



# BrandsEye

Protecting your online reputation

## 10 Rules to Recover from an Online Brand Attack

by **Rob Stokes**

After watching so many brands, from mom and pop to blue chip, getting lambasted on the web recently I have noticed that the majority of them have been unable to handle it effectively. While effective online reputation management may be a relatively new concept to some brands that's still no excuse. These 10 rules to recovery should provide a practical approach for brands facing an online threat.

### 1). Humility

Before you can recover from an online brand attack you have to be aware that your brand can be attacked – no matter how big it is or how untouchable it may seem. I can guarantee that Dell had no clue that they would face a brand attack of the "Dell Hell" calibre (more on that later).

Whether the negative buzz is based on fact or fiction, the first thing you need to do, once you've decided to take your brand's online reputation seriously, is to swallow some pride. You may think your brand is beyond reproach but clearly the customers don't and the longer you avoid facing that reality the worse the situation WILL become.

### 2). Listen

Once you have a clear understanding of the scope of the possible effects of an online attack and are committed to maintaining a good reputation online; you're half way there. Next you've got to understand how the process of consumer complaints has evolved.

The days of letters being written by disgruntled customers expressing their disappointment are long gone. Brands, these days, often don't even know that their customers are disappointed. Is it because they're not expressing their feelings? Not by a long shot!

They're expressing them more than ever, they're just doing so via a different channel – they have moved online. Smart brands are watching consumer generated content, listening to what their customers are saying. The rest of the brands out there haven't yet woken up to the fact that 'listening' is vital and can be detrimental to a brands survival. My point – LISTEN, monitor the Internet for conversations about your brand, you can't react to something you have no idea about.

### 3). Act Immediately!

One of the easiest ways to solve the majority of brand attacks is to respond quickly. A brand that shows it is listening and does indeed care will go far when it comes to ensuring a solid online reputation. The very same consumers who are complaining are actively keeping an eye out for your reaction.



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No reaction – you either have no clue about what is being said or you don't care about what your customers grievances are – both detrimental to their opinion of you. Overreaction – freak out, launch an attack on the customers who have criticised your brand and you're done, not only will they be unhappy with a certain aspect of your brand they will lose what respect they have left for the brand. Conscious reaction – acknowledging what has been said and reacting accordingly is the only way forward.

#### 4). If what they're saying is false...

If the mention of your brand is factually incorrect, in a friendly tone, send the blogger (90% of the time it will be a blogger) evidence that they are wrong, ask for removal or retraction of the entry, offer to keep them informed of future news, and only if no action is taken by the blog author then add a comment.

You don't fight fire with fire here – the high road is definitely the one you want to take.

#### 5). If what they're saying is true...

Run for the hills!

Just kidding!

If it is true, learn from the phenomenon coined "**Dell Hell**". Dell Hell resulted because of the bad experience one blogger, Jeff Jarvis, had with Dell Computers. In true blogger style he documented his experience on his blog and word quickly spread to the point where it was even **covered in print by Business Week**. Dell, however, failed to respond to his musings and the bad customer experiences continued as did the negative comments on the blogosphere. What ensued was literally hell for the company and a recent scientific study by responsesource.com showed that Dell has sustained long-term damage to its brand image and that the cheerleaders for the poor reputation of Dell's customer services are bloggers.

If the mention is negative but TRUE then send your side of the story, try as hard as you can to take it offline. I'll repeat that for effect, take it offline, it's so much harder for people to listen.

Will this help? You'd be surprised, if you are civil; in most cases the author will remove the piece or add information that will help you. While there are a few bloggers who will be explosive no matter what you're saying, if you keep Point One in mind and you're humble, genuinely seem sorry and are interested in sorting things out, they'll probably help you do so.

#### 6). Keep the negative pages out of the search engines

Keeping even more people from reading negative things about your brand is imperative – once the negative musings are listed in the search engine results pages chances are some people (read a stack of people) are going to find them.

What you can do, however, is knock them off the first page of the results and in doing so stop at least 95% of people seeing them – Basic **SEO**.



