

Mirror, Mirror

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I don't much enjoy looking in the mirror lately. Time, gravity and a failure to apply sunscreen have left their marks on my face. The reflection I see is not the person I think I am, thought I was or hoped to be. "Who is that guy?" I grumble to myself.

I've tried replacing the mirrors with those you see in a fun-house that make you look taller and more slender. I've also tried reducing the size of the mirror hoping that I could tolerate a smaller reflection of reality. These tactics work to a degree but I know the results are a mere distortion of the truth. And isn't living in a distorted reality called being delusional? In the end, I realize it is not the mirror's fault. It is merely doing its job reflecting only what it sees.

One of the jobs of the corporate trade compliance department is to be a mirror, to reflect the importing and exporting realities of the company. If the reflection is not flattering, it is not the fault of the trade compliance department, or is it? Is your trade compliance department reflecting an accurate portrait of your company's exporting and importing programs?

As with many business disciplines, we spend our days addressing problems. Yes, I know, the H.R. seminar we just attended told us to call them "opportunities." Nevertheless, we spend a disproportionate time at work addressing issues that did not go as planned. These challenges, exceptions, outliers, opportunities and yes, problems consume our days. It is no wonder that they seem to color our outlook about our companies.

The issues we tackle within trade compliance seem extraordinarily forbidding as they are accompanied by the specter of corporate and personal legal accountability. If only our challenges were as simple as a disappointed customer or a budget shortfall! Because the topics we address are so serious, we have a tendency to reflect a distorted version of the company that our colleagues do not recognize. Some of us have so much glare shining off of our mirrors that others look away for fear of being blinded.

Of course what we are talking about is how the trade compliance department communicates with the rest of the company. We do so informally through personal interactions and formally through meetings and performance reports. How we communicate our observations of the company's trade programs will determine how effective we are at moving our companies' compliance agendas forward. For purposes of this article let's talk about how we reflect our compliance observations through formal reporting.

Clean Your Mirror!

Are your data accurate? Did you drop or add a decimal point? Did your Excel spreadsheet display a rounding error? There is no better way to lose your audience than to present inaccurate information.

Is Your Mirror in Focus?

Do your data coincide with other accepted information sources in the company? Reporting periods in companies typically follow the accounting calendar. Double check your data to make sure it is consistent with other information reported during the same periods. Your information will be difficult for others to interpret and lose credibility if it does not jive with what they know about your corporate performance.

Use the Right Size of Mirror with the Proper Frame

Share only that data that is meaningful to the reader. As trade compliance managers we may have wall-to-wall mirrors in our offices. Our colleagues, however, will never fully appreciate the breadth and elegance of the data we collect. Perhaps a pocket mirror reflection of your work is all that is needed to achieve your goals. That could be something as simple as a monthly email including a handful of key metrics.

For other audiences in your company, you may choose a mirror with a broader reflection and a fancier frame that prompts them to take more than a brief glance at your report. That could mean providing a formal printed version of your report followed with a face to face meeting.

Display a Recognizable Reflection

Use the language of your company. If your company speaks in terms of costs, reporting your classification accuracy rate is not information that will be meaningful to your colleagues. Explaining how rising classification inaccuracy coincides with increasing duty expenses is information they will recognize and will have meaning for them.

You might even discover your colleagues beginning to rely on your reports in ways you had not anticipated.

Use the Same Light Source

If your company's business success is glowing, sharing a gloomy trade compliance report will seem inconsistent with what others know to be true about your company. Instead, present your information in the same light and highlight the positive contributions trade compliance has made towards corporate success. If you need to share a negative, do so in the light that you are trying to perpetuate the company's success through continual process improvement.

Display Your Mirror Prominently

To the extent it is appropriate, share you reports with everyone in the company. Post them on your intranet site. Post them prominently within your office. Talk about your results whenever, wherever and to whomever you can.

Of course you are providing some reflection of trade compliance to your company aren't you? If you fall in the category of those who think mirrors are only for the vain and you are not providing any reporting, you need to change your strategy.

Mirrors Never Lie

There is only so much you can do to clean up the reflection of your business activities. If the image looking back in the mirror is not attractive, then so be it. No matter how tempting it might be, you may not alter that reflection.

So get out the Windex, clean off your mirrors and start reflecting...er reporting.