

A good professional reputation is in the eye of the beholder

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Build a good reputation. This is an adage-like career advice in the business world. And, of course, being known for being good at something surely helps. Reputations will get your foot in the door in the uncertainty-laden fields of careers and businesses. When we make a judgment about someone, we are quick to look for what they have achieved before. As trite as it might appear, it makes sense to “build a good reputation”. The advice has face value.

Not so fast. Imagine that you need to deal with two different constituents in your job. Take, for example, a salesperson talking both to clients who wish their products to be customized and also developers who would rather not undertake such customization. Building a reputation as a client-friendly salesperson, as much as this might help relationships with clients, may not sit well with developers who will need to expend extra effort in their work.

Another example; your job as a CEO is to layoff employees to turn around the company. Building a reputation as a “[Neutron Jack](#)” might be received well among the shareholders, but not among employees (!). Such examples naturally come up in many situations, wherever we need to deal with multiple constituents — or audiences — who use our reputations in making judgments about us. Here, the advice of building a good reputation doesn’t look as clear and actionable. So, rather than simply accepting the advice at face value, we need to look at the picture on the other side of the coin.

This is what triggered our interest in audience-specific reputations. We began with the foundation that, first, reputations are about “being-known-for-something” and that, second, there are multiple audiences looking for possibly different signs to use in their evaluations of you. Considering these two points we then investigated whether reputations can be audience-specific—that is, a particular reputation is useful for success with a specific audience, but less so, or not at all, for others—and how such audience-specific reputations would impact careers.

Our investigation takes place in the world of contemporary art. We highlight two attributes of this context that make it fruitful for our undertaking. First, there are two types of reputations; a reputation for artistic quality and a reputation for commercial appeal. Second, there are two types of audiences that have broadly different appetites. Museums, being the gatekeepers of the art world, focus on artistic quality. The commercial appeal of an artist is a secondary concern for them. Galleries, being for-profit enterprises that benefit directly from the resale value of the artists’ works

they exhibit, focus on commercial appeal. The enduring artistic quality of these works is a secondary matter.

Our initial findings are as one would expect. When artists are known for artistic quality, as indicated by winning awards, they have exhibitions at different museums. When they are known for commercial appeal, as indicated by their appearance on magazine covers, they get exhibitions at a number of different galleries.

What is more interesting is the relative success of artists between museums and galleries. Here, we find a strong segregation. Artists with a reputation for the artistic quality of their work get many more chances to exhibit their work at museums compared with artists known for the commercial appeal of their work. Conversely, for advancing their careers with more exhibitions at galleries, a reputation for artistic quality does not help artists at all; only a reputation for commercial appeal helps.

These results indicate that reputations are audience specific. So, what does this mean for artists, and for you? It means that you need to understand what your key audience values and match that by developing a fitting reputation. Or, put another way, once you start accomplishing things and get to be known for something, you need to choose the “right” audience with whom you can further advance your career.

The fact that reputations are audience-specific raises the question: could there be some spillover of good reputations? Specifically, can there even be negative repercussions of building audience-specific reputations? If so, then the otherwise sensible advice of building a good reputation needs to be revisited, or should instead be posed with a caution.

To consider this, we need to take care of one more thing. The two helms of the contemporary art world differ in another important matter. Museums are generally funded by a variety of public sources including governments and philanthropists. As a result, museums are accountable to a variety of funders for their exhibition decisions; which makes them rely on external markers of artistic quality, such as awards. Galleries, on the other hand, are mostly privately owned, and by a narrower set of constituents. This means that galleries can be more speculative and are less accountable to stakeholders for their choices of exhibitions.

What we find after considering this is quite interesting. Being known for artistic quality while also having built a career through exhibitions at galleries hurts an artist’s chances of getting an exhibition at the top museums. That is the epitome of the art world—museums such as the Louvre or MoMA—is concerned about having external markers of the quality of an artist’s work to assure their diverse set of funders. The reverse is not true: being known for the commercial appeal of one’s work but having built a career through exhibitions at museums does not hurt an artist’s chances of having exhibitions at the top galleries. Simply put, galleries are not bothered about a possible misfit created by the artists’ track-record or what they are known for; they just care about whether artists have commercial appeal.

So what does this tell us? The advice of “build a good reputation” remains valuable, but needs elaboration. Specifically: Mind your audience. A particular reputation that you built might open doors with an audience, but not necessarily with others. More importantly, some reputations might even hurt your career—especially when your audience needs to justify its decision to others, and even more so when your career is on the way to the top-ladder. If you are just striving to kick-start your career, any kind of good reputation is better than none. Although even here minding the audience will allow you to build a reputation that helps more rather than less, so that you use your time and effort wisely.

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Notes:

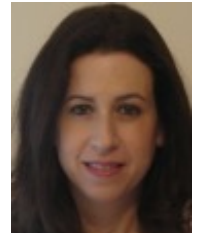
- This blog post is based on the authors’ paper [The Art of Representation: How Audience-specific Reputations Affect Success in the Contemporary Art Field](#), *Academy of Management Journal*, February 1, 2016 vol. 59 no. 1 113-134

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