

Interpretation

Barnum used two different tactics to ruin Peale's reputation. The first was simple: He sowed doubts about the museum's stability and solvency. Doubt is a powerful weapon: Once you let it out of the bag with insidious rumors, your opponents are in a horrible dilemma. On the one hand they can deny the rumors, even prove that you have slandered them. But a layer of suspicion will remain: Why are they defending themselves so desperately? Maybe the rumor has some truth to it? If, on the other hand, they take the high road and ignore you, the doubts, unrefuted, will be even stronger. If done correctly, the sowing of rumors can so infuriate and unsettle your rivals that in defending themselves they will make numerous mistakes. This is the perfect weapon for those who have no reputation of their own to work from.

Once Barnum did have a reputation of his own, he used the second, gentler tactic, the fake hypnotism demonstration: He ridiculed his rivals' reputation. This too was extremely successful. Once you have a solid base of respect, ridiculing your opponent both puts him on the defensive and draws more attention to you, enhancing your own reputation. Outright slander and insult are too strong at this point; they are ugly, and may hurt you more than help you. But gentle barbs and mockery suggest that you have a strong enough sense of your own worth to enjoy a good laugh at your rival's expense. A humorous front can make you out as a harmless entertainer while poking holes in the reputation of your rival.

It is easier to cope with a bad conscience than with a bad reputation.

Friedrich Nietzsche, 1844-1900

KEYS TO POWER

The people around us, even our closest friends, will always to some extent remain mysterious and unfathomable. Their characters have secret recesses that they never reveal. The unknowableness of other people could prove disturbing if we thought about it long enough, since it would make it impossible for us really to judge other people. So we prefer to ignore this fact, and to judge people on their appearances, on what is most visible to our eyes—clothes, gestures, words, actions. In the social realm, appearances are the barometer of almost all of our judgments, and you must never be misled into believing otherwise. One false slip, one awkward or sudden change in your appearance, can prove disastrous.

This is the reason for the supreme importance of making and maintaining a reputation that is of your own creation.

That reputation will protect you in the dangerous game of appearances, distracting the probing eyes of others from knowing what you are really like, and giving you a degree of control over how the world judges you—a powerful position to be in. Reputation has a power like magic: With one stroke of its wand, it can double your strength. It can also send people scurrying away from you. Whether the exact same deeds appear brilliant or dreadful can depend entirely on the reputation of the doer.

In the ancient Chinese court of the Wei kingdom there was a man named Mi Tzu-hsia who had a reputation for supreme civility and graciousness. He became the ruler's favorite. It was a law in Wei that "whoever rides secretly in the ruler's coach shall have his feet cut off," but when Mi Tzu-hsia's mother fell ill, he used the royal coach to visit her, pretending that the ruler had given him permission. When the ruler found out, he said, "How dutiful is Mi Tzu-hsia! For his mother's sake he even forgot that he was committing a crime making him liable to lose his feet!"

Another time the two of them took a stroll in an orchard. Mi Tzu-hsia began eating a peach that he could not finish, and he gave the ruler the other half to eat. The ruler remarked, "You love me so much that you would even forget your own saliva taste and let me eat the rest of the peach!"

Later, however, envious fellow courtiers, spreading word that Mi Tzu-hsia was actually devious and arrogant, succeeded in damaging his reputation; the ruler came to see his actions in a new light. “This fellow once rode in my coach under pretense of my order,” he told the courtiers angrily, “and another time he gave me a half-eaten peach.” For the same actions that had charmed the ruler when he was the favorite, Mi Tzu-hsia now had to suffer the penalties. The fate of his feet depended solely on the strength of his reputation.

In the beginning, you must work to establish a reputation for one outstanding quality, whether generosity or honesty or cunning. This quality sets you apart and gets other people to talk about you. You then make your reputation known to as many people as possible (subtly, though; take care to build slowly, and with a firm foundation), and watch as it spreads like wildfire.

A solid reputation increases your presence and exaggerates your strengths without your having to spend much energy. It can also create an aura around you that will instill respect, even fear. In the fighting in the North African desert during World War II, the German general Erwin Rommel had a reputation for cunning and for deceptive maneuvering that struck terror into everyone who faced him. Even when his forces were depleted, and when British tanks outnumbered his by five to one, entire cities would be evacuated at the news of his approach.

As they say, your reputation inevitably precedes you, and if it inspires respect, a lot of your work is done for you before you arrive on the scene, or utter a single word.

Your success seems destined by your past triumphs. Much of the success of Henry Kissinger’s shuttle diplomacy rested on his reputation for ironing out differences; no one wanted to be seen as so unreasonable that Kissinger could not sway him. A peace treaty seemed a *fait accompli* as soon as Kissinger’s name became involved in the negotiations.

