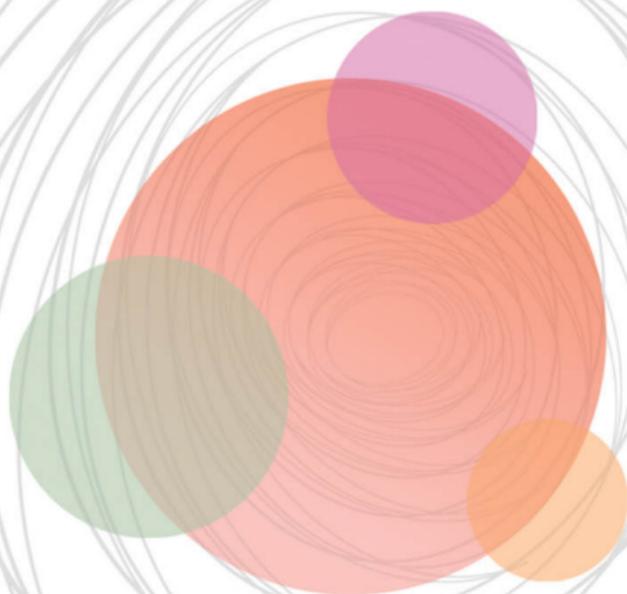


Gini Dietrich

SPIN SUCKS



COMMUNICATION and
REPUTATION Management
in the **DIGITAL AGE**

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Spin Sucks

Communication and Reputation
Management in the Digital Age

GINI DIETRICH

que[®]

800 East 96th Street
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Spin Sucks

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Gini Dietrich is the founder and CEO of Arment Dietrich, a Chicago-based integrated marketing communications firm. She also is the founder of the professional development site for PR and marketing pros, Spin Sucks Pro. Gini is the author of the PR and marketing blog, Spin Sucks, which is the number one Cision Top 50 PR Blogs, the number three Listly Top 50 PR and Marketing Blogs, an annual Readers Choice Blog of the Year, a Top 42 Content Marketing Blog from Junta42, a top 10 social media blog from Social Media Examiner, and an AdAge Power 150 blog. She is also co-host of Inside PR, a weekly podcast about communications, social media, and where they all meet and intersect.

One of the top rated communication professionals on the social networks, Gini can be found writing at *Crain's Chicago Business*, *OpenForum*, *AllBusiness Experts*, and in various PR and marketing blogs and publications.

She delivers numerous keynotes, panel discussions, coaching sessions, and workshops around the globe on the subject of communications in the digital age.

Gini is also the coauthor of *Marketing in the Round*, released by Que Publishing in May, 2012.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Elizabeth Dietrich. When Marketing in the Round was published, she said to me, "Honey, you are so sweet. Please don't let this success go to your head." I won't, Grandma. I won't.

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Introduction

Consider this: The public relations industry might have begun in 1800 B.C. Back then, the Babylonians used stone tablets to educate farmers on how to sow and harvest crops. In Egypt, scribes documented the deeds of the pharaohs; in Rome, leaders such as Julius Caesar wrote biographies to persuade the public to support their political aspirations. There are numerous examples of persuasive speaking, the art of rhetoric, reputation building, and mediating between rulers and subjects.

Among the most famous was the use of public relations to promote Roman Catholicism during Europe's Counter-Reformation. Pope Gregory XV coined the term "propaganda" when he created *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (*Congregation for Propagating the Faith*), which trained missionaries to spread Catholic doctrine in the face of rising Protestantism. The term did not carry negative connotations until it became associated with government publicity around World War I.

Edward Bernays, the father of public relations and nephew of Sigmund Freud, worked on the women's cigarette smoking campaign in the 1920s. He helped the cigarette industry overcome a social taboo: women smoking in public. His client? Lucky Strike. His campaign? He persuaded fashion designers, charity events, interior designers, and others to make the color green trendy. Because a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes was green, women would be more likely to carry them because the color was fashionable.

He is reported to have said, “The three main elements of public relations are practically as old as society: informing people, persuading people, or integrating people with people.”¹

Watch an episode of *Mad Men* and you’ll see the PR theme carried throughout. Though the series focuses on an advertising agency, there is an episode where Peggy Olson suggests they create an event at the supermarket to get women to buy more ham for the upcoming holiday. They would hire an actress to grab the last ham from a shopper’s hands, creating controversy and fabricated supply and demand.

