



HOW  
TO:

# Recover from a social media disaster

Social media offer vast rewards to the astute businesses that take advantage of them. But what can you do if things go wrong? In the first of this two-part series, **Kate Hennessy** examines what to do if your business finds itself in two common disaster scenarios: having your social media campaign hijacked and dealing with negative comments on blogs, forums and other media.

Image: photolibary.com



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When Samboy Chips decided to relaunch its brand using a social media campaign it decided Facebook was a good place to start. Why? There was already a popular Facebook group called 'Bring Back Atomic Tomato Chips'.

Samboy launched a Facebook competition offering \$10,000 and bucketloads of chips to the 'Samboy is Back!' group with the most members.

The campaign kicked off on 23 December 2008. By Boxing Day, Samboy's fanpage had skyrocketed from zero to 11,500 members and 150 groups had entered the competition. Better yet, the group leading the pack planned to throw a big beach party

for its local community with the winnings.

Then, an unexpected turn.

A second group had a membership surge: 'Samboy is Back for Gaza relief'. Members of this politically-minded group became slightly aggressive towards members of other groups, claiming moral upper ground. Samboy wisely, though anxiously, waited it out and the online tussle resolved itself.

Meanwhile, by 11 January 2009, there were 194 entries and 28,000 group members. Then, another twist. In the wake of the Black Saturday fires, a young Victorian woman started a 'Samboy is Back!' group to raise money for the Victorian Bushfire Appeal on behalf of

the Red Cross. Her group galloped to victory with 110,453 members in the final five days of the competition.

While the Red Cross is an excellent cause and Samboy benefited from the outcome, the company's brand had still been toppled by another cause, showing the power a campaign 'hijacking' can have.

But unexpected turns are all part of taking your brand into social networks, where the same open environment that works in favour of your brand can also turn against it. So, if you're playing the social media game and disaster strikes, what should you do?

Guiding you through the following two scenarios is Mike Crebar, creative director at digital agency, Pusher, which engineered the Samboy campaign, and Sean O'Byrne, integrated communications director at public relations company Mark Communications.

## Hijacking

So, what exactly is a campaign hijacking?

"It's when consumers misrepresent a brand, a persona within a campaign, or an element of a campaign," says Crebar. They can also "outright cheat or sabotage your marketing efforts".

While it's usually bigger companies that are most vulnerable to malicious campaign hijacking (Starbucks, Burger King and Doritos are all recent high-profile examples), any company can be at risk.

"Make sure that before you open the door for consumers to honestly express themselves in relation to your brand, that you have cleaned out any skeletons in the cupboard," says Crebar. "Or at least have a solid and real solution in the pipeline for any social issue that may harm your brand."

Monitor your online campaign constantly after it's launched, or hire someone to monitor it.

## “... negative or aggressive comments are the biggest fear for small business owners who foray into social networks - and for good reason”

Crebar kept constant vigil over the Samboy campaign but was still surprised by how fast things moved.

“With all the tools available to encourage sharing, and mainstream media now led by online chatter, a campaign can change directions rapidly.”

If your campaign is hijacked, however, here's a guide to get you through the worst.

**1.** Don't panic and try to view it from a consumer's point of view, says Crebar. Is it funny? Serious? Who cares? O'Byrne adds that it's important to have a very strong and easy-to-deploy reaction statement ready to go.

**2.** Crebar advises you to get in touch with the person or party hijacking your campaign and acknowledge them via the same blog, book, feed or space they are operating from. Consider releasing your reaction statement using a friendly and influential social media commentator, adds O'Byrne.

**3.** If it's serious, urgent, potentially disastrous, or could be leveraged in a positive way, find an agency to help, Crebar advises. O'Byrne believes you should acknowledge the groundswell against your campaign, but think of a creative solution that allows you to leverage the activity and interest. Sometimes all it takes to help turn a story around is

engaging some key influencers with the right story or more information.

And take heart. The most common hijackings are friendly, says Crebar.

“They usually occur when consumers take the reigns of a fun idea and rally behind it with their friends.”

### Negative comments

If a campaign hijacking is the wave that wipes out a campaign, derogatory comments are the water torture. According to Crebar and O'Byrne, negative or aggressive comments are the biggest fear for small business owners who foray into social networks. And for good reason.

“There are always individuals in any community, including social networks, who want to make a stir,” says Crebar. “And if the media channel is open, they have a right to air their voice.”

But if it happens, don't panic, says Crebar, and try to ignore your instinct to pull the comments down.

**1.** As with campaign hijacking, Crebar first advises to judge the comments as a passive consumer. They're not insulting you, they're just venting a little anger towards your logo. In many open forums you'll find people will stick up for you.

If it is a negative comment, O'Byrne advises you to honestly ask yourself if it is correct and valid. Everyone is entitled to his or her opinion and sometimes a negative comment is based on truth or someone's real experience. If the

comment is correct then - depending on who made the comment and where - acknowledge their opinion and use it as consumer insight.

**2.** If you need to respond immediately, be short and passive, then take some time to assess the damage, Crebar advises. If it's serious, respond to let people know you've seen the comment, you're addressing it, and give them a timeline: a week or a day.

O'Byrne believes there are times when you don't need to do anything.

“Brands trying to shut down negative comments will be seen as controlling, while brands that allow users to have their own opinion are playing in the spirit of social media,” he says.

**3.** Continue monitoring comments, even after they're resolved. If the comment is based on incorrect information the brand is entitled to enter the debate with its side of the story, adds O'Byrne.

Preferably this should be done privately, over email with the commentator. Ask them questions, discuss their experience, be proactive. If they don't respond and if it's appropriate, leave a public comment clarifying any incorrect information.

Brands can also outnumber negative comments with positive ones by approaching key influencers with the correct story or fact, he says.

“Whatever you do, don't try to bury negative comments with fake posts; you'll be caught,” says Crebar.

*Next month we'll examine two other common social media disasters: what to do when different people within your company put out contradictory messages over social networks and how to respond if you get caught pretending to be someone you're not. Stay tuned!*