

10 years later and still the same PR mistakes

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

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Ten years ago, I posted the following warning and the situation has now worsened considerably with far too many companies still stuck in the past and wondering why their sales are struggling.

It is worth repeating what I said all those years ago...

As more and more consumers take to complaining about products and services online and in social network forums, ignoring this phenomenon is simply no longer an option for any business.

Yes, you've got a website and a call centre, maybe even a well staffed PR department and all these, you believe, will take care of customer complaints.

And yes, you know that old saying about what happens when one unhappy customer goes off and tells another ten about a bad experience with your product or service. Not a train-smash because by the time that unhappy customer gets home, or a few days and weeks go by, the bad experience isn't too much of a talking point anymore.

WRONG.

As Johnson and Johnson in the USA found out, the days of consumers spreading the bad news by telling a few friends have now gone. The growth and accessibility of the internet and particularly social networking phenomena such as FaceBook, Twitter and the like, have made it possible for consumers to start spreading the bad news instantly and to hundreds if not thousands of people rather than just those ten friends.

Jonson & Johnson made the mistake of ignoring a customer complaint that started doing the rounds on the web and social networks. Soon, radio talk show presenters and consumer journos (who happened to be on those networks just as friends of friends) started picking up on the issue and in no time it got completely out of control.

In South Africa, faster, cheaper internet access has become a reality allowing more and more South Africans to become aware of website forums on which consumers can vent their frustrations. If you have ever visited the local consumer website [helloworld.com](#) then multiply that by about 100 to get an idea of what is on the horizon.

In the past few years, one of the things that I have been asked to do most often is to come up with a marketing solution to this phenomenon. I have done a lot of homework and I have found that the answer is simple but the implementation extremely complex.

For example, even ten years ago, Dell Computers in the US employed 17 "bloggers" who do nothing all day but scour the world's websites and infiltrate as many social networks as possible to see who is saying what about Dell and then interspersing their own comments and providing facts to dispel wrong perceptions, etc.

This is, of course the answer, but an extremely dangerous thing to do unless you know what you are about because it can backfire on you and cause more trouble than it solves.

We have found that indeed, one needs to monitor the web and social media sites constantly and that it cannot be done by employing outside people to do it for you. It MUST be done in-house. You also don't just employ bloggers but marketers - people I call SMAEs (Search, Monitor, Analyse and Engage). With the "analyse" part being absolutely crucial.

What I have been doing is setting up systems within client companies and then coaching and mentoring on an ongoing basis. To make sure that no knee-jerk reactions take place.

The reason for this is also because things change so quickly that on an almost weekly basis one has to employ new methodology and adjust checks and balances to ensure that the right message is going out at the right time, with the right inflection.

It is a professional communications challenge of note. A combination of technology and marketing know-how. Certainly not, either or.

I believe that no company or major brand can continue taking the risk of simply assuming that customers who are unhappy will contact their call centre.

As the internet becomes more accessible and social media networks grow and become more and more popular, consumers will find it far easier just to use their cell phones as they walk out of a retail outlet, bank, insurance company, car service department, hotel, or any company for that matter, to share their frustration with a couple of hundred friends.

And that's the real danger - no time to get home and cool off. No dissipation after a few weeks.

But, instant action.

If you are not monitoring what your customers are saying online, best start as soon as you can because there is no doubt that this is a form of cancer to customer service that has the potential to becoming an epidemic.

The good news, however, is that it is not by any means an expensive exercise and can be implemented reasonably quickly. In fact, the most time-consuming part is helping marketers persuade their boards, CEOs or MDs understand the urgency and need for this. It is quite fun doing a demonstration of what is happening online today with regard to consumerism, to scare the daylights out of boards and get senior management to take action.

Because ignoring this, is like sailing though an iceberg-infested sea with no lifeboats and shark-fins circling all over the place.

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on moerdyk@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).

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