

StreetSmart Marketing

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Handling A PR Crisis

Recently we were promoting one of our seminars. We had the support of the local Chamber of Commerce and provided a special “member to member” discount to Chamber members. To help market the event, the Chamber provided us with an email list of nearly 2,000 addresses and permission to send our message to them. What started as an economical marketing program turned into a marketing nightmare.

We first noticed a problem when we started getting “mailer demons” every few seconds. Within an hour over 500 emails came to our address. Apparently there was a virus that caused our email to be replicated repeatedly to everyone on the list. Not only was our email account getting overloaded, so were the other 2,000 people on that list. Each one of them thought they were getting hundreds of emails from us. There were some angry people, to say the least.

This is a classic marketing crisis situation. The problem was totally out of our control yet we were getting all the negative PR. So we immediately went into crisis mode:

Identify the problem. In our case the problem was an email message, which masqueraded as if it came from us and was transmitted over and over, literally hundreds of times to each individual email box.

Develop a response. We started getting phone calls. Since the email originally went out on a Friday night, we actually got calls from people at our homes on Saturday. As a line of defense, we had to script what we would say: First, we are aware of the problem. Second, we apologize for the inconvenience. Third,

please understand that these emails are not coming from us. Fourth, we’re doing everything we can to solve the problem.

We made sure that everyone on the phones followed the format. Plus, no matter the tone of the caller, we were pleasant and apologetic. Of the many dozens of calls we received, once we explained the situation the vast majority of the people understood it and were empathetic. We also changed the outbound message of our voice mail to explain the problem. Once the inbound calls slowed to a trickle, we went back to the original message.

The next step was to try to **fix the problem, if it’s fixable.** We called AOL who started an investigation for us. We also contacted our IT provider to see if they could figure anything out. Next we contacted the Chamber. They too received many phone calls. We explained the situation to them and they, like everyone else, were very understanding. They offered to send out a brief article explaining the situation in their weekly newsletter.

The last step was to **make sure it never happens again.** In our case that means that we will never do a bulk email ever again. As cost-effective as it was, it was not worth the negative PR it created for us.

When faced with such a PR crisis, we suggest to always attack the problem head on. Don’t hide or shuck responsibility. At the same time, take a brief period of time to outline your response. By dealing with the issues and even allowing irate customers to vent, you’ll do much to minimize the damage.

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