Make your reputation simple and base it on one sterling quality. This single quality—efficiency, say, or seductiveness—becomes a kind of calling card that announces your presence and places others under a spell. A reputation for honesty will allow you to practice all manner of deception. Casanova used his reputation as a great seducer to pave the way for his future conquests; women who had heard of his powers became immensely

curious, and wanted to discover for themselves what had made him so romantically successful.

Perhaps you have already stained your reputation, so that you are prevented from establishing a new one. In such cases it is wise to associate with someone whose image counteracts your own, using their good name to whitewash and elevate yours. It is hard, for example, to erase a reputation for dishonesty by yourself; but a paragon of honesty can help. When P. T. Barnum wanted to clean up a reputation for promoting vulgar entertainment, he brought the singer Jenny Lind over from Europe. She had a stellar, high-class reputation, and the American tour Barnum sponsored for her greatly enhanced his own image. Similarly the great robber barons of nineteenth-century America were long unable to rid themselves of a reputation for cruelty and mean-spiritedness. Only when they began collecting art, so that the names of Morgan and Frick became permanently associated with those of da Vinci and Rembrandt, were they able to soften their unpleasant image.

Reputation is a treasure to be carefully collected and hoarded. Especially when you are first establishing it, you must protect it strictly, anticipating all attacks on it. Once it is solid, do not let yourself get angry or defensive at the slanderous comments of your enemies—that reveals insecurity, not confidence in your reputation. Take the high road instead, and never appear desperate in your self-defense. On the other hand, an attack on another man's reputation is a potent weapon, particularly when you have less power than he does. He has much more to lose in such a battle, and your own thus-far-small reputation gives him a small target when he tries to return your fire. Barnum used such campaigns to great effect in his early career. But this tactic must be practiced with skill; you must not seem to engage in petty vengeance. If you do not break your enemy's reputation cleverly, you will inadvertently ruin your own.

Thomas Edison, considered the inventor who harnessed electricity, believed that a workable system would have to be based on direct current (DC). When the Serbian scientist Nikola Tesla appeared to have succeeded in creating a system based on alternating current (AC), Edison was furious. He determined to ruin Tesla's reputation, by making the public believe that the AC system was inherently unsafe, and Tesla irresponsible in promoting it.

To this end he captured all kinds of household pets and electrocuted them to death with an AC current. When this wasn't enough, in 1890 he got New York State prison authorities to organize the world's first execution by electrocution, using an AC current. But Edison's electrocution experiments had all been with small creatures; the charge was too weak, and the man was only half killed. In perhaps the country's cruelest state-authorized execution, the procedure had to be repeated. It was an awful spectacle.

Although, in the long run, it is Edison's name that has survived, at the time his campaign damaged his own reputation more than Tesla's. He backed off. The lesson is simple—never go too far in attacks like these, for that will draw more attention to your own vengefulness than to the person you are slandering. When your own reputation is solid, use subtler tactics, such as satire and ridicule, to weaken your opponent while making you out as a charming rogue. The mighty lion toys with the mouse that crosses his path—any other reaction would mar his fearsome reputation.

Image:
A Mine Full of
Diamonds and Rubies.
You dug for it, you found it,
and your wealth is now assured.
Guard it with your life. Robbers and thieves
will appear from all sides. Never take your wealth
for granted, and constantly renew it—time
will diminish the jewels' luster,
and bury them from sight.

Authority: Therefore I should wish our courtier to bolster up his inherent worth with skill and cunning, and ensure that whenever he has to go where he is a stranger, he is preceded by a good reputation.... For the fame which appears to rest on the opinions of many fosters a certain unshakable belief in a man's worth which is then easily strengthened in minds already thus disposed and prepared. (Baldassare Castiglione, 1478-1529)

REVERSAL

There is no possible Reversal. Reputation is critical; there are no exceptions to this law. Perhaps, not caring what others think of you, you gain a reputation for insolence and arrogance, but that can be a valuable image in itself—Oscar Wilde used it to great advantage. Since we must live in society and must depend on the opinions of others, there is nothing to be gained by neglecting your reputation. By not caring how you are perceived, you let others decide this for you. Be the master of your fate, and also of your reputation.

LAW 6

COURT ATTENTION AT ALL COST

JUDGMENT

Everything is judged by its appearance; what is unseen counts for nothing. Never let yourself get lost in the crowd, then, or buried in oblivion. Stand out. Be conspicuous, at all cost. Make yourself a magnet of attention by appearing larger, more colorful, more mysterious than the bland and timid masses.

PART I: SURROUND YOUR NAME WITH THE SENSATIONAL AND SCANDALOUS

Draw attention to yourself by creating an unforgettable, even controversial image. Court scandal. Do anything to make yourself seem larger than life and shine more brightly than those around you. Make no distinction between kinds of attention—notoriety of any sort will bring you power. Better to be slandered and attacked than ignored.

