

# All a-twitter

Four experts share advice on using social networks for business

## Blast back the right way in online crisis

BY MIKE WEINER

If you're a business owner, you've probably imagined dozens of nightmare scenarios that could threaten or even destroy your company's reputation. Usually these involve manufacturing glitches, personal injury lawsuits or natural disasters. But few small businesses consider the risks to their reputations and livelihoods that lurk online in this age of social media.

A stunning demonstration of this risk unfolded for Domino's Pizza in April 2009. A disturbing video depicting a Domino's employee tampering with customer food at a Conover, North Carolina, franchise was uploaded to YouTube. Within 12 hours of the video's appearance, it had been viewed 500,000 times.

At first, Domino's leadership team chose not to respond, hoping the crisis would blow over -- an unfortunate lack of action. In a matter of days, propelled by Twitter and other social media, the video exploded on the Web, viewed more than a million times on various video sites.

TV, print and Web news stories ricocheted around the globe and Domino's found itself in the throes of a

full-on brand crisis. Two days later -- an eternity in Web time -- Domino's posted a response on its own Web site and uploaded a video apology on YouTube.

Aside from Domino's languid reaction time, the biggest problem with their response was how their video ranked in Google searches after it was uploaded. "How effective can a crisis response be if it doesn't show up on the first page of a Google search," says Nina Hale, president of Nina Hale Consulting, a Minneapolis-based search engine marketing firm.

"Domino's should have immediately purchased keyword ads on the Google and YouTube search engines so they

you vulnerable to online attacks from the dissatisfied customer, jilted vendor or disgruntled employee. Here are eight steps you can take to prepare your business to fight back if an online nightmare scenario strikes:

1. Assemble a crisis-response team in advance of trouble. If you wait until you are in a reputation meltdown, you'll lose valuable time as you gain your footing. Size is your advantage as you won't have a herd of lawyers and multiple layers of approvals to wade through, which is what probably slowed down Domino's response. Planning should involve envisioning worst-case, nightmare scenarios and sketching out exactly

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— Mike Weiner, Node, part of Maccabee Group Public Relations

appear in the top right corner of the page for anyone who entered the word 'Domino's' in the search. The ads could have linked people directly to the video response."

Your small business may never experience a brand reputation disaster like Domino's, but the ease and immediacy of social media tools still leave

how you and your team will respond.

2. Monitor your online reputation. Google Alerts are your best option for monitoring what people are saying about you or your company within blogs, YouTube, Twitter and media portals in real time. Alerts are sent directly to your e-mail allowing you to see what is happening almost

## [to-do list]

- 1 | Compress your response time.
- 2 | A decade ago a two-day lag in crisis response would have seemed pretty fast. Now with the 24-hour news cycle and the power of citizen journalism, it's pitifully slow.
- 3 | Don't waste valuable time feeling victimized.
- 4 | Take action immediately, but do so thoughtfully and with a cool head.

immediately, and best of all it's free. Since Google cannot monitor closed social network sites like Facebook and MySpace, it will be important that you log on to these sites and perform keyword searches at least once a month.

3. Compress your response time. A decade ago a two-day lag in crisis response would have seemed pretty fast. Now with the 24-hour news cycle and the power of citizen journalism, it's pitifully slow. Don't waste valuable time feeling victimized. Take action immediately, but do so thoughtfully and with a cool head.

4. You can fight fire with fire. Always respond in the same method, media and venue that the original comment was delivered online. That means if your company gets bashed by a blogger, you should respond within that blog. Domino's was correct to release an apology video to combat an offensive video, even if they failed to promote their video properly. This approach increases the chances viewers will read or view both sides of the issue.

5. Keep responses factual, not emotional. Sure you're mad, but don't let that emotion come through. Keep your responses positive, respectful and factual. Be clear about your identity and your association with your organization. If negative comments involve

more than one blog, address each blogger individually with a personal response, not canned copy or boilerplate verbiage.

6. Employ an integrated media response. Should your crisis escalate to the point it will affect your company's revenue, you must take action beyond putting out fires online. Consider buying advertising, geographically targeted traditional as well as pay-per-click Web-based advertising. If you routinely gather customer information in your business, this is the time to put that data to work for you. Blast out an e-mail message that encourages customers to return.

7. Start your own blog. You may not be able to stop negative messages from proliferating through the social media landscape, but you can balance it with your own statement by creating your own blog. Leading blogging Web sites, such as Wordpress.com and Blogger.com, allow you to cheaply and easily start a blog. Ideally, you would start your business blog well before you're in a crisis, but these platforms allow you to get them up and running in a matter of hours.

8. Sponsor Google keywords. Most consumers start with Google when searching the Web. The challenge is how to ensure that your response ranks as high (if not higher) in the search results as the offending reference. This is where sponsoring keywords in Google search (Google AdWords) is critical. AdWords allow you to target certain keywords within Google search. When people use one of your keywords, your ad appears in the search results. Google AdWords are also cost effective, allowing you to set budget parameters around the ads, a great way for a small businesses to exercise control over crisis spending.

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**Mike Weiner** is director of Web and interactive strategy for **Node**, a social media and reputation management practice that is part of **Maccabee Group Public Relations** in Minneapolis:  
612.337.0087;  
mike@maccabeegroup.com;  
www.maccabeegroup.com