

The role of issues management in protecting corporate reputation at Nike

## INTEGRATING ISSUES MANAGEMENT AT NIKE

When Vada Manager joined Nike Inc. seven years ago, his current position as director of global issues management didn't exist. He started at the company as a senior manager within corporate communication but his varied background in public policy, business and media relations, made him the perfect candidate for the role, which he has held since 1999.

Manager agrees that the creation of the role reflected a growing recognition within business of the need to protect brand and corporate reputation by establishing a more structured approach to dealing with issues and crises.

He had been deeply involved in supply chain issues in a similar role at Levi Strauss & Co. before joining Nike. He also brought to his new function an extensive background in corporate, political and professional sports policy and communications, some from working as a VP at agency Power Tate, some from his work within the public sector.

Manager's duties now span global manufacturing policies, litigation support and crisis communications, and he has two professional staff members on his team – one at Nike headquarters in the US, and another in Shanghai, China.

### Challenging times

Although Nike has enjoyed something of a business renaissance over the last few years, when Manager first came to his current role the company's reputation was taking a battering around the issue of its overseas manufacturing operations. "That's probably the

biggest challenge Nike has had to deal with, as it required a tremendous culture shift within our company, and required new ways of engaging with institutions and stakeholders outside of the company," he says. "We knew then it was going to be a long time before we could demonstrate that we had the necessary infrastructure and processes in place to address these issues."

Manager believes the company now has a far more structured and integrated approach to issues management, which he puts down to better internal recognition of the importance of the function, combined with improved external indicators to alert leadership to potential reputation risks.

"You have to build the function's profile and credibility internally, so that business units and managers understand the importance of consulting issues management on anything that could affect the brand's reputation," says Manager.

"You also have to make sure you're involved in the business meetings and communication loops that allow you to keep up with what's going on inside and outside the organization. Although functionally the team sits within corporate communication and corporate responsibility, there's no area of the business that we don't engage with on a weekly basis."

### Streamlining communication

To improve the way issues are dealt with externally, Manager has worked with corporate communication to create the "Issue Brief" – a tool to equip company spokespeople to talk about the company's policy or position on a range of potentially damaging or controversial issues.

"For example, if a top athlete


were in the middle of a marathon and a Nike running shoe fell apart, we have a one-page document that provides in a very concise fashion the history of that product or issue, approved legal statements and language that can be used when discussing the issue, and a list of the most-likely questions that the media or other external stakeholders will ask. It also provides details of the best internal communication person to contact, the best business contact and a good external third party who can provide further information."

The briefs are available through a protected intranet site and can be accessed immediately when needed.

Internally, Manager works closely with the corporate and internal communication teams to make sure employees are also kept abreast of the company's policies and positions on various issues, making it easier for them to act as brand ambassadors.

Many of the usual channels are employed to do this. Staff can find out the company's perspective on both positive and negative media stories on the company intranet. Inside Nike stores, managers are accountable for sharing this kind of information in regular staff meetings or daily morning huddles.

"We also use everything from CDs to DVDs to laminated wallet cards to educate front-line employees about our policies and actions on issues such as supply chain management or Nike's code of conduct."

The end result, says Manager, is a more integrated approach to identifying issues and discussing them internally and externally. "We have an infrastructure in place. My job is to continue looking for ways to improve how we spot potential risks to our reputation." 



**Vada Manager** is director of global issues management for Nike, Inc., with responsibilities across a wide spectrum of corporate affairs. His duties span global manufacturing practices, litigation support and crisis communications.