

Pay back the money Bell Pottinger

 By [Regine le Roux](#)

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As the Bell Pottinger scandal dies down, the public relations industry in South Africa is reeling to pick up the pieces. PR professionals across the globe have always had to slog away to show their worth to clients, now in one fell swoop, the world has been shown exactly how PR should not be done.



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After the initial disbelief that a 'reputation management' company could behave in this way, we are now left with a number of questions. One wonders how Lord Bell, as the leader of a 'reputable' global firm could allow activities to get so out of hand and then happily claim ignorance in many of his cringe-worthy interviews. The PR empire which he and his associates built, took thirty years to reach its peak before it was toppled in less than a year.



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Pitching for business is part of agency life. How would such an agency 'win' a contract with the Guptas without first 'demonstrating' their ability to run dirty PR campaigns for other clients? I wonder how many other countries have bled under a Bell Pottinger smear campaign?

While apologies issued after a crisis are a standard communication tool used to regain trust, it is clear that in Bell Pottinger's case this wasn't enough. The apology was a case of too little, too late. Bell Pottinger CEO, James Henderson issued an apology three months after the firm terminated its contract with the Gupta-owned Oakbay Capital. A decision to let go of a client is certainly not made without full information, so why did it take three months to issue an apology?

Answers and solutions

So, what happens to Bell Pottinger now? The people who were fed the 'white monopoly capital' message are not going to care about an apology, resignation or company liquidation, they are understandably riled up and expect answers and solutions. A big 'hoo-haa' has been made about Bell Pottinger being suspended from the industry body and this should be

applauded as too often these bodies don't appear to take a firm stand against their own members.



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However, surely there needs to be a way for companies like Bell Pottinger to be taken to task and held accountable? I suggest that firms should be forced to pay a fine or invest a considerable amount of their ill-gotten gains back into a good cause.

A company's reputation can build or break its business, which is why values are so important. Without values to steer the ship, Bell Pottinger were tempted by a large retainer from a client requesting a questionable scope of work. While their unethical activity was kept under wraps, all was well, but when it came to light in the news, they were quite literally caught out with mud on their face.

Unequivocal apology

Another interesting point involves the importance of strategic alliances to our industry. I understand as a founder of a communication business that you don't have a hands-on approach with each account, however when you've signed up such a large client, you make it your business to know what they are about because your company is being associated with the work they do.



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7 Jul 2017



The wording of the "unequivocal apology" is telling. It actually blames the account manager whom they fired. She is essentially accused of misleading senior management. That's not an apology, that is blame shifting and the public saw straight through it.

The PR industry is not alone as it is forced to do some serious reflection following this scandal. As the details of other suspect Gupta contracts are exposed in the media, it appears that the auditing industry will soon have to face a similar reputation building exercise.

ABOUT REGINE LE ROUX

Regine is a reputation specialist. She founded Reputation Matters in 2005; where they measure and manage companies' reputations using their unique Repudometer® measurement tool.

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