**GOLD PEAK TEA:**

**SOCIAL MEDIA PROMOTION GONE WRONG**

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“After what you did to Theodore Scott, I will no longer buy your product.” “Pathetic!!!” “Your product reflects how you treated Theodore and it leaves a bad taste in my mouth.” “I hope the sewage system enjoys the year supply of Gold Peak Tea.” Several hundred angry Facebook posts were accumulating fast. Gold Peak Tea found itself with a growing public relations disaster.

In the spring of 2012, Gold Peak Tea announced a contest called Take the Year Offon its Facebook page (Stafford, 2012; “Gold Peak Tea - Take the Year Off Promotion Official Rules,” 2012). The Grand Prize was $100,000, a chance to stay home for a year, and a year’s supply of Gold Peak Tea coupons. The Take the Year Off contest also included two sweepstakes. The prize for each was a package of 4 Live Nation concert tickets and associated travel.

Gold Peak Tea was a brand of tea marketed by the Coca-cola Company. Gold Peak Tea management viewed Take the Year Off as a way of keeping its loyal base of customers interested. The brand’s Facebook page usually contained product advertisements, customer-supplied photos of enjoying Gold Peak Tea products, announcements of new partnerships, encouragement to enjoy its products on special occasions, and comments from satisfied customers (“Gold Peak Tea Facebook Page,” 2012). The Take the Year Off promotion would help Gold Peak Tea communicate that it cares about its loyal customers by rewarding one of them. For new customers the promotion would raise brand awareness. Little did brand management know that its efforts would raise national brand awareness, but in a negative way.

During the Judging phase, entrants visited a designated website, where they completed a registration form. It requested an essay about what the contestant would do with $100,000 and a year away from work, as well as a recent photo of the contestant. By submitting an essay, contestants were entered into the first sweepstakes for Live Nation concert tickets. A panel of judges reviewed the essays for quality, creativity, and relevance to the theme. The best ten to fifteen contestants were asked to record a brief video. The judges then allowed the best five videos to progress to the next phase.

In the Voting phase, the five finalists’ videos and essays were posted to a designated website, for a public vote. Members of the public were allowed to vote once per day. Each voter was granted an entry into the second sweepstakes for Live Nation concert tickets. The contestant with the largest number of votes won the Grand Prize. The winner was required to submit periodic status updates to Gold Peak Tea, intended for publicity purposes.

The contest seemed to be going well. In October 2012, Gold Peak Tea proclaimed the Grand Prize winner to be Theodore Scott, a lawyer. However, serious trouble lay ahead. In the company’s audit of their winner, it soon became known that Scott had solicited votes on an About.com forum, where members offered to vote for each other in various sweepstakes and contest entries (Vega 2012) (“Contests & Sweepstakes,” 2012).

When Scott’s vote solicitation was discovered, he was disqualified, in favor of an entrant named Michael Simpson (Vega, 2012). On the brand Facebook page, Gold Peak Tea brand management explained: “Unfortunately, Theodore Scott was disqualified when it was determined during the verification process that he had attempted to inappropriately induce members of the public to vote for his submission, a violation of Official Contest Rules.” The terms and conditions prohibited offering incentives to potential voters, vote farming, or any other action that inflated the number of votes, as determined by Gold Peak Tea’s sole discretion.

Scott was furious. In a lengthy rebuttal on Gold Peak Tea’s Facebook page, Scott said that he did not believe that asking for votes was the same as inducement: “….I merely asked for their vote, and told them to let me know if I could vote for them in something. If they voted for me, they did so out of their own volition….” Scott furthermore claimed that the rules were vague and broad: “….key personnel at Gold Peak Tea….admitted to me that the rules in question were ambiguous.” His last argument was that other entries did not follow the theme of how contestants would spend a year at home. Nonetheless, Gold Peak Tea’s brand management and the Coca-cola parent company had made their determination. Scott was out, Simpson was the winner.

A major part of the controversy was disagreement over what constituted vote farming and inducement. The commonly accepted legal definition of vote farming was a broad, concerted online effort to ask random people for contest votes. Law sources stated that the legal definition of inducement was when a person changes their behavior because of a promise (West’s Encyclopedia of American Law, 2008).

Not only was Scott angry, but there was backlash from Facebook participants. Several hundred angry remarks were posted on Gold Peak Tea’s Facebook page. Most agreed with Scott. Some people threatened to boycott Gold Peak Tea and Coca Cola. Social media pages sprang up in support of Scott: Stand for Justice- Go Team Theodore and Boycott Gold Peak. A Go Team Theodore Twitter page was also created, with a link to sign a petition.

In contrast, there were some remarks that agreed with Gold Peak Tea’s decision to disqualify Scott. Some commenters argued that Scott’s actions constituted inducement because he offered a vote in return. A few commenters argued that the loser is really the brand itself: “Voting contests are the best ones for building up excitement and participation….Poorly handled ones turned into messes like this though.” The story was so interesting that the New York Times covered the story (Vega, 2012).

Gold Peak Tea was faced with a difficult crisis management dilemma. It could delay responding to the angry Facebook comments, actively refute them, pursue the matter in court, or censor the comments (Thomas et. al., 2012).

In the short term, Gold Peak Teaignored many Facebook complaints, and removed others. It warned: “The House Rules for the Gold Peak Tea Facebook page state that users will not ‘publish, post, distribute or disseminate any defamatory, infringing, obscene, indecent, misleading or unlawful material or information.’ Certain posts addressing the Take the Year Off promotion do not abide by these Rules and have been removed.”

The long term crisis management strategy would need to be different. Gold Peak Tea could give in to public pressure. Or, it could enforce the contest rules, but it might result in serious damage to its brand. What should it do?

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