

Stories of irate consumers turning to social media to gang-tackle brands have become so common that the time to recalibrate crisis management in a digital world is now. Companies must have in place an adroit team that can fight fire with fire to counter damaging information that is spreading virally on blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other media that reach consumers rapidly and reestablish goodwill.

Every brand needs to dust off their crisis plan and create a new strategy for crisis management. In a world that is shaped by speed of response, it is critical to monitor what is being said about products, employees, executives and more, creating a new crisis infrastructure and delivering tailored messages to restore and enhance reputation. Recently, The Centers for Disease Control flooded social media with nerves-calming messages about the spread of swine flu. Even the U.S. Air Force showed up on Twitter to refute another government agency's report that GPS technology may fail as satellites are not being replaced appropriately.

Perhaps the most notable recently example is when Domino's Pizza was put to the test when two employees who thought it was funny posted clips on YouTube showing one inserting cheese in his nose and adding it to a sandwich. As discussion moved at lightning speed across YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and dozens of other social-networking sites, Domino's responded - not just through traditional media but via the same mediums, posting an apology from Domino's USA President Patrick Doyle on YouTube that included his personal commitment to finding out what happened and pledging to find a solution. Domino's also responded to discussions on Twitter and Facebook. The brand gained support by taking a conversational approach with its customers, listening as much as talking, and responding in a manner that was approachable and transparent.

As with any crisis plan, the first step of course is to have the plan in place before the crisis. Given the speed with which crisis spreads online, preparation is more critical than ever – and needs to be tested early and often. You should consider how a wide variety of situation could impact you in a crisis situation – and from which angles, sites and communities. A thorough audit of your space will help you uncover these weaknesses and plan accordingly. Social media strategy must be in place long before the emergence of a crisis. A company's statement needs to be ready long before a crisis emerges and it must be released immediately upon discovering the situation.

Gone are the days of an investigative journalist calling to fact-check before running a story, as citizen journalists currently have no real constraints before publishing information which would create a crisis. This changes the landscape in two major ways for companies – obviously, the speed of information's dissemination has increased, but more importantly, the accuracy of claims can often be distorted and misrepresented, particularly during the early stages of a crisis.

In a time in which the opinions of so many are so readily available, companies need to use their customers' opinions to their advantage. Engage your customer in good times and bad, and in the end, they'll respect you for it. There are numerous available with which to measure the tenor and tone of conversations in the social media environment. Companies need to understand who their true brand ambassadors are and create a program to empower them. In the excitement of finding these powerful and influential "fans," don't forget to look within your own ranks. Employees can, and should, be your number one brand ambassadors, and it is important not only to recognize their efforts to promote the company's vision, but also to ensure they are aware of the potential pitfalls. Develop a policy that suits your corporate culture, and make sure they are aware of its opportunities and limitations. Seemingly benign posts from an employee can bubble up to become problems down the line, such as the eager engineer sharing his insights into a pending product launch, which hasn't been formally announced to the public yet.

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While reputation inevitably takes a hit during a crisis, rapid response can mitigate the situation significantly. Clearly, if Domino's had not been engaged in a dialogue with its customer prior to the crisis, it would not have had any followers – and thus no one to listen to its take on the crisis. While this is most obvious on Twitter (as your “followers” are the only audience with which you can interact) it is true with virtually all social media.

Allison & Partners recommends to clients that communications and product marketing teams regularly brainstorm what potential issues might materialize and devise a response plan accordingly, ensuring that everyone is briefed on their individual responsibilities. Speed of response is critical, so even if the initial communiqué is, ‘We’re aware of this and are investigating it fully and will provide a further update at X time,’ at least it shows the public that the organization takes the issue seriously. While it will not necessarily quell the rumor-mongers, it at least provides some breathing room before a more comprehensive response is issued and shows consumers that the company is aware of the situation and is engaged in finding a solution.

Perhaps the most important steps for companies to take are making it clear they are taking steps to rectify the problem. It’s a plus that today it is easier for companies to provide regular status updates, through a blog, Twitter feed or so on – the same technologies used to launch the bad news -- so the public can see that progress is being made.

Knowing how you will disperse your message via social media is critical. Social media is not one-size-fits all, so companies cannot simply set themselves up on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social networks and keep blasting the same message that appears their press releases. Organizations need to determine what their specific goals are for social media and how it can benefit them, and ensure all elements of it tie neatly together. Otherwise they can end up being a series tactics in silos which don’t really contribute to the overall goal and don’t feed into each other.

Social media has the potential to move at the bandwidth equivalent of lightspeed. Your crisis plan needs to move just as fast – if not faster – to contain the beast. Paramount to this is monitoring conversation about your company, its products and its brands prior to a crisis. It is critical to understand not just the quantity, but the quality of conversations taking place about your company. From Brand Ambassadors to Brand Bashers, they are all out there waiting to be discovered and engaged in a meaningful way; being able to marshal these resources in good times and bad puts you ahead of the game, and will help you to prepare template statements for a myriad of situations in place so that you can respond immediately upon discovering the issue. As in other crisis situations, this response needs to be sincere, authentic and empathetic. You don’t need the solution, just communication that addresses what your next steps will be.

Having those elements in place in time of crisis is now mandatory. But the demise of the press release is still some time away, even though its form is morphing as time progresses. A press release contains significantly more background than is available in other forums, so it allows the media a deeper insight into a company or product than can be contained in a tweet or a Facebook post. Some reporters do want to know more, and trusting that that kind of information will be mined if it is contained within a blog post on the corporate web site is dangerous, as it could lead to a lot of media missing major announcements.

Although the days of the shotgun approach to media relations are long past, it’s still a risky game to simply make information available and hope that it will be picked up by all key influencers without having to proactively push it out to them.

It’s risky, too, not to pay attention to chatter on blogs. Had Motrin been paying attention, it certainly would not have launched an ad campaign to make the claim that carrying babies in slings can give you a backache, and that baby slings are fashion statements. Mothers who are advocates of slings objected, and boycotted the Ibuprofen tablets. The ad was discussed on Twitter early one Sunday, and by mid-day Motrin Moms was one of the most popular tags on the site. Motrin produced a response and an apology that evening.

In the “old” world, a company producing an official apology, same day, on a Sunday, would have been viewed as very proactive. In this instance, Motrin was criticized as being too slow to respond. This really goes to show that companies must always be tracking what’s being discussed about them and get out there with a response to guide the conversation as much as possible. It’s

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Remember, too, we advise, to be prepared for success. KFC hit a marketing homerun when Oprah Winfrey helped promote its grilled chicken two-piece meal and offered consumers two coupons for free food at Oprah.com. When word of the chicken bonanza was spread by bloggers and it became a hot topic on Twitter, KFC was overwhelmed, could not deliver on the offer and had to rescind it. The Boy Scout motto of a simpler, pre-digital era still applies: Be Prepared (for the 'tweet' smell of success).