

Looking for an Antidote to Venom on the Web: How to Deal with Anti-websites Using Crisis Management

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My purpose is to suggest a strategy for how companies should respond to so called anti-websites, especially when the information published is incorrect and the company needs to reach the public with their counter-arguments.

I attempt to clarify some of questions associated with the issue of using public relations and crisis management on the Internet. PR professionals need to find new ways of practicing their craft in this new media environment. Using the Internet, the public has found new opportunities of voicing their opinions more easily and to a greater audience than ever before.

A popular use of this new power are the so called anti-websites, where consumers set up sites specifically to voice their opinion on a specific product or a company. Companies PR professionals need to develop a new kind of crisis communications plan to deal with this problem, while not attracting too much attention to themselves, nor infringing upon any rights to freedom of speech.

Until recently consumers have had few outlets for voicing their opinion when dissatisfied with a product or service and it was difficult for them to tell other consumers of their experiences. The Internet allows consumers to immediately tell millions of people about what they are dissatisfied with, and why. A simple search on the keywords “consumer opinion” on Yahoo! produced 26,772 results, many of which are anti-websites run by dissatisfied customers, or sometimes by former employees. Consumers from all over the world, but notably the United States, have discovered the Internet as a way of expressing their rights of free speech.

In an attempt to start regulating the Internet, the Communications Decency Act (CDA) was passed in the United States in 1996. However, the Supreme Court deemed the Act unconstitutional in June 1997 as inhibiting our rights to freedom of speech protected by the First Amendment. A new attempt was made last year, when the Child Online Protection Act (COPA) was approved by the Congress and

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signed by President Clinton in October 1998. The law was to take effect from November 20, 1998, but the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), and others, sought and were granted a temporary restraining order. The duration of the temporary restraining order was extended until February 1, 1999, when the district court denied the plaintiffs motion to dismiss, but granted their motion for a preliminary injunction. The battle will continue in court and as for now, there is no way of telling if there will ever be a possibility of protecting children from harmful content on the Internet, while refraining from violating the First Amendment.

The legal problematics of the CDA and the COPA are good indicators of how hard it is to regulate and control the Internet. It would probably be close to impossible to rule whether dissatisfied consumers posting information against a company on the Internet are actually conducting slander or just exercising their right to freedom of speech under the First Amendment. Hence, companies must find other ways to deal with anti-websites.

Americans' right to freedom of speech is indeed important to protect, but since anyone can publish anything on the Internet there is often no way of knowing what is true and not. The recent surge of anti-websites has left the companies being attacked facing a new dilemma in their crisis communications. On one hand, companies need to be careful in responding to consumer opinion on the Internet in order not to impinge on the freedom of speech as protected by the constitution. Simply trying to close down websites by having company lawyers threaten with lawsuits is not going to help and usually does not have any effect anyway. On the other hand, companies need a strategy to respond to anti-websites and make sure that their counter-arguments are heard if the information published is incorrect.

The arrival of the Internet has changed our lives in many parts. For public relations, more has changed than stayed the same, which has been a both positive and negative experience for the industry. In looking at developing a new strategy of crisis communication for dealing with anti-websites, it is also important to take notice of all these changes in the PR industry. Public relations is not the same as it was five years ago, but what has happened along the way, and how is the industry coping? The surprisingly scarce information on using and dealing with the Internet from a PR point of view suggests that the industry is still striving to catch up. The continuing boom of highly successful high-tech PR agencies using the Internet as their primary tool suggests otherwise.