

# Saving face with a baby-face? Shape of CEO's face affects public perception

May 30 2008

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When a corporation has a public relations crisis, the news media splash photos of the company's CEO around the world. According to new research in the *Journal of Consumer Research* the shape of the CEO's face evokes judgments about the person and the situation.

"A company can control what face is put on the crisis, and [our] research suggests that the face shape of this person is not a trivial consideration," say authors Gerald J. Gorn, Yuwei Jiang (both Hong Kong University), and Gita V. Johar (Columbia University).

In the study, participants examined news accounts of fictitious corporate misdeeds. The research found that in a minor public relations crisis, participants held a more favorable attitude toward a baby-faced CEO (large eyes, small nose, high forehead, and small chin) than a mature-faced CEO. The study subjects perceived baby-faced CEOs as more honest.

However, when the situation was more serious, and especially when it involved questions of competency, a baby-faced representative didn't help the company. "In contexts where innocence conveys naïveté, a mature face is evaluated more favorably," write the authors. For example, if a company failed to detect important defects in products, the baby-faced CEO was perceived to be detrimental.

The research also found that the "baby-face effect" is unconscious, and that when participants were distracted (by memorizing a number) the

babyface had greater influence. The unconscious nature of baby-face effects has not previously been shown in other research. The authors also demonstrate that the association between baby-faced people and honesty can be overcome by showing participants pictures of supposed criminals with babyfaces.

So, what advice do the authors give? "While there is no panacea for a company suffering a PR crisis, putting the right face on a response might just help save some face."

Source: University of Chicago

Citation: Saving face with a baby-face? Shape of CEO's face affects public perception (2008, May 30) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-05-baby-face-ceo-affects-perception.html>

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