

Countering online aggression: Surviving in a new media world where everybody is a journalist

By James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA

As use of new media spreads, we're entering an era where the civility of communication is declining as rapidly as the ubiquity of methodologies expands. Major brands, famous people, elected officials and others have been the subject of personal attacks and the views and adverse opinions of others since the beginning of our republic, but now individuals formerly without access, a platform or an audience are finding all three with great ease.

Various organizations and trade associations are attempting to develop communications rules and codes of conduct for these new communicators, but the reality is that, in our culture, you get to say what you want when you want, even if the audience is only you. What you say can be damaging, destructive, irritating and embarrassing, but you still get to say it. If you're the one under attack, the questions are: What do you do? When do you know what to do? Should you do anything?

You're on your own

The reality is that you are on your own. The traditional notions of third-party support and other kinds of PR techniques are both difficult to achieve and can be detrimental to those you ask to support you, endorse you or validate your position or ideas. Once an attack begins, the conversation is challenging, hurtful and seemingly unfair, but probably true in some respects. Responding by lashing out gives those attacking you

intensified energy, and allows them to make even more out of what is going on than they could have done before you responded.

Does this mean that you must stay quiet? If you can't fight back, if you can't find others to step forward on your behalf, or if your attempts to respond are met with additional energy, allegations, distortions and negative visibility, what can you do?

- From watching the word-of-mouth industry cope with these circumstances and working with a wide variety of clients who are the subject of these attacks, it seems to me that there are some routine PR activities to avoid, at least initially. Direct face-to-face engagement is one of them. While this strategy sometimes helps in other visibility situations, when we are talking new media, the medium is going to be your voice and their voice out there in the blogosphere.

- There is always significant encouragement to go into the medium that is attacking you and retaliate there, sort of a blog-for-blog strategy. My advice is to avoid this as well. Going into blogs and responding creates a diatribe rather than a dialogue, and rarely ennobles either participant.

- Not responding is a toxic strategy to the person or party under attack. It is clear that you will need to respond to attacks in some manner.

So the question remains, what do you do?

A new media manifesto for victory

There are specific marching orders to control your own destiny, and to even carve out a little victory now and then. This manifesto is a recipe for surviving attacks from the bully, blogger, bloviator and the bellyacher on the Web, and behaving with integrity, honesty and even humor. If your mother could teach you the rules for winning in the aggravating environment of a new media attack, here's what she would tell you to do:

- Speak only for yourself; say less, write less, but make these communications really important.
- Aim for 75- to 150-word responses; this is 30-60 seconds reading or speaking time.
- Always let others speak for themselves. When you try to speak for others, you will always be wrong, and possibly attacked for being incorrect.
- Avoid claiming that you agree with your opponents on anything, unless they

say so first. Once opponents say so, you may quote them saying it, but always say what you believe to be true.

- Avoid saying that you work closely with other organizations or individuals related to your situation, unless they say so first and you can then quote them. Otherwise, they will deny the relationship or point out, as some may quite quickly, that whatever links exist are weak. They will then describe those weaknesses.

Those who can and may support you in the future must have their status preserved for the long run. Drawing them into your discussion may needlessly make them targets of attack. They will have to abandon and, perhaps, denounce you.

- Assume that everyone in the discussion has more credibility than you do. Your job is to validate your credibility every time, rather than to discredit others.

- Be relentlessly positive (avoid all negative words) and constructive (avoid criticizing and criticism). Both fuel your opponents.

- Focus on the truly important 5 percent and forget the rest. Respond to and develop what truly matters.

- Emotional words plus negative, destructive language equals less truth and trustworthiness. Let the attacker discredit him or herself.

- Be calm. Critics, agitators and bullies are energized by anger, emotionalism and whininess.

- Silence is always toxic to the accused. Even your friends will sacrifice you.

- Refuse to be distracted by negativity, friendly pressure or the agendas of others. They are not in the spotlight. You are.

- Discourage others from explaining your situation. They will get it wrong. You will be blamed, and they will be attacked. They will then have to abandon you altogether.

- Everything that goes around comes back around. Avoid verbal vegetables, the words, phrases and statements you write or say that you will have to eat in the future.

- Remember, truth is 15 percent facts and data and 85 percent emotion and perception. Facts do matter, but addressing the emotional component of issues and questions is more important.

- Be strategic. Say, act, plan and write with future impact in mind.

- Prepare to work alone and be abandoned by just about everyone.

- Stay cool. Reasoned, appropriate, direct and constructive responses tend to disempower those on the attack.

- Keep the testosterone under control. Every bit of negative energy you throw in their direction will multiply by a factor of five to 10, and they will throw it right back at you.

- Work in real time. Do it now; fix it now; ask it now; challenge it now.

- In all speaking and writing, be simple, sensible, positive and empathetic.

- Avoid the creation of critics and adversaries; they accumulate, hang around and never cease.

- Get accustomed to accommodating the long-term, relentlessly negative nature of these situations.

- Correct and clarify what matters, but do it all on your own Web site. Avoid joining blogs or conversations outside your site. The latter strategy will suck all of your energy into responding to others who are having fun and sleeping well, while you are doing neither.

- It's your destiny. If you refuse to manage it, someone else will.

If the attacks are online, generally speaking, you have some options. You can rework your Web site with the help of search engine optimization (SEO) firms that will enable Web search results to provide more positive than negative listings. Also, a good precaution is registering all common misspellings for your Web site and derogatory domain name options in a variety of potential suffixes (.com, .bus, .org, .net and others). The intent is to block the use of these potential attack tools for a period of years so others are unable to use them against you.

Sometimes all it takes is a letter from an attorney asking the perpetrator to cease and desist the damaging commentary. But realistically, however, you need to let the situation persist for a time before you take this particular route. Recognize that whatever you send in response, and no matter who it comes from, will be posted and commented on by those who are attacking.

The bottom line for responding in the new media environment is that the quality of your responses, your products or your services are going to be judged by their tone, sensitivity and clarity. **T**

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Want to learn more?

There is a lot more to talk about on this topic. You may wish to join the author in a 90-minute PRSA teleseminar on this concept called **"Surviving in a World Where Everybody Is a Journalist: Overcoming the Bullies, Bloggers, Bloviators, and Bellyachers in This New Media Environment,"** on **Dec. 13 from 3 - 4:30 p.m. EST.** Please visit www.prsa.org for more information and to register. This teleseminar provides 1.0 Maintenance Credit towards the minimum of 10 credits required to maintain your APR. Please contact Kathy Mulvihill at PRSA, (212) 460-1436 or kathy.mulvihill@prsa.org. **T**