

Stormhoek calls on social media power – again

 By [Eve Dmochowska](#)

6 Mar 2008

If your company's outsourced contractors were in a R6 million financial crisis due to no fault of their own, and you wanted to help them out, who would you turn to for help? If you are Stormhoek winery, you dodge the bank manager and turn to your biggest fan club – your customer base.



Stormhoek has been making marketing waves ever since, in 2005, it used the blogosphere to promote its product. In the tough wine sales industry, where even the biggest market share owner only owns 2% of the market, local Stormhoek reputedly grew its UK sales six fold to 300 000 cases per year. All this, on a mere US\$20 000 annual budget, which is only about R15 000 per month. Not bad for a local brand with global recognition.

Unfortunately, Stormhoek's UK partner Orbital has declared bankruptcy for reasons well outside Stormhoek's control. And although Stormhoek itself is still in a financially sound position, its sub-contractors are not. This translates into layoffs – a situation that Stormhoek is eager to help avoid.

Online viral marketing

Since it relied so strongly on online viral marketing to boost its sales, it seemed natural that it would turn to the same blogosphere space to come up with a solution to the financial woes.

Now, it is asking the public for a loan. Basically, for a R2000 loan, a Stormhoek supporter will get allocated a vine, on which his or her name and location will be displayed. He or she will also receive a photograph of the vine, as well as a bottle of wine made from the crop of that vineyard block.

In the meantime, Stormhoek will allocate 5% of its production costs to a loan-repayment fund, to repay the R2000 loan with interest.

Within days of the [news of this plan](#) hitting the web, well over 70 articles had been generated online about the campaign, the [Facebook group](#) has been actively in action, the word has been out on South African social bookmarking service [Muti](#) and international microblogging/status update tool [Twitter](#), and local video and image sharing social media site Zoopy.com is [doing its bit](#) as well. Over 11 000 people have visited the new Stormhoek website ([www.stormhoek.co.za](#) – the old site, [www.stormhoek.com](#), was controlled by the UK company and has been frozen), and yes, 22 vines have already been sold.

Confident

Although 22 is far, far away from the target of 3000 vines, Graham Knox, Stormhoek's owner, is confident that once again, the online world will pull through and drive them to success in this venture.

Nice as this feel-good story is, it is also an excellent case study for any other company that wants to get maximum bang for its minimum buck.

Here are some lessons:

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1. Open yourself up fully, and remain fully transparent

In its initial campaign, Stormhoek invited bloggers to try its wine for free. That's it. No commitment to write about it, and certainly no commitment to write only good things. It did not select only "A-list bloggers". This transparency paid off, and word spread virally, and fast.

2. Continue the conversation

Stormhoek continually engages the online community in a conversation. In South Africa, it sponsors the wine for any geek get together. Once again, no obligation on anyone's part, but invariably people write about the event, mention the wine, and another notch to the Stormhoek's feel-good belt is added.

3. Evolve

Nothing, of course, is ever stagnant on the web. This also applies to Stormhoek. It is continuously evolving its online – and offline – conversation. In the next couple of days, for instance, Stormhoek will add video to its stable, using Zoopy's video aggregator.

4. Understand the meaning of a relationship

A successful relationship is a two-way street, and a relationship that is well nourished by both parties will continue to thrive. Stormhoek did a very clever thing by asking its supporters to help it help out the contractors. Basically, it is saying to them: "We've been in this together from the start, so now is not the time for us to leave you out, or for you to desert us." As a result, no one who feels a connection to Stormhoek of some sort feels powerless to help. Don't have R2000? Get your friends together. Or write about it. Tell others. Spread the word. Just don't be indifferent.

5. Stay human

In this highly digital world that makes the conversation possible, it is important to remind everyone that there is a human face behind the blog, and there are human faces behind the vines. Visit the Stormhoek blog, and you will read about the individual lives that you will be affecting, should you lend your R2000. You will find out about the worker whose job you will save, how many kids he has, how long he has been working there and so on.

6. Write your own rules

Get creative. Difficult, but fun. Stormhoek knew what it wanted to achieve at each step of its marketing campaign, and it decided to be the first ones to try it. It was the first wine producer to use the power of the social web to grow sales. It was the first to use its fan base to save friends of the industry. It found solutions where none seemed obvious –

including setting up an offshore account to make the buy-a-vine scheme possible.

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An idea for your own campaign

What can you do to start your own online fan club?

First, buy a vine. Then ride on the coat tails of Stormhoek's powerful marketing campaign: blog about your purchase, send out a press release, tell your existing customer base about it. You will be aligning yourself with a feel-good story, that has a proven viral marketing value, and at the same time you will be doing some very, very good for the local wine industry.

As an added bonus, once your loan is repaid, it will all have been done free of charge.

Let's drink to that!

For more:

- Zoopy: [The Stormhoek Story: The beginning](#) [video]

- Zoopy: [The Stormhoek Story: The making](#)

ABOUT EVE DMOCHOWSKA

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