

Are you ready to handle crisis and complaints in the digital age?

 By [Noëleen Bruton](#)

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The advent and rise of social media has created a vast community of citizen journalists and has provided the consumer with easily accessible platforms on which to voice concerns and complaints, resulting in both positive and negative consequences of these new, very public and prolific platforms.

On the positive end of the spectrum regarding customer complaints and suggestions, companies now have the opportunity to both address the problem as well as respond quickly. And, with the right processes in place, effective handling of these issues can afford them with the opportunity to create a mirror effect, where the public sees a company in a favourable light as a result of the way they handle concerns. On the negative side, social media has given rise to a new breed of serial complainers, who use the platform for their 15 minutes of fame or even for unethical personal gain. Also, while it can take time to investigate and give feedback on both crises and complaints, the public expects an instantaneous response.

Direct access

Digital media has given customers and traditional media more direct access to companies than ever before - and management needs to know how to address this access effectively so as to ensure that they retain the respect and loyalty of their customer base. If they haven't done so already, companies need to assess their digital platform management and processes, and determine whether they are properly equipped for these rapid changes in the way we deal with both customer service and crisis PR.

It's important to draw a distinction between the way in which a company handles crises versus complaints. In both cases, it's important to have processes in place to get the necessary information out as quickly as possible, while in the case of complaints, companies also need to have a firm policy on dealing with serial complainers.



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Responses now must be a whole lot quicker than they've needed to be in the past, when complaints came through the post or telephonically that could be responded to within a 'reasonable' time period - thereby giving businesses time to do research, solve the issue and to check the validity of complaints. Since the advent of social media, one often has to respond before even knowing all the facts. But crises and complaints can quickly take on a life of their own and a minor complaint can turn into a PR fiasco. Often, the security and operational staff are so busy dealing with the actual crisis - which could be robbery, suicide or death - that they don't have time to provide responses on multiple platforms.

Quick response

Operationally, it's imperative that the people on the scene gather and share information quickly and accurately to ensure that the communication and responses on social media are as immediate as possible. The expectation of a quick response means your responders - the people in your organisation who are equipped to respond to complaints or PR crises and who know the facts - need to be ultra-sensitive to managing expectations, while also being as forthright as the situation allows. It is vital to get accurate data, because old fashioned holding statements simply won't suffice.

In many instances you may need to say, 'We'll get back to you,' but what's imperative in these situations is that the person representing the company sets accurate deadlines for providing feedback, keeps the media and public updated along the way and remains true to their word. In this digital age, there's a tendency by the public to mistrust big corporates, and the key in social media interaction in the case of both crises and complaints is to bring sincerity back into the communication. Make sure you do what you say you will, and you'll slowly build credibility and retain loyal customers.

An approach that we sometimes take is to 'wait and see' if the issue is taken up and debated or whether it will calm down and 'go away'. I do caution here that you had better have your ear to the ground and make sure that your social media personnel are quick to pick up an issue before it gains momentum and spins out of control.

Proper processes in place

Customer comments and complaints can usually be dealt with effectively if customers are taken seriously and treated with the requisite respect and attention. It's also vital to have proper processes in place, including accurate document keeping and the ability to report quickly after investigating a complaint, to ensure that you are able to respond timeously, accurately and honestly - allowing you to turn a potentially damaging situation into an opportunity to demonstrate transparency, speed and a policy of prioritising proactive communication.

Of course, there are always the 'serial complainers' and the 'chancers', both of whom tend to want something from the company. In the hospitality environment, we have found that this can often be in the form of bribery. 'If you give us a free room, we won't complain/report you to the media' or some similar threat. You can't afford to run your business like that. Excessive hyperbole, exaggerations, and untruths on the part of customers need to be dealt with honestly, calmly and factually, because knee-jerk defensive comments on your part will do more harm than good - and are likely to harm your reputation, even if you are in the right.

It's also important to remember that, in clear-cut cases of defamation, you do have a right to remove commentary from social media and that there is still legal recourse against it.

It's not an easy road, and most organisations are still finding their way along it, but getting to know your platforms, improving your processes, being honest and being quick to respond with factual information is a good start to ensuring you maintain your sound reputation and your excellent relationship with your customers and the media.

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