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The Overlooked Strategy For Reputation Management

by Joseph Cowan, Friday, February 13, 2009, 4:15 PM

There is an opportunity screaming at companies that is supported in great degree by search, traffic and consumer behavior data: using search for reputation management.

Prior to the development and ubiquitization of the Internet, news, damaging or otherwise, would flow from the media to the consumer. Feedback from consumers was limited to that of letters to the editor of newspapers and the occasional letter or phone call directly to a company or politician. Consequently, this almost one-way process prevented rapid dissemination of negative information regarding corporations, individuals and issues. There was seemingly always time for a company to develop and put into place an information strategy regarding an issue.

Fast-forward to the Internet and the 21st century. Web 2.0 and the rapid deployment of user-generated content sites have changed both the direction and speed of response for a reputation crisis. Consumers not only interact with stories published on newspaper sites and other media, but many, with personal agendas, create their own blogging sites for the express purpose of stating their own opinion regarding issues. One opinion generates multiple responses and these responders share their opinion with others.

Drop a stone at the top of a snowy crest and watch as the avalanche ensues.

Over the past calendar year alone, corporations, government leaders, the food, financial and health care industries, sports figures, and entertainment celebrities, have all found themselves in the midst of this revolution of public opinion in a new form. The consumer, not subject to regulatory committees or legal teams, instantly responds to breaking news, and those consumers expect an equivalent speed of response from the relevant group.

The mistake many make is to assume that consumer response to breaking news might not be so

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bad, or that the issue will subside. Or, they believe that they can wrest control at some point from the media. But, as the media decides what sound bites are used in interviews, or letters to editors can be ignored, beleaguered executives, marketing teams and individuals find that there is really one place where they can be guaranteed a forum for their point of view on an issue: the Web site.

Consumers that have an open mind, that are willing to research an issue and get the most information, will use search engines to do so. Appropriate use of paid search, search engine optimization and trademark registration can be an effective means of getting your point of view to the consumer in a controlled format. Being prepared and having an active campaign prepared for reputation management can help counter consumers with an agenda or who only have the media point of view. In the event of a crisis, large or small, corporate structure can delay or prevent meaningful, effective communication strategies. If that's the case on your end, a prepared reputation management campaign can be pre-approved through your regulation process, in place, and ready for that rumble of a breaking news issue.