



By Mary Lou Denny

Debunking the myth
that any publicity
is good publicity

Positive Publicity

With major missteps recently from large corporations like Groupon and The Gap, some marketers think the quickest and easiest way to garner media attention is by staging a crisis. Often referred to as mea culpa marketing, it involves an organization staging a stunt—anything from insensitive commercials to seemingly thoughtless rebranding. However, this risky tactic can cause more long-term damage than short-term benefits.

Grabbing Attention

Mea culpa marketing has a simple formula. Pull a stunt to get attention, then immediately follow up with an apology. Once the first news cycle is over, the company works to win back public favor. This is hardly a smart strategy to improve your reputation or even to implement a short-term initiative.

It is important to understand the difference between publicity—organically generated media coverage—and public relations, the active strategy of communicating meaningful messages to target audiences, producing positive press coverage and generating better search engine rankings. Savvy marketers know that being mentioned in a single news cycle by the media will not produce beneficial results. It takes a strategic public relations plan to cement your company's credibility and to reach your goals.

The rise of this type of short-term, well-orchestrated and potentially dangerous tactic conveys a message true for any company or brand: It is becoming increasingly difficult to grab the attention of target audiences.

Not all mea culpa marketing efforts are big-budget initiatives. Some marketers use 140 characters to garner attention. Clothing designer Kenneth Cole posted this message on Twitter referencing the violent unrest in Egypt in early 2011: "Millions are in uproar in

#Cairo. Rumor is they heard our new spring collection is now available online at [link] - KC."

Following online outrage against the brand, Cole posted an apology on his Facebook account. Adhering to the standard conciliatory steps of this type of marketing gimmick, the brand sought forgiveness and visibility while attention was focused on the brand.

A comprehensive marketing and public relations strategy can establish ongoing and positive relationships with customers, prospects, the media, employees and the consuming public. Gimmicks such as mea culpa marketing are not effective short-term or long-term strategies.

Positive Public Relations

In the evolving media landscape, it is crucial that you highlight your company's success and leadership with news releases, media relations and social media. It is also important to connect directly with your target audience and shareholders with a company blog or e-newsletter.

Calculated blunders used to drum up media coverage can easily be found with a Google search for years to come. Future prospects may run across the planned mistake and become immediately disinterested in working with your company. Many may never discover the second phase of the calculated crisis, the apology and the solution.

Water quality businesses have an excellent platform on which to educate customers on local water quality and how their services can improve the lifestyle in a community. When you share the educational information that helps your customers in an interesting way, you will build your brand as the educational expert in your community. That is the way to garner the type of attention that will increase your status and success in the industry.

Seeking publicity just to get your name out there without worrying about

the quality of the message is like selling a water treatment system that does not work: You make the sale in the short term, but in the long term you fall short.

Social Media Strategies

According to a Forrester report, more than 80% of Americans use social networking websites each month. More than 300,000 businesses have a Facebook presence, and social media initiatives have delivered stellar results for small and large businesses alike. With several metrics available for measuring your company's social media effectiveness, it is important to set clear goals. Consider metrics that compare sales, website traffic, social media mentions, brand awareness or other business goals.

Some businesses have seen a dramatic increase in sales since participating in social networking sites. Of the top 100 global brands, the most heavily and widely engaged in social media saw an increase in sales, according to Engagement DB's social media engagement report. In the first half of 2009, Dell generated \$3 million directly via Twitter. At the end of 2009, Dell reported that it had doubled its Twitter-based sales.

Social media is not just for large companies, however. Naked Pizza, a small pizza parlor in New Orleans, is one example. The pizzeria is equipped with a large, prominent sign encouraging people to follow it on Twitter. Naked Pizza also measures its social media success through sales. On a record-breaking day, more than 68% of total sales and 85% of new customers came as a result of Twitter.

Benefit from an increase in website traffic with a successful social media strategy. Link sharing is a key element in social networking sites. Post interesting content on your Facebook fan page, blog or Twitter account so your followers, fans and readers can share links to your content with their online peers. Monitor the number of inbound links your target audiences are generating.

To foster link sharing, utilize services such as TweetMeme, a "retweet" button

that can be added to web pages and blog posts tweeting a link to your website. It allows visitors to easily tweet a link to your content. Facebook analytics for a fan page allow you to monitor how many clicks your Facebook content garners and the amount of web traffic it generates. Capitalize on social sharing services such as SocialTwist, which delivered more than 10 million links in 2009, to skyrocket your organic search engine results.

Social media can help build and strengthen brand awareness. Monitor blog traffic and press mentions inspired by blog posts or other shared online content. Social media seeks to build relationships and create brand evangelists to spread the great news about your business. It can raise your search engine listings and increase brand visibility.

To best harness the power of social media, learn which channels your target

audiences are using or most likely to accept. Social media engagement is more than posting links to your website or tweeting your success on a routine basis. Instead, foster conversation and position your business as an industry leader.

For a positive social media return on investment, it is important to set clear business goals and milestones to measure your success. For maximum impact, listen to your audiences and adjust your efforts accordingly. *wqp*

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