

Your Reputation Might Be Your Biggest Asset

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Your business reputation includes everything from your corporate and social responsibility to the trustworthiness of your sales and delivery people.

It can be the most difficult asset to protect because it's intangible. You work to build it everyday, yet it can crumble with one blunder – that you might not even see. The potential loss of income can be huge - and much more important in the long run than the loss of physical assets.

How does this happen? ~

- Do your customers or suppliers have unclear expectations? If a delivery or payment is late and your service rep waffles, you're seen as playing CYA.
- What if you miss an important deadline when someone is sick, and you've got no plan and don't communicate? There go the referrals out the window.
- Have you ever taken on too much work and can't return calls or keep an appointment? All of a sudden you're unreliable.
- What if you accept a complex job you've never done before, and your customer is disappointed in quality, timeliness or cost? Now you're a windbag and not to be trusted.

Where's that ounce of prevention? ~

It's right here – just do the opposite of the examples above!

- Document and share your discussions, notes, and expectations of each other.
- Prepare contingency plans, perhaps cross training, and communication messages in advance and be ready to recover.
- Say "No." Or "No, thank you." Or, "No, not now."
- Be very cautious about what you can and cannot do well. Get help early or refer your customer to someone else.

Prevention is an essential investment in your reputation: the outcome will be worth far more than you'll ever spend. Studies show it costs 8 to 10 times more to fix a problem or a loss than to prevent it from happening. Of course, prevention is not a one-time thing: it's like a salve that needs to be applied continuously, but the positive improvements are cumulative.

- Protecting your reputation starts with careful communication. Make sure you under-promise (for quality and quantity or time) and over-deliver.
- Encourage feedback and welcome criticism – early and often. They won't tell you if you don't ask.
- Make things right quickly: if a customer is unhappy, find out what they would like done, and if at all possible, do it immediately. Fix it or refund it.
- Talk to your clients and employees about how important reputation is to you and to the future of the business. If they have your ear and are treated fairly, they'll be happy to help you preserve it.