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Find out what terms the page is getting good rankings for (these will generally be around your brand name) then, for starters make sure that your website is ranking higher – in all fairness this should be important to you regardless of an online threat. This should take 2 of the 10 first page places, now all you need to do is fill the other 8 spots with positive pages. It's not as daunting as it sounds, the other eight spots could be filled by other sites that you don't own - articles that you author and publish online, social media pages such as [Squidoo](#) and [MySpace](#) or forum posts to mention a few.

It is important to note once gain that if you are going to build social media pages, make sure you apply generous dollops of humility and honesty. Brands that either put themselves on a pedestal or purport themselves dishonestly will inevitably be thrashed by the disillusioned customer. Once you've got these pages in place, you can boost their rankings by building keyword rich links to them. Keep adding pages and links until you've forced the offending pages out of sight.

## 7). Maintain communication

So, you've sorted out the issue – you can sit back and relax now, right? Wrong! Just because you think you've put out the fire, doesn't mean it can't flare up again. Look at [Kryptonite Locks](#), they were punished in waves. It all started when a cyclist learned he could open his Kryptonite bike lock with a pen instead of the provided key. So he posted his findings on a forum and after the first week more than 340,000 readers had visited the forum thread. [Videos of how to do it](#) were even posted which quickly became viral. To cut a long story short Kryptonite offered to replace all the locks and lost a huge amount of revenue after the blogosphere debacle, but just doing this did not solve their problems. The problem here was that Kryptonite only responded to the widespread criticism once the story had hit offline media 10 days later – a bit late!

If you aren't an active member of the online community it tends to be a little harder to recover from an online attack - learn from the Kryptonite lesson and get involved immediately (preferably before something like this even happens). If your company doesn't have a blog, start one. Participate in industry forums and chat rooms. Build genuine credibility as a member of these conversations and you'll find that firstly, the likelihood of a brand attack will decrease because people will have more respect from you (generally the more distanced a brand gets from its customers, the more they start to despise it). Secondly if you are attacked again, you will (hopefully if you've done your job right) have a community of allies and evangelists who will support your brand and its efforts to clear its name.

## 8).Engage in the conversation

Looking a little closer to home we see that Dell has done it again. Dell Hell – the sequel hit our screens early in 2007 and the bloggers were at it again. To cut a long story short [Dell](#) advertised their Dell Inspiron 640m and 9400 on our web store at R0. So of course South Africans were placing their orders left right and centre thinking that all they needed to pay for were the transportation costs. Wrong! Even though each order was responded to with a thanks for paying you'll be receiving your lap top soon mail another email followed apologising for the mistake, asking customers to furnish their bank details so that the money they had paid could be returned to them in a couple of days.



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Sure they sent each customer who ordered a lap top **an apologetic email** – but is that enough? NO! In order to douse this kind of fire they should keep the brand in the face of consumers by engaging in the conversation. This could be done by making use of blogs, communicating with customers, being as open and honest as possible. If someone does have something bad to say about your brand, you should be aware of what it is and be armed with an appropriate response.

Most customers have been quite understanding but there are quite a few customers expressing their disappointment with Dell at the moment – after all they should really be way above these “technical difficulties”. Keep an eye out on this situation to learn more about just how important ORM is to brands both big and small.

## 09). Care

If you truly care what your customers think then most of this will come naturally. That’s all people want. They give you their money, they just want some good service and respect in return.

## 10). Be prepared

No brand is immune from an online brand attack – no matter how much you THINK your customers love you. The best brands have strategies in place to immediately identify a reputation crisis and respond to it quickly enough to stop the negative word of mouth spreading.

Think of the areas where your brand could be susceptible. Start building credibility online because you’ll need it when your goodwill is under threat.

This article only really skims the top of the deep pool known as Online Reputation Management. **Quirk eMarketing** in association with **Sally Falkow** will be presenting a full day conference on the ins and outs of online brand attacks, how to prevent them and how, if worst comes to worst, recover from them. Attending the **WebPR+ Conference** is a definite must for brands that are serious about their involvement online.