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Brands Navigate the Blogosphere

by Abram Sauer
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Yet many brands fail to respond correctly. And it matters more than ever. According to BIGresearch's June 2006 Consumer Intentions and Actions Survey, 87 percent of consumers research products online before buying them in a traditional store environment.

So, what to do? While each case is somewhat special, there are a few rules for what to do and, maybe more importantly, what *not* to do, including the three biggest no-nos. But first, a little context (because context is everything).

(Aside: What follows assumes that you are already monitoring blogs for mentions of your brand[s]. You *are* monitoring blogs, right? Even through something as easy and free as Technorati or at least Google Alerts? Right? *Right?* If not, stop here and get started now.)

A good deal of information about dealing with online, consumer-generated commentary already exists. The bulk of this advice focuses on how to architect a measured and effective response on a brand's own blog.

Keep in mind that your brand-sanctioned blog is neither trafficked nor considered anywhere within the realm of impartiality. In fact, many online consumers probably wouldn't trust your blog even with a post titled "Water is Wet." It's a reality of modern-day market communications: while not every brand is seen as an Enron, few are considered to have consumers' best interests in mind (even if they really do). This means you need to reach out to bloggers and post on consumer-interest comment boards.

It is also important to define exactly what kind of sites we are talking about. For the purposes here, we're speaking of personal blogs or community sites that are not brand specific and are genuinely concerned with the greater spread of information. This does not include sites such as www.dellsucks.net, www.hateaol.com, www.disney-sucks.com, or www.allstateinsurancesucks.com. The best advice for dealing with such hate-(insert brand name here) sites is probably to avoid trying to engage in the comment boards. The audiences of these sites are likely largely unreachable. (Not to say one should give up on them, just that posting on those comment boards probably won't yield positive results.)

Let's try a test: Blog X just slammed your brand.

What do you do?

1. Do not immediately reply. Gauge the attitude of the post and determine its momentum. Is it petering out or is it gaining steam? Is this about a specific time-sensitive brand campaign or is this something about the core brand? Reach out or post too early and you look defensive. But wait too long and the damage will be done; by the end of a day or two, commenters and bloggers move on to new stories, while older stuff attracts fewer eyeballs. Wait at least a couple hours but try to respond in the first 24.

2. Treat everyone as equal, even if the blogger is wrong. If you try to bully anyone it will end badly for you.

Consumerist.com editor Ben Popken sums up the stupidity of the latter: "The biggest mistake



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is storming in, waving a big stick around. If you try to intimidate a blogger, he's probably just going to post the correspondence and mock it publicly. You're a guest [on that blog], so show some respect and you're more likely to get it in return."

3. If the post is just plain ridicule for the sake of it or immature joking (e.g., sexual innuendo about your cartoon mascot), it's best to ignore it altogether.

4. Many negative comments are just disappointed consumers who had a single underwhelming experience. These are easy to handle inexpensively and could not only save you a customer, but create a brand advocate; simply send the blogger an offer to amend the situation (e.g. a return or replacement). If for some reason you do not want to do this (spite?), ignoring the post is much better than trying to refute it.

Says editor of the blog [The Impulsive Buy](#), known only as Marvo: "I think the biggest mistake a brand representative can do after a negative review on a blog is write a rebuttal, either via the comments or sending an email directly to the blog's writer. There are many negative reviews out there on the web, but these negative reviews should be thought of more as constructive criticism."

Consumerist's Popken: "If you do decide to enter a conversation, come bearing gifts. Offer to help resolve their issue and try to listen to their complaints, rather than stifle criticism. You may turn a fiend to a friend."

5. Have a sense of humor. Sarcasm is the currency for much of the blog world and over-sincerity is often seen as a sign of being an outsider. Granted, sarcasm is a dangerous biz, and it's highly recommended that you don't take it too far; but not taking yourself too seriously will probably help disarm readers a little and show them that you're not just a "suit."

This does not mean you should not be genuine in your answer, however. If you're at all in doubt, find some of the younger employees in your department and run your response past them. They'll probably be able to give you a read on how it will come across.

