

## The challenge of negative word of mouth: Part 2

I'm going to be sharing my agency's step-by-step process on how to effectively deal with negative word of mouth (WOM). In my [previous article](#) I looked at sustained negative WOM. This article focuses on situational WOM and outlines a five-point plan to counter negative perceptions that are being spread.

 By [Jason Stewart](#) 13 Jun 2012

### Dealing with situational negative WOM

Brands will always make mistakes - as they are run by humans. That's not the problem, as people are surprisingly forgiving, especially in South Africa where we have such a high tolerance for bad service. What makes people mad is how brands deal with the situation. Most responses are of denial, trying to ignore the claim, or making the customer feel like the fool.

A few brands actually get it right, and it is amazing the level of gratitude and advocacy that is created and takes place because of those actions. Research has proven that customers rate their level of brand satisfaction higher if they had a problem that was solved professionally and quickly compared to experiencing everything as it should be. This shows that we have an unprecedented opportunity to create advocates out of being human (and messing up).

So here is my five-point plan to make that happen:

1. **Acknowledge your mistake as soon as possible.** (The longer you wait, the more aggression and negative emotion is built up towards the brand.)
2. **Show accountability in serious cases.** There needs to be a repercussion (loss incurred by the brand). By spilling some blood, it shows that we are taking the matter seriously and gives the public the pound of flesh. This could be turned into a positive, however, where the brand offers free product or a major discount to those affected, or contributes working hours into rebuilding a community park (doing things that are seen as positive and respectful towards the consumer as well as being inspirational).
3. **Do not try and spin lies.** Once you have admitted the error and been candid about how it happened, steer the conversation away from the blame and towards the solution and how you are going to make the customer happy. Place them in a better situation than they would have been. (I remember how my aunt complained about milk that she bought from Pick 'n Pay, being "off", only to have Raymond Ackerman knocking at her door with two bags of groceries and fresh milk! Her entire suburb heard the story versus the nine that heard about the "off milk"!)
4. **Realise that everyone is watching you now.** This is a fantastic marketing opportunity as you have a captive audience. Right the wrong. Spend more if you need to and go the proverbial extra mile to serve your customer/s better. Remember that you are dealing with trust and credibility issues. You will most likely lose by not acknowledging the mistake early (or trying to cover it up). You can only gain by being honest.
5. **Follow-up.** Ask the customer if there is anything more that you can do for them to ensure that they are

happy and satisfied. This last step is very important. Follow up with them after a few days to check on their experience of the product. This has incredible WOW appeal.

For every situational mistake that happens, try to figure out why so that you can prevent the same from happening in the future. Remember that it is not a failure of people but rather a failure of the system - either in training, in motivating, in directing communication, in responding or in measuring. Find the fault in the system and fix it or build safety nets for alerts in a break in the system.

## Summary

Mistakes do happen, but it is how we deal with them that really counts. And remember the old wise words "treat others as you would like to be treated". This primes the right attitude that will ensure that our customers have only the best to say about us, guaranteeing positive bottom line growth for our brand. (You see - nice guys do finish first!)

## ABOUT JASON STEWART

Jason Stewart is the co-founder and MD of HaveYouHeard ([www.haveyouheard.co.za](http://www.haveyouheard.co.za)), a communications agency immersed in culture to influence it. With 11 years' trading experience and offices in Johannesburg, Cape Town and London, HaveYouHeard uncovers unique insights to create innovative ideas that influence the audience by bringing the brands it partners with to the centre of culture.  
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