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Internet-based Crises

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Internet has become the tremendous tools to reshape buying patterns. Because it is transmitted in digital form, Internet can easily be copied and retransmitted. When the impact of Internet on people's life gradually becomes huge, many Internet companies focus the feature of Internet. The advertising community was among one of the first groups to foresee the utility of Internet. For advertisers, Internet provides a great way of communicating with the consumer and allows for the full range of advertising techniques to be transmitted through a faster and more efficient means of reaching a larger consumer (Godwin, 1998).

However, when the crises happen on companies, how can those companies use the Internet to deal with the major crises with proper ways? Or how can the companies deal with the Internet-based crises? In fact, the role of internet has multiple functions in a crisis. Internet can be the main communication channel for companies to manage the crisis. Also, Internet can cause different crises that company will not expect in the future. Needless to say, many companies with a strong Internet presence have failed to use their web sites and other online resources to address crises, either those born on the Net or those that had their genesis. For example, When TWA Flight 800 crash in 1996, the TWA Web site's home page was almost immediately removed and replaced with a terse statement that verify the crash but noted that TWA had no additional information (Holtz, 1999). The statement promised more information as soon as it became available. That page did not change for weeks.

It is incumbent upon organizations to have plans for addressing crises, and now the Internet must be integrated into those plans. This paper address several issues relating to the internet in a crisis. Part one will consider what kinds of the Internet crises that companies can face. Part two illustrates several cases relating to the Internet crises. Part three illustrates the solutions companies can be used to against Internet crises. The last part is conclusion.

Rogue web sites

Rogue Web sites are normally created by disgruntled individuals or irate customers with intention of bring attention to an issue or several issues concerning a corporation or organization (Fearn-Banks, 2002). The company attacked in the rogue site must consider whether to respond and if it responds, how. Sometimes no response seems appropriate because the site appears to be simply vicious. However, the company have to determine whether readers will actually believe the claims or not. According to Dr. Louis K. Falk, in his research on rough Web sites, classifies such sites into five categories. Some credit the company for positive moves; others dwell on negatively alone. The five categories are the following:

1. Sites in which consumers are unhappy with the performance of the company:
A rogue Web site that targeted ealmarket featured complaints and comments from customers and employees

and claimed " a considerable amount of content on this site is from other sites around the world.

2. Sites in which consumers are unhappy with the policies of the company: a rogue site aimed at Pepsi-Cola featured complaints that the company supported animal cruelty because it placed ads at bullfights.
 3. Sites in which consumers or former employees hate the company: a rogue site complains that McDonald's was not environmentally concerned because it killed animals, damaged the Earth, harmed the health of consumers.
 4. Sites in which consumers create humor pages also called spoof sites: a site aimed at making fun of Taco Bell clearly says so. The Web master says at the top of the homepage about spoofing the Taco Bell.
 5. Sites in which an index is created for complaints of multiple businesses: <<http://www.consumerama.org>>: An index of companies with links to consumer protest sites, class actions, and government investigations.
- Those are the typical rogue sites that seem designed to destroy a company's reputation.

E-mail rumors

E-mail rumors can spread to thousands of people in seconds and, just like spoken rumor, they can change elements of the story with each transmission. Because many people can write or speak about anything freely in the Internet, and even a greater degree of e-mail rumors, it is unavoidable that some competitors will use e-mail rumors with vicious intent to their target companies. Others use it merely warn their friends. Those kinds of transmission of e-mail rumors can be extremely damaging to businesses, organizations, and people in public life.

Cybersmear

Generally, disgruntled employees, irate customer and rumor-spreading investor with real or perceived grievances against an organization frequently use the Internet as a potent new tool to publicize their discontent. Those kinds of action generally defined as Cybersmear (Casarez, 2002). Whether it be through "gripe sites", live chat rooms or Internet bulletin boards, these individuals can instantly publish gossip, accusations, opinions, complaints or misinformation to a global audience. Because posters commonly hide their real identities behind fictional screen names, and because few of any gatekeepers exist to filter online content, these postings can be not only quite uncivilized, but also extremely difficult to counter.