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

P.T. Barnum, America's premier nineteenth-century showman, started his career as an assistant to the owner of a circus, Aaron Turner. In 1836 the circus stopped in Annapolis, Maryland, for a series of performances. On the morning of opening day, Barnum took a stroll through town, wearing a new black suit. People started to follow him. Someone in the gathering crowd shouted out that he was the Reverend Ephraim K. Avery, infamous as a man acquitted of the charge of murder but still believed guilty by most Americans. The angry mob tore off Barnum's suit and was ready to lynch him. After desperate appeals, Barnum finally convinced them to follow him to the circus, where he could verify his identity.

THE WASP AND THE PRINCE

A wasp named Pin Tail was long in quest of some deed that would make him forever famous. So one day he entered the king's palace and stung the little prince, who was in bed. The prince awoke with loud cries. The king and his courtiers rushed in to see what had happened. The prince was yelling as the wasp stung him again and again. The courtiers tried to catch the wasp, and each in turn was stung. The whole royal household rushed in, the news soon spread, and people flocked to the palace. The city was in an uproar, all business suspended. Said the wasp to itself, before it expired from its efforts, "A name without fame is like fire without flame. There is nothing like attracting notice at any cost."

INDIAN FABLE

Once there, old Turner confirmed that this was all a practical joke—he himself had spread the rumor that Barnum was Avery. The crowd dispersed, but Barnum, who had nearly been killed, was not amused. He wanted to know what could have induced his boss to play such a trick. "My dear Mr. Barnum," Turner replied, "it was all for our good. Remember, all we need to ensure success is notoriety." And indeed everyone in town was talking about the joke, and the circus was packed that night and every night it stayed in Annapolis. Barnum had learned a lesson he would never forget.

Barnum's first big venture of his own was the American Museum—a collection of curiosities, located in New York. One day a beggar approached Barnum in the street. Instead of giving him money, Barnum decided to employ him. Taking him back to the museum, he gave the man five bricks and told him to make a slow circuit of several blocks. At certain points he was to lay down a brick on the sidewalk, always keeping one brick in hand. On the return journey he was to replace each brick on the street with the one he held. Meanwhile he was to remain serious of countenance and to answer no questions. Once back at the museum, he was to enter, walk around inside, then leave through the back door and make the same bricklaying circuit again.

On the man's first walk through the streets, several hundred people watched his mysterious movements. By his fourth circuit, onlookers swarmed around him, debating what he was doing. Every time he entered the museum he was followed by people who bought tickets to keep watching him. Many of them were distracted by the museum's collections, and stayed inside. By the end of the first day, the brick man had drawn over a thousand people into the museum. A few days later the police ordered him to cease and desist from his walks—the crowds were blocking traffic. The bricklaying stopped but thousands of New Yorkers had entered the museum, and many of those had become P. T. Barnum converts.

Even when I'm railed at, I get my quota of renown.

PIETRO ARETINO, 1492-1556

Barnum would put a band of musicians on a balcony overlooking the street, beneath a huge banner proclaiming FREE MUSIC FOR THE MILLIONS. What generosity, New Yorkers thought, and they flocked to hear the free concerts. But Barnum took pains to hire the worst musicians he could find, and soon after the band struck up, people would hurry to buy tickets to the museum, where they would be out of earshot of the band's noise, and of the booing of the crowd.

THE COURT ARTIST

A work that was voluntarily presented to a prince was bound to seem in some way special. The artist himself might also try to attract the attention of the court through his behaviour. In Vasari's judgment Sodoma was "well known both for his personal eccentricities and for his reputation as a good painter." Because Pope Leo X "found pleasure in such strange, hare-brained individuals," he made Sodoma a knight, causing the artist to go completely out of his mind. Van Mander found it odd that the products of Cornelis Ketel's experiments in mouth and foot painting were bought by notable persons "because of their oddity," yet Ketel was only adding a variation to similar experiments by Titian, Ugo da Carpi and Palma Giovane, who, according to Boschini painted with their fingers "because they wished to imitate the method used by the Supreme Creator. " Van Mander reports that Gossaert attracted the attention of Emperor Charles V by wearing a fantastic paper costume. In doing so he was adopting the tactics used by Dinocrates, who, in order to gain access to Alexander the Great, is said to have appeared disguised as the naked Hercules when the monarch was sitting in judgment.

THE COURT ARTIST, MARTIN WARNKE, 1993

One of the first oddities Barnum toured around the country was Joice Heth, a woman he claimed was 161 years old, and whom he advertised as a slave who had once been George Washington's nurse. After several months the crowds began to dwindle, so Barnum sent an anonymous letter to the papers, claiming that Heth was a clever fraud. "Joice Heth," he wrote, "is not a human being but an automaton, made up of whalebone, india-rubber, and numberless springs." Those who had not bothered to see her before were immediately curious, and those who had already seen her paid to see her again, to find out whether the rumor that she was a robot was true.

