

In the age of social media, not all publicity is good publicity

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Watching a Toronto television reporter's [televised smackdown](#) of two soccer fans' juvenile behaviour this week, I couldn't help but wonder: How do the reputation-management folks at the Bank of Montreal feel about the free publicity they're getting?

When *CityNews* reporter Shauna Hunt [tweeted](#) footage of her reaction to the fans – one of whom had interrupted her interview by shouting a misogynistic taunt she apparently encounters all too often – the reaction was swift and, for many women, deeply gratifying.

Ms. Hunt's followers complied with her request to share the footage. Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne saluted the reporter for calling the behaviour out as unacceptable. And Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment has apparently banned the men from attending Toronto FC and other sporting events for at least a year.

Nobody benefits from being affiliated with adult men behaving like sniggering 13-year-olds. No doubt, that's why the men's employers felt compelled to weigh in. Crown corporation Hydro One fired one, and a spokesperson for manufacturing company Cognex Corp. was quick to declare the other's views "reprehensible" and inconsistent with the company's values.

In the meantime, BMO's logo was prominently plastered on the chest of one of the men, video and photos of which are still circulating on websites and social media two days later. Although the bank bears no responsibility for the men's behaviour, the visual link established in viewers' minds between their puerility and its image can't be welcome.

The question is: Will it have an impact on their sponsorship decisions? Should it?

When media attention on Tiger Woods's infidelities transformed him overnight from "best golfer of all time" to "prolifically serial cheater," Accenture, Gillette and Gatorade were among those who cut him back or dropped him as a spokesman. Suddenly, the star athlete no longer represented these organizations' "values."

But companies that buy naming rights to a sporting venue don't have that kind of control over the fans who give them profile through ubiquitous game-day shirts. There's not much they can do about people who aren't smart enough to recognize the career limitations of making offensive statements about sexual assault so as to disrupt the professional activity of a woman armed with a camera, a microphone and a broadcast platform. Maybe actively distancing themselves from such associations would be a good idea.

Public-relations advisers have long ceased saying that "all publicity is good publicity" – especially when it associates an organization with wanton disregard for the rights of half the population. Even if your target market is primarily male, this is still poor stewardship of your reputation. And research into the market-share benefits of attracting female talent now arguably makes it a fire-able offence – discerning shareholders of both genders who are attuned to cultural trends and employment law are likely to care.

Sexual harassment and assault have earned an unprecedented volume of news media attention in the past year, shining a spotlight on the leadership of the institutions involved. The National Football League was roundly condemned for its handling of the Ray Rice incident. The CBC was similarly criticized for failing to address complaints about Jian Ghomeshi. And universities across the country are developing more robust policies and procedures in response to broad public concern about rape on university campuses.

But it was the passing comment of a retired female air-force trailblazer that provided perhaps the simplest and most compelling analysis of how to address these issues. In a televised CBC story on last month's release of the Deschamps report on sexual

misconduct in the Canadian Forces, Dee Brasseur was remarkably optimistic, noting that if leaders openly and definitively embraced the need for change, their subordinates would, too, given the military's command-and-obey ethos.

Plenty of research documents the degree to which leadership matters. And although private-sector CEOs and university presidents may not enjoy the same degree of influence over their employees as military bosses, it would be enormously powerful to see them exercise a little moral authority nonetheless. Not just because their brand is in peril, but because the women who work for them – and those who buy their products and services or own shares in their company – deserve to be respected.

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