A rough site case

The Webmaster of a rough site aimed at Dunkin' Donuts said he or she had "way too much time on his hands" and posted some thoughts about Dunkin' Donuts on a personal Web Site (Segal & Mayer, 1999). In the few weeks, the site had unusual influx visitors. The Webmaster learned through the referrer log yahoo. That all of these visitors went through Yahoo to access the site. The Webmaster also learned that Dunkin' Donuts did not have its own Web site, so Yahoo indexed the rough site as a "consumer opinion" Web site about Dunkin' Donuts.

The site started getting, it said, "500 hits and a dozen e-mails a week." Then the Webmaster requested and was granted the use of the domain name "dunkindonuts.org" and moved the content previously posted on his personal Web site to the new official Web site. Dunkin' Donuts started to respond to the comments on the rogue site. A Dunkin' Donuts spokesperson, on the top line of the rogue site is quoted as saying, "if this was where customers were going to post their comments, we thought it was important for us to go ahead and address them." Soon after, Dunkin' Donuts made arrangement to acquire the site for its own use.

E-mail rumors case

A rumor circulated both on the Internet and via e-mail claimed that bananas from Costa Rica were infected with "necrotizing

fasciitis, " or flesh-eating bacteria, and that the entire Costa Rica monkey population had been wiped out because of the bananas (Fearn-Banks, 2002). It warned the public to stop eating bananas and to seek medical attention if they had eaten a banana and had come down with fever. The bacteria, it said, could "eat" 2 to 3 centimeters of flesh per hour, making amputation likely and death possible.

The message, like most e-mail rumors involving food, said the message could be confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). When contacted, a spokesperson for the CDC said, "This is a false report." APBNews.com reported on the incident, saying a trade group was trying to squelch the rumor. Tim Debus of the International Banana Association (IBA), an organization directly affected by the rumor, called it "just another case of Internet terrorism like the recent hacker attacks on popular Web sites." In addition, Tim Debus also indicated that the prank could disrupt the economy, made efforts to get the word out that the allegations were false (Noack, 2000)

What does one do about a rough site?

If the company is the victim of an attack site, the best preparation is to anticipate their creation (Holtz, 1999) Expecting they will appear helps avoid the knee-jerk reaction of sending in the layers. You can communicate directly with the creators of such pages in order to access their sources and issues and what it would take to bring them to your side of the fence. Falk suggests the following tactics if company has been attacked already (Fearn-Banks, 2002)

1. Do not overact; the problem may not be as bad as it seems
2. Assess the problem. Consider whether the information is true or false, whether many key stakeholders have been the site.
3. Analyze the attack site; do not pretend you are a consumer; webmasters of rogue sites recognize misleading communications. In addition, contacting the webmaster of the attack site by telephone, face to face, or through e-mail.
4. Drive the discussion by following your employees to be interviewed on the Web site. Make your company the expert on information about your company.

What does one do about e-mail rumors?

Like word-of-mouth rumors, e-mail rumors are difficult for companies to fight. However, it is sometimes less difficult to determine the source of an e-mail rumor. Janal(1998) advised three tactics for fighting all cyber crises, including e-mail rumors: (1)pay attention (2)read the rumor and think about it(3) put up a fight. Companies and organization should be ever-vigilant watching for e-mail rumors. Encourage employees to notify the public relations departments, or another designated department, when they notice e-mail or word-of-mouth rumors. If the source is unfounded and the source of the rumor is known, respond to the rumor. If the rumor is not known, respond to the listserve or Internet service provider (ISP) associated with the e-mail messages that distributed the rumor. At times, a decision must be made between fighting a rumor with public relations or with layers. Public relations is the first step. If that does not work or is not feasible, call the lawyers.

Conclusion

The widespread adoption of the Internet and the World Wide Web is a new phenomenon for many companies. In order to protect the individuals and organizations, the government authority need to pass the lawsuits to against those Internet crises. Software and Internet piracy security, and hacking will be the first laws developed and passed. In addition, laws governing rumors and online attacks will be more difficult to propose and pass because of the anonymity of the culprits and freedom of speech.



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