

Strategies

How the Internet can cause backlash -- and how to prepare

Minneapolis / St. Paul Business Journal - July 6, 2007 by [Caroline Melberg](#)

Editor's note: To inquire about submitting a Strategies column, contact Managing Editor Mark Reilly at (612) 288-2110 or mreilly@bizjournals.com.

Just when you thought your job as a small-business owner couldn't get any more challenging, along comes the giant elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about -- and it has dramatic implications for your small business.

You've probably already participated in this seismic marketing shift -- or you know someone who has -- without even realizing it.

What am I talking about? To use the correct term, "user generated Internet content." You've probably heard of blogs, bulletin boards and forums, and seen the buzz about YouTube and MySpace and FaceBook -- but you haven't thought about the implications these radically different technologies have on your business.

The implications are big. Today's Web is all about participation, and blogs, YouTube and MySpace allow users -- your customers -- to put their two cents in. Your company is no longer in control; your customers are.

The customer connection

What happens when customers start to put their two cents in about your business?

Ask Taco Bell. On Feb. 23, a video was released of several rats scampering around one restaurant in Greenwich Village. By that afternoon, the story had raced around the Internet, creating a companywide crisis. By March 13, a search on Google for "Taco Bell rats" showed 726,000 results! Steven Fink, president of crisis-management firm Lexicon Communications said, "The biggest problem with the Internet is not that it is widespread but that [a story] is out there forever. This story will live on the Internet for all time."

Are you thinking, "It can't happen to me"? As a small-business owner you take great pride in your company. But today the impact of just one unhappy customer is dramatically magnified by tools that have democratized the publishing and distribution of information into the hands of every person with access to a computer and an Internet connection.

Think about how you use the Web today. If you are going to meet with a new company, or evaluate their products and services for your business, don't you check them out online first, to see what they are all about? The vast majority of your customers do.

Proactive preparation

So what can you do to make sure that you put the power of the Internet on your side, should a crisis arise?

In response to the Taco Bell incident, Steven Fink says, "What marketers are dangerously failing to take into account is that discussion online is fueling the discussion happening offline. This is a perfect example of how you need to have a very fast Web-based response to a crisis so you are providing information -- not spin or distorting the facts for people, but providing information that helps neutralize it."

Here are some steps to take to make sure you get the right message about your company out online.

Before a crisis occurs:

- Proactively become knowledgeable about the power of user-generated content. Understand how blogs and sites like YouTube and MySpace work.
- Develop a search strategy that places your business high in the natural search-engine rankings for keywords related to your business or industry.
- Publish content related to your business or industry in multiple places online across the Internet. This helps ensure that the messages online about your company are what you want your customers to see.
- Consistently search online for mentions of your company, or register for an online "Alert" service that notifies you when a mention of your company occurs online.

When a crisis occurs:

- Create a positive, truthful response to the situation and post it on your Web site, preferably linkable from your home page.
- Post your side of the story to your blog, if you have one.
- Allow customers to subscribe via RSS to updated posts from you about how you are fixing the situation.
- Make sure all of your employees are up to date on the situation and understand how to explain the solution to your customers -- both in person and on the telephone.
- Buy pay-per-click keywords related to your company that will direct customers to your Web site -- and your side of the story.
- Include negative pay-per-click keywords related to the issue and your company so that your sponsored results listings do not reinforce a negative image. (For instance, Taco Bell should have purchased the negative keyword "rats" in the example illustrated above).

Of course the best thing to do is to continue to always strive for excellence to ensure that a crisis does not occur.

But being prepared -- even if a crisis never happens -- will happily result in your business ranking higher in the search engines, and more customers finding your business as a result. And if you do experience a crisis, you'll weather the storm with much less negative publicity, allowing you to use the situation to improve your reputation as a business who can be counted on within your community for years to come.

Caroline Melberg is president and CEO of Small Business Mavericks, a division of Melberg Marketing. For more information, visit www.SmallBusinessMavericks.com

[Contact the Editor](#) [Need Assistance?](#) [More Latest News →](#)

Entrepreneur Case Studies

[From Beginners to Bigshots](#)

- [How to write a business plan](#)
- [SBA loan program details](#)
- [Profile: Tech startup uses SBA loan](#)
- [Profile: Restaurateurs tap most-popular loan](#)



All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.