

Deepwater Horizon Reputational Crisis 2.0

Greenpeace's Online Spoof Competition Against BP

MANAGEMENT DECISION

The authors prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. Although based on real events and despite occasional references to actual companies, this case is fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons or entities is coincidental.

Reactions and Decisions

Tony Hayward felt overwhelmed with all the aspects of the crises and especially concerned in how to present a specific action plan to the public. Due to the complexity and multiple dimensions of the initial oil spill, the Greenpeace logotype competition as well as the spread of online spoofs were left with considerably little attention.

Actions Towards the General Public

It took a while for Hayward to figure out how to handle the massive spread of online criticism BP was receiving. Therefore, it wasn't until a considerable amount of time before the online criticism was approached. The first tangible action BP implemented was trying to take control of the news published under 'oil spill'. BP paid both Google and Yahoo to moderate the flow of criticism they were receiving online by buying keywords on the search engines. The corporation's goal in buying the search results was to make information on the leak more accessible but also an attempt to salvage its reputation. When searching for 'oil spill' people would now be brought to BP's website and a link with the tagline "Learn more about how BP is helping" to gain information in how BP was resolving the oil spill. In other words, BP paid to lock the position against oil spill terms and put a positive message on top of the news.

This action represents an advocacy strategy, aiming to change public opinion through helping stakeholders to perceive the issue from the organizations point of view. Even though this action upset a part of the public as they believed the corporation was spending money to save their reputation when money could have gone to contain and clean up the actual spill, it pushed both the Greenpeace logotype competition as well as the spoofs further down in the search engine thus shifting the attention elsewhere. Consequently, when searching for the term 'oil spill' on Google, it could be observed that the spoofs from the competition seemed to have vanished from the web.

Actions Towards Greenpeace

In addition to trying to eliminate the spread of criticism through the search engine, BP used a silent approach toward their agonistic stakeholder Greenpeace by refusing to publicly comment on the competition. They agreed if BP, being one of the largest corporations in the oil industry world, would have taken legal action toward Greenpeace, being a leading independent organization campaigning for peace and a green future, they were sure to lose the PR battle. This would only create more harm toward their brand as well as increase the attention of the competition. Therefore BP remained silent. Further Tony Hayward later admitted that he was frustrated with the spoofs situation and wanted it all to disappear which can further explain BP's chosen strategy.

In the end, communication experts gave BP high marks when it came to their actions within social media and the web. The corporation created a website where organizations could pitch in to help clean up the mess and created accounts on Facebook and Twitter where they constantly posted updates and responded to new developments of the crisis resolution. This shows how BP clearly tried take control of the online landscape by restricting the search results.

Further Application

Even though BP did not take specific actions toward handling the online spoofs the case does demonstrate an interesting component concerning the attempt to remove or change online content in order to save the reputation. This can also be seen in other examples. Toyota used a similar online strategy after their faulty brakes disclosure. When users searched “Toyota breaks” car dealerships popped up as well as other news results, diminishing the actual crisis. A different example concerns King Carlos I of Spain whose popularity tumbled as a photograph was published of him posing, with a gun on his hip, next to a dead elephant in Botswana while his homeland wallowed in its 2012 financial crisis. To save his reputation he made sure the picture was removed online. These suspicions’ toward alterations of online content can also be observed within the recent presidential election where Donald Trump accused Google for manipulating search algorithms biased in favoring the democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton. All these examples, as well as the rise of companies such as internetreputation.com who specialize in removing negative images and blog posts from internet, introduce a new communication strategy corporations are applying within reputation management.