

# Point of View



## Triangulation Isn't Just For Politicians Anymore: Aligning Reputation Levers, Issue Impact and Message Fit for Effective Communications



**Ipsos Public Affairs**  
The Social Research and Corporate Reputation Specialists

Little frustrates communications professionals more than developing a great campaign only to see it have little or no impact on their company's reputation. That's where triangulation comes in. Triangulation helps make sure that a campaign not only tests well, but that it is aligned with the attitudes driving the company's reputation and the issues that are impacting the company or industry.

**Message testing often looks something like this:**

Come up with a "fun," "hip" or "cool" idea → Test the idea to see if it truly is great → Come up with a knock-out execution → Test the execution to see if it does in fact floor your audience.

Generally, if you test the idea and find that people like the idea and think the execution works, then the organization will invest money and effort into the communication and roll it out to the public. The critical question to ask, though, is whether the communication centered on this idea actually pulls the levers that improve your reputation while addressing your consumers' underlying concerns. In essence, do the messenger, the message and the audience align? This is the message fit.

As a strategic approach, triangulation takes that fit one step further and aligns the message not only to the key drivers for the audience and strengths of the organization, but also to the external issue environment.

Triangulation offers communications professionals a greater certainty about the strategic direction of their messages. The three points of triangulation are:

1. Driver analysis
2. Issue impact
3. Message fit

**Driver Analysis**

The drivers of reputation vary strongly by company. Evaluation of the drivers needs to include attributes around products and services, business management, and Corporate Social Responsibility. In addition, special care needs to be taken in determining reputation drivers. The attributes that go into reputation share much of the same mental space among respondents (consumers or elites). As such, you need a tool for determining

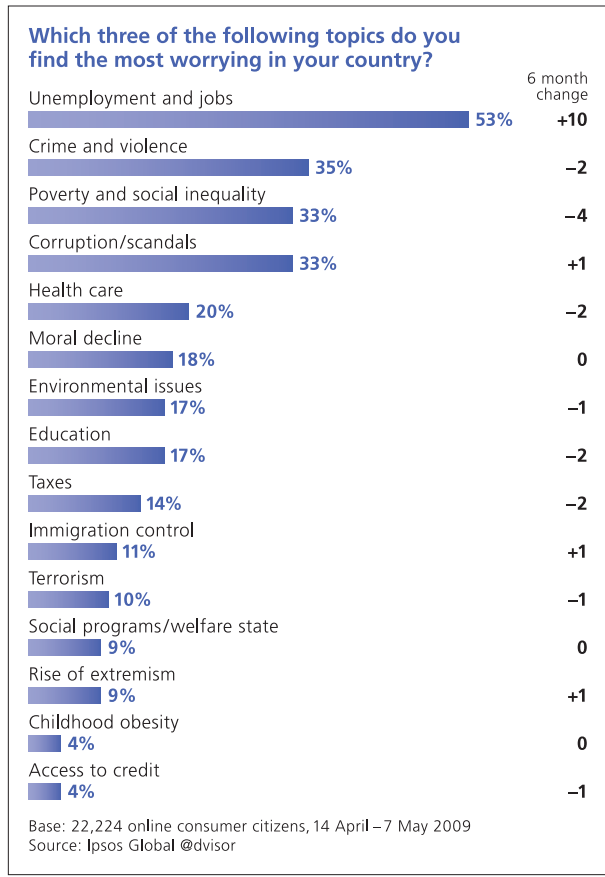
drivers that isolates the impact of each attribute or class of attributes. At Ipsos, we use Shapley's Values to provide the driver analysis for our clients as it both isolates the impact of individual metrics and is stable over time no matter what mix of metrics are included.

**Issue Impact**

Getting the most out of your communications activities means understanding the issue environment in which your company operates. The issue environment can be global, local, or industry specific.

We know from Ipsos' latest Global @dvisor multi-country tracking study data that unemployment and jobs are now the leading concerns for a majority of the world's population. As the economic crisis deepens, concerns about the environment, healthcare, taxes and other issues have given way to concerns about the immediate economic circumstances. In this environment, communicators need to consider weaving economic impact into their messaging.

**Unemployment tops the world's agenda**



The economic downturn has hit the reputation of the auto and banking industries particularly hard while the general reputation of other industries is unchanged. At the same time, it has impacted other industries in different ways. For instance, as governments try to make up falling revenues, alcohol and junk food trail only cigarettes as the most popular targets of sin taxes.

