

Crisis Communications in the Age of Twitter

The best policy is pro-activity and active listening.

BY PAUL MACCABEE

ENDURING THE INFERNO OF A CRISIS from the recall of a product to a consumer boycott, has always been a humbling experience, but at least in the past companies had the luxury of time to respond. Today, fueled by 800 million users of Facebook, 175 million devotees of Twitter, 500 million viewers on YouTube and blogs read by more than 345 million people, the velocity with which a company's reputation can be blown apart by an online crisis is breathtaking.

Consider how quickly the beef industry was overcome recently by chef James Oliver's TV segment about "pink


slime," which went viral with 1.3 million YouTube views, followed by ABC News' blog post "70 percent of Ground Beef at Supermarkets Contains 'Pink Slime' " exploding across the Web. And witness the speed with which United Airlines was overwhelmed by 11.6 million views of a video, "United Breaks Guitars," posted by an outraged customer. And

The good news? Here's how those same online channels which can bring down a company's good name in the time it takes to fire off a 140-character tweet, can help your company respond to a crisis with unprecedented speed:

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DON'T BE AN ONLINE OSTRICH: RESPONDING BEFORE THE CRISIS LIVES FOREVER

» In the era of Twitter and Facebook, you no longer have the option of hoping a crisis will blow over before your company responds. Consider that six years ago, bloggers were abuzz when a customer popped open a Kryptonite lock by inserting a Bic pen. Today, that story about vulnerable Kryptonite locks still comes up fourth in Google Search for the brand. Search for the words Bic Kryptonite and you'll get 1.2 million results with titles like, "Twist a Pen, Open a Lock." As of this issue date, the "How To Unlock a Kryptonite Lock with a Bic Pen" video on Youtube has received 234,000 views.

What did the company do wrong? Kryptonite, which had known about the problem for two years before it was exposed, refused to reply to a call from Wired magazine, which reported the company's silence. Contacted by the New York Times, the company defended itself by saying "that locks made by other manufacturers shared the same vulnerabilities." Your lesson? Respond quickly and honestly, or your reputation will be barbecued on the Web for years, even decades, to come. 



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1

LISTEN UP!

» Monitoring Conversations About You Online "You can't fight what you can't see," sing the rock band Girls Against Boys. And you can't defend your reputation if you don't monitor what the online world says about your company — before, during and after a crisis. How can you determine if that nasty blogger is a lone malcontent or a highly-influential figure in your industry? There are more than 450 online monitoring tools available, from Google Alerts and Social Mention to Trackr, Viral Heat, Alterian and Radian6. Klout, and Twitalyzer can analyze negative tweets, while Alexa and Compete can evaluate the prominence of websites posting negative mentions of your company.

2

DARK SITES AND ONLINE CHANNELS: PREPARING FOR THE INEVITABLE

» Don't start your company's social media engagement the day your CEO is perp walked through your lobby by the FBI. Before a crisis hits, build your social media infrastructure: a branded YouTube channel, Twitter feed and company blog — the quickest way to respond, in kind, to online critics. If your company has advance warning, you can prepare a pre-loaded, not-yet-public response "dark site," which can be switched on to provide video and supporting documents and images.

3

PAY RATHER THAN PRAY—USING PAID CRISIS TOOLS

» Sponsored Tweets can keep links to your company's rebuttal high at the top of Twitter search results. You can even buy paid search terms on Google (such as "Disgraced Minnesota CEO" or "Radioactive Chocolate") which will not go active until you pull the switch; that way, consumers searching for an explanation of your crisis will also have a prominent link to your response where they can learn your side of the story. Don't forget to review your ad copy, to ensure your company's messaging isn't newly distasteful given the current crisis.

4

CRISIS ALA YOUTUBE

» YouTube is an essential crisis response tool, relying the emotional, human side of your advocacy when it's needed most. But if your spokesperson responds to a crisis on YouTube, make sure he or she acknowledges the issue you're facing head-on. Check out Domino's president Patrick Doyle, whose YouTube-distributed apology for renegade employees who violated health code standards was straight-forward and candid. Rather than attack online critics, Domino's thanked the blogging community for alerting his company to the outrage.

Finally, help consumers find your response video by adopting the words they'll actually use to search. Domino's actually titled one of its response videos "Disgusting Dominos People —Dominos Responds." A Domino's PR executive got it when he said, "Domino's owns all of its trademarks, but we don't own the Domino's brand. Our customers do."