

Managing an online PR crisis



By [Ronelle Bester](#)

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A PR crisis can erupt at any time - be it the result of a disgruntled employee or an enraged customer - and can cause a company a significant amount of reputational damage if handled incorrectly.

Even the smallest companies can fall victim to negative public sentiment, and PR agencies, irrespective of their size, need to be prepared to deal with the fall-out as swiftly and efficiently as possible.

This is particularly important when it comes to managing public sentiment in the online environment, which has given rise to a new breed of critic - one armed with anonymity and the ability to express their opinions across a wide range of platforms.

Whilst there is no cookie-cutter solution that can be applied to all online crisis situations, there are certain measures that agencies can take to better equip them to diffuse a range of potentially explosive outcomes

Be prepared

The key to dealing with any kind of crisis is preparation. The immediacy of the web means that a situation can escalate very rapidly, and, as such, needs to be dealt with as quickly as possible.

Whilst professional media monitoring tools are not a realistic option for many smaller agencies, Google Alerts can be used as an effective alternative. Daily keyword searches can also aid in tracking coverage, and should be undertaken as regularly as possible so as to keep a vigilant eye on public sentiment.

Assess the situation

Every single crisis situation is different, and needs to be carefully assessed before action is taken. A considered approach is necessary, as what works in one instance could potentially have disastrous consequences in another.

Before entering into full-blown crisis mode, consider the situation from a holistic perspective. What is the actual impact of these comments? Is anybody actually reading them apart from the critic in question?

Google can once again be helpful in painting a bigger picture, as a page's position within a search can offer insight into its popularity and readership. An understanding of the article's audience can be invaluable in informing your crisis management strategy, so make sure to arm yourself with as much information as possible before diving in head-first.

Is silence really golden?

The vast majority of crisis communication experts recommend responding to negative comments. Whilst this approach is effective in the majority of instances, there are times when a response can actually serve to further fuel the fire.

So how do you decide whether to keep tight-lipped or launch a counter-offensive? The validity of a comment will often dictate which approach would work best. Should a criticism, for instance, arise as a result of a legitimate error on the part of the company in question, a transparent and honest response is most likely best to serve the situation.

However, should the complainant be using a web-based news platform to lash out at your client based on a personal vendetta, this approach can actually end up exacerbating the situation. Bearing in mind that you are operating in a public forum, it doesn't do your client's reputation any service to be engaging in a petty squabble of a personal nature. In situations like this, it is often best to take the conversation offline where possible, and to try to find an amicable resolution outside of the public sphere.

Hit back strategically

Often the best approach to handling a crisis is to counter negativity with a positive stance. The reality is that, whilst many situations can be dealt with easily, there will be times when you are forced to deal with unreasonable individuals who will remain unconvinced by your attempts to come to a sensible détente.

In cases such as these, it is sometimes better to take a more indirect approach to crisis management, and employ tactics other than company engagement in order to counter any negativity appropriately.

For instance, should you be dealing with an unhappy employee, who is using a story's comments section to vent about their issues with their employer, you can involve other members of staff, and encourage them to respond to these comments with their own, more positive views of the company. This can be a very effective approach to countering a negative situation, as comments originating from peers, rather than directly from the company itself, are often better received.

Situations like this can also represent an opportunity to engage in publicity of a more positive nature. Rather than taking a defensive stance on behalf of your client, why not organise a publicity tour or a charitable initiative likely to be received positively by the media? By proactively fostering positive sentiment, you can quickly change public perceptions and dull the impact of a reputational crisis.

Expect the unexpected

The fluctuating nature of the web means that crisis situations can arise unexpectedly and in various forms, and can often include an element of surprise that you couldn't possibly have envisioned.

However, by employing a considered and informed approach to a possibly detrimental situation, you can better position yourself to counteract negativity effectively in as quick and concise a manner as possible.

ABOUT RONELLE BESTER

Ronelle Bester, MD of Red Ribbon Communications, started her career in technology at Dimension Data as marketing manager of the Western Cape. She has a BTech degree in public relations from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and has lectured in public relations at both the University of South Africa and Varsity College. Email Ronelle at ronelle@redribboncommunications.co.za, read her blog and follow her on Twitter at [@ronelle](https://twitter.com/ronelle).

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