Hollywood has not often been kind to the PR industry. *Wag the Dog* depicts a “spin doctor” (played by Robert De Niro) who distracts the public from a sex scandal by hiring a film producer to construct a fake war with Albania. In *Sex and the City*, the character of Samantha (played by Kim Cattrall) was a publicist who threw elaborate parties and spent her evenings club-hopping from fabulous event to fabulous event. And reality TV star Lizzie Grubman did the work of celebrity publicists in Manhattan while the world watched. She and her team of assistants planned nightclub openings, launched albums, and mingled with celebrities and the media.

Because of these depictions, when interviewing soon-to-be college graduates, their reasons for going into PR run the gamut from “I’m good with people” and “I love to plan a party” to “I’m a night person” and “My family doesn’t mind if I go to events and clubs with clients.”

There isn’t a specific degree required to join the public relations industry. In fact, just about anyone can hang out a shingle and call themselves a PR professional. There isn’t a global body monitoring the behavior of the industry, and advanced degrees and testing aren’t required. That’s why you hear so many stories in the news about the bad parts of the profession: astroturfing, lying, spinning the truth, making up fake personas to write reviews, doing whisper campaigns, sitting in on interviews so the clients can’t answer questions for themselves.

Even business leaders hire PR professionals or firms, usually because they’ve heard from their peers that getting their names in the paper will solve all their problems. One year, two weeks before Christmas, we received a phone call from a man looking for a PR firm to help launch his new product. During the conversation, it came out that his expectation was he would sell out by Christmas. How? By getting on the front page of the *New York Times* just a week later. Two weeks before launch date—let alone right before Christmas—is not enough time to get results, but he also wanted the front page of one of the most renowned and respected newspapers in the United States. Take a look at the front page. Have you ever seen a new product announced there? Typically it’s reserved for world events, the country’s latest crisis, or political exposes.

1. Barbara Diggs-Brown, *Cengage Advantage Books: Strategic Public Relations: An Audience-Focused Approach*, Cengage Learning, 2011.

Likewise, being in Chicago, it's impossible to count how many times prospects and clients would say, "If you could just get us on *Oprah*, all of our problems will be solved." Toward the end of her run, she only hosted authors and celebrities, but that never stopped business leaders in manufacturing, healthcare, software, and other business-to-business organizations from seeking the Oprah magic bullet.

The industry, as a whole, hasn't done much to change the perception that we're all spin doctors, liars, party planners, club hoppers, and magicians. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is a membership organization for the industry. While it serves the needs of its members—professional development, conferences, networking, and content—it does not govern the industry from a whole from engaging in unethical practices.

The official definition of public relations, as redefined by PRSA in 2012, is: "Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics." But try to explain that to a business leader (or a young professional, or your friends, or an educator, or your grandma), and it goes above their heads. People understand what is tangible; media relations—when a story runs in print or airs on television or radio about you, your company, or your product or service—is easy to understand. You can see it, touch it, feel it. It's not something that feels like magic so it's often what is thought of when explaining public relations.

The truth of the matter is, while media relations is an important part of a communications program, there are many other tactics used in a cohesive strategy: content, email marketing, social media, crisis and reputation management, events, social advertising, investor relations, lobbying and regulatory work, and more.

That's why this book is called *Spin Sucks*. An offshoot of the number one (or number three, depending on which list you look at) public relations blog in the world, this book is written for business leaders who need to better understand how the industry is changing, what to expect from the PR professionals you hire, and what kind of return you'll have for time and money spent by hiring PR pros. If you are a communications professional, some of this will apply to you and some will be old hat, in which case your best bet is to check out the blog which is written twice daily specifically for you.

If you run an organization, are on an executive team, or have (or need to have) communications professionals or a firm reporting to you, this book will show you how to prepare your business for a marathon instead of a sprint, how to build a communications program that can withstand the constant changes at Google, and how working ethically—while not providing instant ROI—will deliver more valuable long-lasting results, as well as a spotless reputation. You'll also learn how the lines between marketing, advertising, digital, and PR are blurring, and what to expect should negative criticism happen online.

