

Title:

Crisis Management

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Summary:

The Internet may have opened worlds for businesses and consumers, but it has also created a public relations nightmare for businesses. Forums, opinion Web sites, blogs, and anything that is publishable can smear a company's name in moments.

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Article Body:

The Internet may have opened worlds for businesses and consumers, but it has also created a public relations nightmare for businesses. Forums, opinion Web sites, blogs, and anything that is publishable can smear a company's name in moments.

Remember, "Yours Is a Very Bad Hotel" presentation that described one customer's bad experience with a hotel chain? Hotels are run by humans. Humans make mistakes. It's how you handle the mistakes that can make the difference in customer service. Since the hotel's employees didn't try to help the customer overcome a bad situation, the customer lashed back and bloggers blogged it.

If the hotel is on top of its game, it would unleash its crisis management (also known as reputation management) team to salvage its reputation while it can. It's possible for a company to overcome bad PR and come out ahead as in the case of PG&E (California's Pacific Gas and Electric company).

Another strategy is to use Internet monitoring to monitor online articles regarding a company's activities to prepare for negative publicity. Some go further and monitor chat rooms, newsgroups, and online discussion forums.

It's like the story of the town gossip who spread false stories about its people. One day, he felt terrible and went to the chaplain [Rabbi, pastor, priest, or other — take your pick] to ask for forgiveness. The chaplain said, "I will forgive you, but you must do something first."

"Take a feather pillow, cut it open, and scatter the feathers to the winds." The

man thought this was a strange request, but it was a simple enough task, and he did it gladly. When he returned to tell the chaplain that he had done it, the chaplain said, "Now, go and gather the feathers. Because you can no more make amends for the damage your words have done than you can recollect the feathers."

The same can happen to a company without a crisis management plan in place. It's possible to survive the crisis and thrive as PG&E did. Don't expect Worldcom to pull out of its Enron-like mess. Fraud is not excusable. And Martha Stewart? She has hired a public relations strategist firm in an effort to do damage control. It'll be worth watching to see what happens in her case and how the PR firm attempts to save her reputation. Did you know there is a recall on one of her products? Adds fuel to the fire, doesn't it?