opponent – Ion Iliescu, probable candidate for a new mandate.

We all know the results: Iliescu suddenly gained ground in opinion surveys, reaching values that he hadn't reached in the elections campaign in 1996. He rapidly exceeded the 30 percents that he could always count on, without any election campaign, reaching a confidence quota of over 40%. What had happened? The enormous credibility capital Ion Iliescu rejoiced at triggered the now famous „victimization mechanism” translated by sociologists as follows: "Poor Iliescu, they don't get off his back! Why on earth do they hold a grunge against him?". In exchange, the "collateral victim" was Teodor Melescanu, leader of a recently established party. Affected by both negative campaigns in capacity of Minister of Foreign Affairs, Melescanu began to decrease in surveys until he reached bottom-end where he remained up to the present day. As many other ministers of foreign affairs, he sat pretty good in terms of sympathy capital but the absence of a credibility capital has been fatal to him!

Nothing seems more volatile than credibility. Being linked to the dynamics of social representations, credibility is always exposed and never shield from "bad weather". Similar to an individual who felt in a swamp of moving sands, an unadvised or poorly advised subject struggles to save its confidence capital but his uncontrolled moves cause him to sink even more in the lack of credibility swamp.

The most striking cases in Romania are Musca (August 2006) and Traian Basescu (January-April 2007). In both cases we witnessed a spectacular fall, from stunning quotas of credibility. In the former case, the absence of a *mistake management* strategy stands out at least in the first phases of the image crisis. In the latter case, the determining factor has been the discursive strategies that Basescu treated as "image strategies" but which slowly but surely led to the erosion of his credibility capital. Should this erosion had never occurred, the parliament decision on 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2007 to suspend the Romanian President would have been utterly unconceivable.

## 2. Mistake management and reputation improvement

Ancients used to say: „*Errare humanum est*”, but as humane is to be mistaken, as stupid is not to learn from our mistakes. If we represent a player in the public arena, it is a crime not to have a damage limitation strategy that is a mistake management strategy. Mistakes can be made in any field of activity but its management implies the same elements. When a mistake is acknowledged, the first steps must be taken towards its management. We shall see that this may lead us to a credibility gain.

John Molnar, vice-president of the Property Management Commission in the USA Congress talked in an article in the *Washington Post* about mistake management within project execution but, by extensor, his theory applies to the public domain as well: "Mistakes are a given fact. They differ only in terms of the degree they reach and the way they are managed. There is no such thing as too much theory on mistake management. In fact, there are good mistakes and bad mistakes. Mistakes are integral part of the learning process and the way they are managed make the difference between a good manager and the poor manager. There are quantitative and qualitative mistakes; expensive and inexpensive mistakes; small mistakes, easily forgettable or on the contrary" (Molnar, 2000).

The company or the individual who develops an open policy or philosophy of mistake management shall outrun its competitors. As a rule, companies hate and avoid washing their dirty linen in public, but they don't do it even *in house*. This happens because the great majority of people are not honest enough with themselves in order to

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