Officially, the PR industry has only been around since 1929, and it has remained pretty much the same for more than 70 years. The tools today are different, but the premise remains the same. Lie or spin the truth, and you will be found out. People will take you to task. Your organization will suffer from decreased sales, lower stock prices, and a tarnished reputation. The digital Web has forever changed the way we communicate. It's changed the way we all do business. And it has forever changed the way we, the PR professionals, perform our jobs.

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Whisper Campaigns and Anonymous Attackers

In early 2009, the *Halifax-Plympton Reporter* received a letter to the editor urging people to “contact their Congressman about the Medicare Advantage program, a sort of privatized health plan paid for through the recipient’s Medicare. There may be some interest in doing away with the program.”

Seems benign enough, right? The letter was signed by a local resident, but it didn’t mention the local Congressman, which the paper’s editor found strange. So he called the man who wrote the letter and was astounded to learn the letter’s “author” had no idea what he was talking about.

The editor filed the letter and went on about his day. About a week later, he received a phone call from a man who said he was calling on behalf of the person who wrote the letter. The editor told the caller what he had done and asked who he was and who he worked for. The caller declined to tell the editor who he was and hung up the phone. But what he didn’t count on was caller ID. The editor traced it back to a high-powered lobbying and public affairs firm in D.C. It became pretty evident the firm was working for an organization with an interest in keeping Medicare Advantage in business.

The firm’s site promises “grassroots communication,” but this is downright astroturfing.

According to *Campaigns & Elections*, astroturfing is “a grassroots program that involves the instant manufacturing of public support for a point-of-view in which either uninformed activists are recruited or means of deception are used to recruit them.”

At one time found only in politics, this practice has spread to the communications industry.

Genuine grassroots campaigns tend to have many people involved, but don't always have the money needed to support them. Think about Occupy Wall Street, or President Obama's 2008 bid for the White House, or campaigns designed to get television programs back on the air. They use the Web and social media to help further their ideals, but don't always have a lot of money behind them.

Astroturfing, though, tends to be flush with cash but people-poor...so the designers make up people. On the Web, they'll create fake personas or robots to spread the word. Offline, sophisticated computer databases, telephone banks, as well as hired organizers, are used to recruit and inspire less-informed activists to send letters to their elected officials or to the city's main newspaper. Ultimately, it ends up looking like there are many people up in arms about pending changes.

According to Wikipedia, these techniques have been used to

- Defeat President Clinton's proposed health care reform through a front group called Rx Partners, which was created by a public relations firm and the Coalition for Health Insurance Choices
- Oppose restrictions on smoking in public places through a front group called National Smokers Alliance, which was created by a global public relations firm
- Encourage people to buy Coke
- Generate news clips to assist Microsoft lobbyists in persuading U.S. state attorney generals not to join a class action suit against the company

While shocking, the good news is, as consumers, we're far more educated through information found on the Web, these kinds of campaigns are found very quickly, brought to the attention of influential journalists, and taken down.

"For years, Mark Zuckerberg, the chief executive of Facebook, has extolled the virtue of transparency, and he built Facebook accordingly. The social network requires people to use their real identity in large part because Mr. Zuckerberg says he believes that people behave better—and society will be better—if they cannot cloak their words or actions in anonymity," wrote the *New York Times* on May 13, 2011.

Enter a global public relations firm. They were hired to create a "whisper campaign" about Social Circle—an optional feature of Google that uses publicly available information from social networks to personalize search results.

The story goes like this: Two very high-profile former reporters-turned-PR-pros worked with journalists and bloggers to begin digging into Social Circle and writing negative stories about it. When pushed to reveal their client, they refused, and a blogger published their email exchange.

The initial email from the high-profile PR pro began, “I wanted to gauge your interest in authoring an op-ed this week for a top-tier media outlet on an important issue that I know you’re following closely.” He went on to describe the sweeping violations of user privacy at Google and how the blogger could use the information in his email to write the op-ed.

The blogger responded with, “Who is paying for this? (Not paying me, but paying you).”

The PR pro wrote, “Thanks for the prompt reply. I’m afraid I can’t disclose my client yet. But all the information included in this email is publicly available. Any interest in pursuing this?”

