

## Crisis of Identity: Unilever, Merck

BY RONALD ALSOP

Companies with battered reputations like Enron Corp. and Tyco International Ltd. may wish they weren't quite so famous – or infamous – right now.

But lack of familiarity can be an even more serious long-term reputation problem. If they're faceless entities, companies have no chance of crafting a strong reputation.

Two companies, in particular, suffered in the Harris Interactive/Reputation Institute ranking because of a murky public identity.

Both Unilever and Merck & Co. left many respondents scratching their heads.

Only 8% of respondents said they are "very familiar" with Unilever, while just 18% are well acquainted with Merck.

In contrast, more than three-quarters of the respondents said they are very familiar with Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and McDonald's Corp.

Darrin Chapman, a 32-year-old respondent from DePere, Wis., quipped that Unilever sounds as if it sells mechanical levers. He could name only one of Unilever's many brands – Good Humor ice-cream bars. "I only feel neutral about Unilever because I know so little about it," he explained. "The company needs to make its corporate name clearer on packaging and advertising for its brands."

The lack of a clear identity is especially troubling for Merck. It suffers from the pharmaceutical industry's negative reputation for excessive prices but enjoys little

offsetting benefit from the healing power of its prescription medications. People know it produces drugs but most can't name a single one.

Many respondents say they may well have a Merck drug in their medicine cabinet, but they know more about the Merck manuals of medical information than about its prescription brands.

"The corporate brand image needs improvement, with a better tie between the Merck name and specific products," said Philip Pierce, a 49-year-old employee-benefits consultant in Troy, Mich. "Other big pharmaceutical companies, such as Bayer, Pfizer and Lilly, do this very well."