

Nissan Ex-CEO Illustrates Do's And Don'ts Of Image Repair

By **Elizabeth Ortega** (January 22, 2020, 5:26 PM EST)

Carlos Ghosn, the former Nissan Motor Co. Ltd. executive, recently gave new meaning to "thinking outside the box" when he reportedly used a perforated box to escape from house arrest in Tokyo to a safe perch in Beirut.

As a communications strategist who is watching from the sidelines while he tries to restore his sullied reputation, I draw the following lessons for lawyers, positive and negative, from his messaging.

1. Seize the narrative early and often.

I tell my lawyer clients that in order to fortify their brands among colleagues and potential clients, they must have a game plan to quickly establish a credible narrative.

In our work with lawyers, I recommend preparing a detailed communications strategy for reputational crisis management. Once the crisis hits, there's no time to do this, because a person's first reaction to a situation and first account of a story shapes other people's perspective. This perspective rarely changes over time.

So it's imperative for individuals facing adverse public opinion to develop a strategy with believable, personal and relatable messages early on. Effective planning crystallizes thoughts and establishes key messages that remain on point from the very beginning of a potential crisis.

As soon as Ghosn set foot in Lebanon, he launched an aggressive reputation-management campaign that his legal and communications teams doubtless helped devise.

At Ghosn's first press conference, Nick Kostov of The Wall Street Journal asked the international fugitive how he would go about establishing his innocence. Ghosn's response signaled his plan to recapture his reputation: "Well, first, I am used to what you call 'mission impossible.' I am going to clear my name," the proud self-publicist boasted.

If you listen, people divulge what defines them. Ghosn's declaration that he will clear his name despite the "impossible" mission ahead of him demonstrates this beautifully.

As does a conversation I had last year with a first-rate litigator who recounted how he tells his young



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sons, “Daddy is a superhero and goes to work to fight the bad guys.” This lawyer defines the work he does as extraordinary.

And I agree. Lawyers advocate, defend and uphold controversial facts. Their “mission impossible” can be to investigate systematic corruption and restore victims’ stolen assets — a fitting description of a hero.

Similarly, communicators preserve, enhance or restore brands. This may not, at first blush, seem heroic, but often a person’s reputation is closely tied to how they see themselves. When you have to tell someone that what they see is not what others see, you quickly learn the magic behind words. Try telling a client they have an ugly baby and you’ll see that effective communication requires superhuman strength.

2. You can’t keep a good man down.

Here’s the thing about Ghosn’s approach to damage control: He clearly intends to reinforce his narrative by cultivating public sympathy and portraying himself as the hero of his story.

His logic is sound. After all, his superpowers worked in the late 1990s, when he wrested Nissan from the brink of bankruptcy, and they worked again a few weeks ago when he dared to bolt Japan via bullet train and private plane.

His body language at the press conference communicated his unbroken stance. Even before reporter Kostov finished his question, Ghosn interjected. He took a deep breath, swept his hand away from the podium and firmly re-grounded his footing to hitch up his pants. It was as if he was saying, “Ready to launch.”

Lawyers use these same tactics in the courtroom to face off against their opponents. They develop a narrative that portrays their client as the hero fighting the evils of the world — starting with the party on the other side.

I counsel lawyers in their own reputation management to explain to their clients how they can help them overcome great odds or obstacles. Once you’ve established yourself as a hero to your client, the client is willing to trust your guidance and perspective. This leads to greater synergy and paves the way to cooperation, because when you must explain and contextualize an unfavorable outcome, the client will probably accept your explanation and move forward with you.

3. When shaping a narrative, public perception is everything.

To preemptively strike in a crisis is bold and oftentimes extremely effective, provided the message is valid and on point. But, crucially, the narrative has to fit the character of the speaker.

During the media onslaught about his legal troubles in Japan, subsequent escape and perilous landing in Lebanon, Ghosn’s messaging has evolved. He’s passionately and vociferously defending his escape, his controversial compensation and his actions that Japanese officials deem criminal.

In an interview with The Wall Street Journal, Ghosn told the reporter that in his former position, he would listen to lots of proposals from various people. He said the test he applied was, “Is it legal?”

The CEO who was known for acting fearlessly claims he decided against taking more compensation

because of legal constraints. Yet it's tough to imagine that Ghosn's creative juices went dry when he planned his personal road to financial success.

In Ghosn's Journal interview, he confidently raised his eyebrows to express his dissatisfaction with injustice and reiterated his passionate campaign to clear his name. But it's evident from the video that his larger-than-life body language and story line are not aligned, casting doubt on his version of the facts.

Lawyers who sheepishly defend their clients' actions rarely win over the judge and jury, since their body language conflicts with their storyline, no matter how credible it may be. On the other hand, if you wholeheartedly believe your client to be the victim and completely credible, this will be reflected in your stance as their counsel.

In reputation management, I advise clients to focus on the truths they believe. These pieces of the narrative will frame the story and positively influence public opinion. And remember, since your first account of a situation forms other people's perspective, it will endure even if contrary facts come to light later on.

4. You can't have your cake and eat it too.

Ghosn played the sympathy card in an interview with CBS News. "So, I am sitting here alone in a country which is not mine, in a system that I don't understand," he said. "I have everything, you know, all red signals everywhere. I said, 'My only hope of being able to defend myself [is to] get out of the country.'"

This approach counters his superhero narrative. He says he's a "victim of injustice." Instead of the assertive act he gave at the press conference following his escape, he's now trying to garner sympathy to rebuild his tainted reputation.

However, as Ghosn seeks to reclaim solid footing, he has begun to portray himself as a foreigner in a country in which he often stayed, worked and seemingly thrived for almost 20 years. Interestingly enough, he was so revered in Japan for his corporate success, he became the subject of a popular comic book.

The incongruity suggests his strategy may be falling apart. I submit Ghosn can't have his cake and eat it too. His switch from superhero to victim blurs his message and negates his goal: to show his detractors he remains focused on his "mission impossible." Again, the narrative has to fit the character of the speaker.

So the constructive advice here is to match your personality and narrative to your single overarching goal, and dedicate yourself to pursuing it.

5. It's not only, and always, about you.

When a client is in hot water, the first thing I counsel is for them to support a charity or promote a good cause. This is Crisis Management 101. Ghosn needs to humbly lend his influence to something bigger than himself. Every cause needs a face and, when it comes to people like Ghosn, every face needs a cause.

The way to keep his narrative alive would be for Ghosn to lobby for changes to Japan's legal system.

He's already shining a light on its cracks, beginning with the lack of due process that resulted in his house arrest.

So far, he's voicing his grievances but isn't proposing anything that would help fix the institution he's implicitly attacking to defend his reputation. What are Ghosn's solutions for a criminal justice system that lacks transparency and fairness?

For example, another "mission impossible" and a game-changer, he could tackle would be to advocate for former colleagues he left behind to face the backlash of his escape. It would be an example of working for the greater good, not just to save one's own hide, but to repair a corner of the world.

If he walks the walk of public advocacy, he'll earn the right to talk the talk about his own situation. If not, the public will soon tire of his poor-pitiful-me refrain.

When a defense lawyer maps out the narrative of a case, the lawyer must pointedly build up the client's reputation despite the case against them, using an authentic strategy and storyline.

Similarly, I advise my clients — attorneys who manage reputations every day — to do unto yourself as you would do unto your clients. Be credible. Be personal. Be conversational. Deliver a factual story. By controlling a favorable narrative, you bolster your client's reputation and become a superhero.

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