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BLOG STORM

ONE IRATE CUSTOMER CAN STIR UP A WHIRLWIND.



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Surviving a Blog Storm

CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS ON THE WEB CAN SPIRAL OUT OF CONTROL.

Looking on the internet for references to your company, you come across an unfamiliar and hostile-sounding site, and the search engine has it listed right next to your own official Web site. You open the page and read someone's claim that your business is sloppy, neglectful, and doesn't deliver what it promises.

Your initial annoyance turns to deep concern when you realize how many customers and potential customers might stumble across this as easily as you did. Welcome to the irate customer, 21st-century style.

A whole new ball game

Customer complaints are nothing new. What is new is the access the internet has given to any determined individual with an ax to grind. "The primary difference is that issues that heretofore had been buried by virtue of the fact that they were regional, now have a national or international

scope," says Todd Defren, a principal with Shift Communications, a public relations firm based in Massachusetts and California. "What happens in Sheboygan is now found out about in Shanghai." And most of those internet viewers will have no basis for knowing whether the accusations are accurate, blown out of proportion, or downright false.

Jonathan Bernstein, a Monrovia, California-based crisis-management consultant, says, "These days, every crisis has an internet component." Not only that, virtually everything that becomes part of the internet also has the potential to hang around for years.

Life in the blogosphere

A blog (short for "Web log") is an interactive site whose owners can update the information, with new postings, as often as they like. They are simple and inexpensive to set up and run. Many blogs are fanciful or personal in nature, but others provide the means for bloggers to vent

against whatever makes them mad, including your company.

Unlike conventional, static Web sites, some blogs allow visitors to post their own responses, so any controversy has the potential to gather steam in a universe that has acquired its own name: the blogosphere. "The real damage happens when a blogger comes out with an opinion or a fact, and other bloggers build on it," says Ted Demopoulos, a New Hampshire-based information-security consultant.

Of course, many voices are drowned out by the sheer volume of information on the Web. Most bloggers lack the know-how to ensure that their sites rank high in the search engines, Bernstein says. "They are only communicating with their friends—people who are already their fans."

It's the smaller percentage of truly internet-savvy bloggers, well versed in maximizing their own visibility, who can seriously threaten your reputation, Bernstein says.

What to do about it

How you respond depends on what the blogger is saying. Patently libelous statements may ultimately require legal action, Bernstein says, but most responses

Crafting a Response

An irate person who criticizes a company is often interested mainly in feeling as though someone is listening, crisis management-consultant Jonathan Bernstein says. So you may be able to settle matters by letting the blogger know you are a real person who has heard the argument.

If you post a response on the person's blog:

- ▶▶ **Don't get angry or make threats.** A calm response will show visitors to the blog that you are reasonable.
- ▶▶ **Say that you're looking into the matter,** you are sorry they aren't happy, and you will contact them privately.
- ▶▶ **If you exchange e-mails directly with the blogger,** don't say anything you don't want made public—it may be posted.



require less drastic steps. As with any irate customer, first assess the complaint to see if it is valid—after all, even good companies mess up from time to time.

Demopoulos says, “If you’ve made a mistake, you want to get beyond it. You want to apologize and move on.” Other charges may be entirely baseless. Or the blogger may not even be a customer, but someone who simply dislikes your industry.

Since blogs are interactive, consider posting a response on the same site where the negative comments appear. Be careful not to respond in anger, though. “If someone slams me online, it’s like throwing down the gauntlet,” Defren says. “I want to defend myself vociferously. But you have to take a deep breath, relax, and don’t do anything you’re going to regret later.” (See “Crafting a Response,” *opposite page*.)

The antidote

Many bloggers are guests on sites owned by companies that provide space to multiple users. “If someone has posted information that is not accurate, contact the site owner, and provide proof the blogger is wrong,” Bernstein says. “Ask them to take it off. In most cases they will.”

Another approach is to flood the internet with *positive* stories about your

company, he adds. Spread the good news through free or low-cost internet press release distribution sites such as prwire.com, 24-7pressrelease.com, and expertclick.com. Send out positive stories about things your company is doing. “If you generate a flurry of positive news releases, they will show up on the first page of a Google search engine, and on most other major search engines as well,” Bernstein says.

If it looks like fun...

Then, of course, there’s always the option of starting your own blog, where you have more control over the flow of information about your company. Among the easiest ways to do so is through the site blogger.com. Complete a simple, three-step process (set up your account, name your blog, choose a template). And it’s free.

More and more companies are using blogs to communicate interactively with their customers and the public. A good blog, though, requires almost constant attention to stay current and fresh. Make sure you have the time to devote to the project. Don’t spend so much time blogging that you neglect your business, Defren warns. “It’s business first, blogging second.” n

