**Reputation Audit**

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How’s your professional reputation? If you’re a lobbyist or in advertising, then you may have to overcome some disappointing public perceptions. According to a 2013 Gallup poll, in which participants rated the honesty and ethical standards of twenty-two occupations, both of those professions received unfavorable rankings. Confidence in lawyers and business executives was also low, with only about 20% of the respondents giving them high marks for integrity.

Why the poor scores? One explanation involves stereotyping, with the entertainment industry playing a key role in shaping impressions. For instance, my favorite fictional barrister was Jack McCoy, portrayed by actor Sam Waterston in the long-running *Law & Order* series. Even though McCoy made missteps and the courtroom antics probably caused real attorneys to cringe, he was a likeable guy who tried to do the right thing. Contrast his image with currently popular TV solicitors who blatantly exhibit sleazy values. It’s easy to see how those images could negatively impact the public’s feelings about the legal field.

 As James Coleman, a law professor, stated in an interview with the *Duke Chronicle,* “TV programs like 'Suits' portray lawyers at large law firms as hard charging, hard drinking and sexually always on the make…Only the first part is generally true; the rest is...fiction, at least for most law firm lawyers. They don't have time for drinking or sex—certainly not in the office.”

My general trust of lawyers is high, probably because my personal experiences have been positive. However, that is an uncharacteristic appraisal by someone from the baby boomer generation. Ratings were 10% more favorable from younger people, ages 18 to 34. Millenials were more apt to trust other professions, too.

Why does this matter? Because our reputations impact our ability to recruit clients, investors and qualified job candidates. It makes the difference between forgiveness of an occasional error or being crucified by skeptical consumers. Finally, according to the Reputation Institute, a 1% increase improvement in reputation can result in a 1.3% financial return.

Building a good reputation requires a concerted effort to objectively measure the value of reputations by benchmarking, boldly inviting feedback from customers and actively engaging with our professional associations to ensure standards that foster integrity. We should strive to overcome stereotypes and create positive role models that serve to inspire the best in our professional fields.