

Message 7

Rumors in cyberspace

Rumors have a devastating effect. In the online world, rumors spread like wildfire within a fraction of time compares to rumormorgering off-line.

While facing the challenge of rumors can be a legal issue, dealing with rumors that have negative repercussion on the corporate image is mainly and firstly a public relations issue. Since 1994 that Intel corporation was hit by the Pentium Flaw rumor, the company has realized that the best strategy against rumormorgering does not start with legal action. Ultimately, every online image issue is a public relations issue.

The latest Middleberg/Ross Media in Cyberspace study that was released in March 2000 indicates that the Internet can be the Achilles heel for a company's image in relation to rumor coverage by journalists. More than half of the responded journalists admitted that they would report an online rumor if corroborated by a single source. Of the respondents:

- 60 percent said they would consider reporting an Internet rumor if confirmed by an independent source.
- 12 percent said they would not consider reporting an Internet rumor.
- 3 percent said they have already reported an Internet rumor.
- 19 percent said they would report an Internet rumor if it came from a "reliable" professional news website.

The cornerstone of online image control is careful monitoring of what is being said online about a company, its products, and its people. Currently, only 15 percent of the *Fortune 1000* companies monitor the Internet to some degree for information that refers to them.

Companies need to gather the best online intelligence as a combination of:

- People viewing online environments such as chat rooms.
- Machine-generated searching for general information online.
- Machine-generated filtering and listing of specific information online.

Tactics for controlling rumors in cyberspace

The application of tactics for controlling rumors online depends on the nature of each certain situation. The following options might help confine rumormorgering in the Internet.

- 1) Refuse to take the "no comment" stance. As soon as you realize that there is bad news about you online you should be energetic rather than pathetic before the news snowballs. The "no comment" stance is a snowball throw to bad news online because it implies that you have something to hide from people.
- 2) Write a letter to the editor stating your point of view on the issue at hand and request a retraction for misinformation when that occurred.
- 3) Issue a news release or make a public statement in relation to the news that hit your company in the form of a negative rumor. Avoid giving the news publicity that does not have. The news release or the public statement should respond to the forum wherein the rumor circulates.
- 4) Prepare a dedicated subsite into the company's website that targets the bad news and counterattacks the rumor. Concise information in the subsite's pages with hyperlinks to the corporate website should provide key points and in-depth analysis of the company's stance on the issue at hand.
- 5) Prepare an "online answer for query only." Be willing to participate in the online forum wherein the rumor cropped up and/or in the online fora wherein news about you have been traced with Qs & As focused on the rumor strictly.
- 6) Use third-party trustworthy sources with an expertise on the issue at hand. A well known authority who provides positive information on your behalf reinforces your credibility which is under attack by negative

rumors.

7) Keep your company's online media relations site up-to-date with information that pertains to the rumor. This information should address the point that the rumor concentrates on as well as the core points that are important to you and relate to the rumor. Every rumor should be viewed as an opportunity to remind your audience of your concerns that benefit your customers.

8) Become familiar with online interaction patterns of rumormongers, and counterattack with information that justifies your reputation.

9) Ask the system operator (SYSOP) of a newsgroup site to help you post your view online when something negative and incorrect appears in an online environment controlled by the SYSOP.

10) Train your company's spokespeople to respond timely and with a single voice to reputation threats by online rumors. Train your employees to divert media inquiries to your spokespeople.

11) Depending on the nature of the rumor, you should notify as soon as possible:

- the company's CEOs and board of directors

- group users, webmasters, SYSOPs, and editors on inaccuracies that were traced online and on your reply to them.

- business partners, employees, and key stakeholder groups on the situation at hand.

- content providers for your company's website in relation to information that pertains to the rumor.

- the company's legal advisors with the aim to orient them towards defending the company's reputation on one hand and to muzzle them on the other hand.

12) Prepare in advance a contingency plan that could be used to assess

the impact of a rumor on your company. This contingency planning could cater for:

- -- Fact finding
- -- Reaction analysis
- -- Business and Financial impact analysis

Fact finding

1. What is known now?
2. When did the rumor first occur? How long has it been going on?
3. Who is involved?
4. What are the related circumstances?
5. What is the likely damage?

Reaction analysis

Supporters	main likely impact	main action to minimize impact	time for action
management, CEOs and board of directors			
employees and their families			
investors and stockholders			
customers and end-users			
local residents and community opinion-leaders			

Adversaries	main likely impact	main action to minimize impact	time for action
online rumormorgers			
local and national			

officials			
online news portals			
competitors			
social action groups			

Business and Financial impact analysis

nature of potential damage	immediate damage	future damage
business sales and customers		
stock market plummet		
lawsuits		
whistle blowers		
market share		
mass media coverage		
government agencies		
unions		

references

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