The blogger, smart to these kinds of practices, denied the request and made the entire conversation public, which made national news and required the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) to get involved, from an ethics point-of-view.

This is common practice in Silicon Valley. PR professionals are hired to help create negative stories about one’s competition.

It happens in Hollywood, too. During the 2013 Oscars season, you might remember seeing stories such as, “Can you believe *Zero Dark Thirty*? The Academy is never going to vote for a movie that justifies torture.” Or “If you want historical accuracy, don’t watch *Argo*. The suspense when they’re leaving the airport? That never happened.” Or “Come on, *Lincoln*! Mary Todd Lincoln never attended debates, but there she is in the visitor’s galley in the movie.”

These comments typically begin with publicists or “Oscar-campaign consultants” who have off-the-record chats with reporters and voters. They don’t talk about the great attributes of the movies, actors, or directors they represent; rather, they point out the flaws in their competitors. And some of these stories are created by the media looking to increase eyeballs and win in the ratings wars.

The Academy has tried to discourage the negativity by imposing a one-year suspension of membership for first-time violators, but this rule is hardly ever enforced because most whisper campaigners are too smart to malign their competition publicly. They never put anything in writing, including in email.

The idea of whisper campaigns began, not surprisingly, during wartime, because it is an effective and inexpensive way to create protests, support stand-offs, and exercise national will without using the military. From there, it has seeped into politics, the tobacco industry, Hollywood, and now Silicon Valley.

But it isn’t limited to those few instances. In business, companies hire employees to create fake social media accounts to post comments on blogs, forums, chat rooms, and social networks. They try to steer conversations in a desired direction or post negative responses that rile up the community.

For instance, a defense contractor that works with the government was found to be mounting an attack against WikiLeaks when they were hacked by Anonymous (the

hackers responsible for a lot of the tightly secured information that throughout the years has been leaked to WikiLeaks).

In the documents they found and leaked, there was information about how to create personas to attack journalists, bloggers, and commenters to “smear enemies and distort the truth.”

Here’s a quote from the leaked materials: “To build this capability we will create a set of personas on twitter, blogs, forums, buzz, and myspace under created names that fit the profile (satellitejockey, hack3rman, etc.). These accounts are maintained and updated automatically through RSS feeds, retweets, and linking together social media commenting between platforms. With a pool of these accounts to choose from, once you have a real name persona you create a Facebook and LinkedIn account using the given name, lock those accounts down and link these accounts to a selected # of previously created social media accounts, automatically pre-aging the real accounts.”

Another document describes how they use automation so one persona can represent many different people with the stroke of a key. “Using the assigned social media accounts we can automate the posting of content that is relevant to the persona. In this case there are specific social media strategy website RSS feeds we can subscribe to and then repost content on twitter with the appropriate hashtags. In fact using hashtags and gaming some location based check-in services we can make it appear as if a persona was actually at a conference and introduce [sic] himself/herself to key individuals as part of the exercise, as one example. There are a variety of social media tricks we can use to add a level of realness to all fictitious personas.”

That’s just another example of how gigantic organizations are gaming the system, lying and stealing, and developing groups of “people” to provide opinions about an issue.

In the past, these things worked fairly well. It was difficult to not only prove it was happening, but to get the attention of journalists to tell the story. But there’s a new sheriff in town, named social media. Because of him, everyone has a megaphone. When you are found out, people are all too happy to rip you down from the fake proverbial pedestal.

Brian Solis, principal analyst at Altimeter Group, a prominent blogger, keynote speaker, and author of several books, did a test to promote the launch of “The End of Business as Usual.” Using a service called Let Me Tweet That For You, he created a bunch of tweets from celebrities such as Donald Trump and Ellen DeGeneres that are made to look like they endorse his book (Figure 4.1).

Of course, the tweets Brian created aren’t real and he never actually sent them. He created them only to show it’s important to confirm any information we see online that seems strange, because it most likely is. A great example of this is the photos of Abraham Lincoln you see floating around the Web that display quotes, supposedly by him, on how to behave online. Of course, Lincoln didn’t say those things, but people continue to share the quotes. After all, if it’s on the Internet; it must be true.



Figure 4.1 *Let Me Tweet That For You* allows you to create fake tweets from real people.