In 1842, Barnum purchased the carcass of what was purported to be a mermaid. This creature resembled a monkey with the body of a fish, but the head and body were perfectly joined—it was truly a wonder. After some research Barnum discovered that the creature had been expertly put together in Japan, where the hoax had caused quite a stir.

He nevertheless planted articles in newspapers around the country claiming the capture of a mermaid in the Fiji Islands. He also sent the papers woodcut prints of paintings showing mermaids. By the time he

showed the specimen in his museum, a national debate had been sparked over the existence of these mythical creatures. A few months before Barnum's campaign, no one had cared or even known about mermaids; now everyone was talking about them as if they were real. Crowds flocked in record numbers to see the Fiji Mermaid, and to hear debates on the subject.

A few years later, Barnum toured Europe with General Tom Thumb, a five-year-old dwarf from Connecticut whom Barnum claimed was an eleven-year-old English boy, and whom he had trained to do many remarkable acts. During this tour Barnum's name attracted such attention that Queen Victoria, that paragon of sobriety, requested a private audience with him and his talented dwarf at Buckingham Palace. The English press may have ridiculed Barnum, but Victoria was royally entertained by him, and respected him ever after.

Interpretation

Barnum understood the fundamental truth about attracting attention: Once people's eyes are on you, you have a special legitimacy. For Barnum, creating interest meant creating a crowd; as he later wrote, "Every crowd has a silver lining." And crowds tend to act in conjunction. If one person stops to see your beggarman laying bricks in the street, more will do the same. They will gather like dust bunnies. Then, given a gentle push, they will enter your museum or watch your show. To create a crowd you have to do something different and odd. Any kind of curiosity will serve the purpose, for crowds are magnetically attracted by the unusual and inexplicable. And once you have their attention, never let it go. If it veers toward other people, it does so at your expense. Barnum would ruthlessly suck attention from his competitors, knowing what a valuable commodity it is.

At the beginning of your rise to the top, then, spend all your energy on attracting attention. Most important: The *quality* of the attention is irrelevant. No matter how badly his shows were reviewed, or how slanderously personal were the attacks on his hoaxes, Barnum would never complain. If a newspaper critic reviled him particularly badly, in fact, he made sure to invite the man to an opening and to give him the best seat in the house. He would even write anonymous attacks on his own work, just to keep his name in the papers. From Barnum's vantage, attention—whether negative or positive—was the main ingredient of his success. The worst fate in the world for a man who yearns fame, glory, and, of course, power is to be ignored.

If the courtier happens to engage in arms in some public spectacle such as jousting ... he will ensure that the horse he has is beautifully caparisoned, that he himself is suitably attired, with appropriate mottoes and ingenious devices to attract the eyes of the onlookers in his direction as surely as the lodestone attracts iron.

Baldassare Castiglione, 1478-1529

KEYS TO POWER

Burning more brightly than those around you is a skill that no one is born with. You have to *learn* to attract attention, “as surely as the lodestone attracts iron.” At the start of your career, you must attach your name and reputation to a quality, an image, that sets you apart from other people. This image can be something like a characteristic style of dress, or a personality quirk that amuses people and gets talked about. Once the image is established, you have an appearance, a place in the sky for your star.

It is a common mistake to imagine that this peculiar appearance of yours should not be controversial, that to be attacked is somehow bad. Nothing could be further from the truth. To avoid being a flash in the pan, and having your notoriety eclipsed by another, you must not discriminate between different types of attention; in the end, every kind will work in your favor. Barnum, we have seen, welcomed personal attacks and felt no need to defend himself. He deliberately courted the image of being a humbug.

The court of Louis XIV contained many talented writers, artists, great beauties, and men and women of impeccable virtue, but no one was more talked about than the singular Duc de Lauzun. The duke was short, almost dwarfish, and he was prone to the most insolent kinds of behavior—he slept with the king’s mistress, and openly insulted not only other courtiers but the king himself. Louis, however, was so beguiled by the duke’s eccentricities that he could not bear his absences from the court. It was simple: The strangeness of the duke’s character attracted attention. Once people were enthralled by him, they wanted him around at any cost.

Society craves larger-than-life figures, people who stand above the general mediocrity. Never be afraid, then, of the qualities that set you apart and draw attention to you. Court controversy, even scandal. It is better to be attacked, even slandered, than ignored. All professions are ruled by this law, and all professionals must have a bit of the showman about them.

The great scientist Thomas Edison knew that to raise money he had to remain in the public eye at any cost. Almost as important as the inventions themselves was how he presented them to the public and courted attention.