### Message Fit

Traditionally we test messages for crispness, clarity, and credibility. In addition, we seek alignment of messenger, message, and audience.

For instance, a technology company may decide that as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policy it will offer an outreach program to invest in communities. If in this case, the company then donates food to a charity for the homeless, there is an obvious communicative disconnect. Stakeholders are then likely to question the motive and rationale for such a move. Although certainly a laudable action, would such an activity be seen as credible?

If donations are put into a different context, the outcome is significantly different. For example, what if one of the potential drivers of this organization was environmental sustainability? If the organization was taking a negative hit for “green washing” and subsequently decided to donate recycled and refurbished computers to a charity outreach program, this action would fit the organization’s mission and potentially create a win-win situation for its reputation. While this example is simplistic, it illustrates that to achieve a win-win scenario, the communications policy has to be sensitive and well communicated, utilizing the right media to the right stakeholders. If executed properly, the company could hope for long-term positive reputational gain that would likewise be of benefit to the non-profit organization being supported.

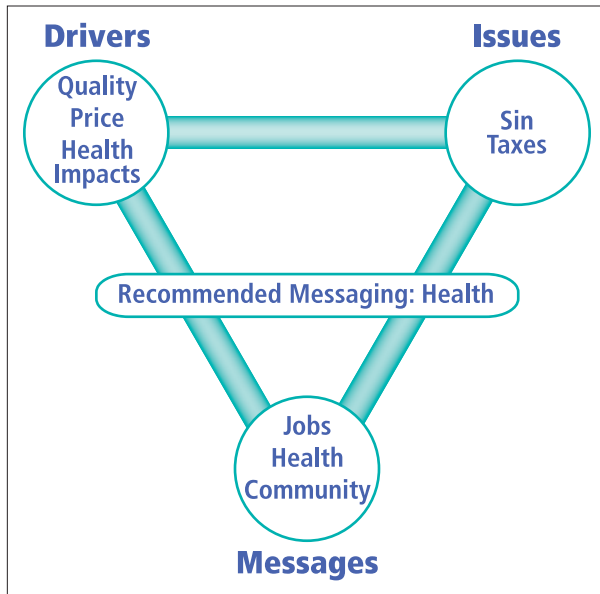
### Triangulation

Triangulation takes the alignment of message fit, messenger, and audience a step further by matching the message not only to the key drivers for the audience and the strengths of the organization, but also taking into account the external issue environment.

Let’s take the hypothetical example of an American company that produces and sells salty snacks. The drivers of the company’s reputation are perceptions of quality, price, and health impacts (in this case, a negative driver). According to the latest Global @dvisor data, the company has little to fear in terms of attitudes toward the industry in general or toward American companies. Still, the company does need to be aware that support for taxing the company’s products is high around the globe with many people seeing taxing “junk food” as an easy way to make up tax revenues lost in recessionary times.

Health issues are clearly in the crosshairs for this company in a very negative way – attitudes toward the company are a negative driver and the company’s products are a “sin tax” target. The company needs to determine which messages in its arsenal meet the tests for crispness, clarity, and credibility AND address the key negative driver AND address the negative issue environment. The company has a good reputation for quality – is there a way to leverage this strength to address the weakness? Is there a message on price (another strength) that could address the potential price increases as a result of a sin tax? Is there another economic argument (given that this is the largest underlying concern around the globe) that can be made to address these issues? These types of messages may not be the “coolest” or best testing ideas in the company’s current communications plans, or they may not exist at all. However, that does NOT mean that the company should spend time and resources on a communications plan that is seen as “cool” yet fails to address these key issues. Such a communications plan, while having surface impact, is unlikely to address the underlying and more serious issues of either the company or the industry and is therefore unlikely to have any lasting impact on reputation.

**Triangulate For Message Impact**



**Conclusion**

Effective communications and corporate social responsibility initiatives require triangulation between driver analysis, issue impact, and message fit. In order to shift opinions over the long term, companies must address their key drivers and the issues surrounding their industry with messages that meet traditional standards while also fitting the situation. Having a “fun,” “hip” or “cool” message is not enough. Sometimes companies will have to sacrifice “fun” in order to make things “work.” Because when budgets, futures, and reputations are on the line, it is much better to employ a communications strategy that has impact and is effective.