6. Cite. When posting on a message board or contacting a blogger, give more than your word. Whenever possible (and research this first) send along or post links to back up your comments. Again, these references will carry more weight if they are third-party and not from YourBrand.com.

7. Lose the marketing-speak. If ever there was a medium to abandon the warmed-over stock response, this is it.

John Q. Pope, a member of Dell's corporate communications group in Round Rock, Texas, is a frequent commenter on such sites. "[Speak in marketing jargon] and be prepared to be called out as a shill," he says. "There is no substitute for plain language and candor, especially in a channel where anything sales-y or PR-ish is met with unvarnished disdain."

8. Comments are research. Not only are they like consumer group studies you didn't have to pay for, they are also probably far more honest.

9. Do your research and then get the appropriate coworkers on board so they know what's going on and why.

Dell's Pope: "Dell has been actively monitoring and engaging in the blogosphere since August of this year—by customer support professionals proactively looking to resolve customer issues, and by others (employees) like me who can quickly jump into the conversation to add or correct information, offer a different perspective, or just learn from others and to say we appreciate the views being expressed."

But what if a blog *praises* your brand? What then? This advice has focused on negative posts because—for the same reason we lean toward salacious gossip—consumer-generated content tends toward the negative. But blog praise is just as much reason to reach out as blog criticism. Send a thank-you note. Send some free samples. Offer to put the commentator on your contact list. And be sure to copy the link as a potential future reference.

Warning: Do *not* try to bring this blogger secretly "on board" as a spokesperson. This has *backfire* written all over it.

The Final Three HUGE No-Nos. We cannot stress enough how potentially catastrophic these are.

Ignore them and you get what you deserve.

No-No 1. No black ops. Do not directly engage a site editor or blogger with the hopes of cutting a deal. You are not "above" their blog. This has the very real possibility of backfiring if the blog editor publishes your email dialogue on a follow-up post. Not only will you look unwilling to engage in a conversation with the very people who need your ear, but also you will look like the conniving, duplicitous corporate sleaze that you are.

Consumerist.com's Popken: "If you request parts of the conversation be kept private, a reasonable blogger may comply, especially if they're blogging professionally. But if you then use that courtesy to start berating or treating them poorly, you may find your whole conversation their next top post."

The Impulsive Buy's Marvo: "Bloggers will write whatever they want to write and they will include whatever they want to include. I've never had brand reps do anything truly boneheaded, but one thing they've done that I might not agree with is give recommendations to how I should write a review. By doing so, it makes it seem like they don't trust me."

No-No 2. As tempting as it might be to go into the comments site of a blog under an assumed name, don't. While there is a slight chance you will get away with the anonymous defense, the reward (ultimately very little) doesn't justify the risk—your brand will come off not only as the conniving, duplicitous corporate sleaze that you are, but incompetent to boot.

Dell's Pope: "The lack of transparency, or 'astroturfing,' is a credibility killer. At Dell, we recently institutionalized our practice of making it known we represent the company, as in my username: JohnP@Dell. Transparency is now a corporate policy in all of our online communications."

No-No 3. For Pete's sake, under no circumstances should you meet with the blogger and make shady offers in exchange for "good blog." Such behavior will end up being written about and you will come off as, yep, a conniving, duplicitous corporate sleaze. Which you would be.

Consumerist's Popken: "Edelman's Mike Krempasky took me out for drinks and declared the conversation off the record. Then he asked me what he could do to get me to stop writing about his clients. Not a smart play." To really ram this last lesson home, you can read in detail about the [entire disastrous and rather lurid saga](#).

Finally, it is of the utmost importance that brand owners and reps learn to respect consumer bloggers and board commenters. Many see these forums as the only place where they have a voice in an increasingly corporate-communication controlled world.

Dell's Pope: "To do it right—and we're learning from our mistakes almost every day—you must have a feel for the dynamics of the blogosphere, respect sometimes raw opinions and value the dialogue. It is a communications channel like no other, with its own jargon and protocols (or lack thereof). It requires fact-based information, not opinion. And constant attention, or the conversations will play out without your participation."

And always remember that these people are not passive consumers and, as so, are important to your brand *because* of how active they are. Everything they said about word of mouth is true.

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