After Brian opened the kimono, so to speak, and showed what he did and why he did it, we took to the Web to create a fake tweet from a colleague, saying she loves working with me (Figure 4.2).



Figure 4.2 *A test to create a fake tweet about myself from a friend and colleague.*

Admittedly, it's kind of fun to create tweets saying awesome things about yourself that look like they're coming from your friends or colleagues. And the good news is the service doesn't allow you to actually tweet what you've created. Instead, it generates a tweet that says, "Check out what @belllindsay just said <http://lemmetweetthatfor-you.com/t/2t199k> Site by @okfocus."

So Lindsay would be alerted if I tweeted that, and anyone following would be directed to the site where it was generated. No harm, no foul, right?

Not so fast. What if trust has now completely eroded? People are astroturfing and creating whisper campaigns and writing fake reviews—and now, faking tweets. What next?

As it turns out, there are lots of blog posts, forums, and how-to sites written for people who want to start their own whisper campaigns. If you'd like to go that route, stop reading and donate this book to a library. You're not going to learn how to do that here.

Trolls and Anonymous Attackers

There are quite a few things you can do to dissuade anonymous attackers. Use Livefyre as your commenting system, which forces commenters to have an account (usually with one of the social networks); build a strong community of people who can quickly recognize those who are there only to cause trouble; and have guidelines that clearly state comments will be deleted if you swear, make up facts, or are intent on damaging someone's reputation (or that of someone in the community) through libel. Ninety-nine point nine nine percent of the time, people are very professional, fun, and kind to one another.

But there will be that one time when you are attacked personally, and anonymously.

When you discover negative comments, you can quickly do some research to find out who the people are. Track their accounts back through Livefyre, and after a few clicks, you'll discover whether it's a real person or not. Sometimes you'll find there is a content farm in another part of the world that is set on creating negative comments to engage authors in conversation, eventually gaming the Google rating system.

Rather than engage those "people," delete the comments and ban the users from commenting on your site. It does take some time, but it's well worth it. Don't be rushed. Take that time. Because if you don't, the attackers win. Situations like this make the online world a bit scary. People will say negative things about you. They will criticize you. When this happens, take out the emotion, listen to what people have to say, admit when you're wrong, and say you're sorry.

Except when the attackers are anonymous. The culture of the Web allows for anonymous attackers known as "trolls": the people who say, from behind a computer screen, things they would never say in public. We see this with online bullying of children and teenagers, and we see it, via adults for the most part, in business. The Web provides a "safe" world where trolls can wield power and influence others. Unlike most real-world bullies, though, anonymous attackers can find a large ready-made audience to consistently engage, vote up their content, share it, and provide serious ego-stroking without negative consequences. In fact, some sites offer real-world bonus items for popular content—no matter if it's harmful or not. But, like real-world bullies, trolls need to get a rise out of their victims to enjoy the interaction. When you don't "feed the trolls," you disgrace them and make them feel irrelevant.

It really isn't unlike serial killers or mass murderers (particularly in the United States) who kill for the publicity and fame they know they'll achieve. Those 15 minutes of fame come at any price...but they're willing to do what it takes to get them. The same thing happens online (even if not at the expense of people's lives) and trolls will do what they can simply to get a rise out of you.

Reddit is a site that allows anyone to register with any username. You can submit and vote on content, all anonymously. You're also able to start a forum dedicated to your hobbies or interests, known as a subreddit. During the Boston Marathon bombings, there was an entire subreddit dedicated to the manhunt—which gave you more accurate and timely information than the news. In fact, reading that stream—which was hooked into the Boston police scanner—revealed to the online world that the second suspect had been caught a full five minutes before the news reported it.

During the 2012 Presidential campaign, President Obama became the first sitting president to participate in a Reddit AMA (Ask Me Anything) feature. People from all around the world participated, and he answered questions about space exploration, Internet freedom, his favorite basketball player (Michael Jordan), and work-life balance. The hour-long Q&A session gave Reddit mass legitimacy and let the site open itself up not only to the typical web geeks, but also to mainstream news and political junkies.

But the site isn't all for the greater good. Because Reddit allows anonymity and the policy itself is very lenient on offensive speech, it has bred an underground of trolls, attackers, and downright bad people.

In October of 2012, a man known as Violentacrez—one of the biggest trolls on Reddit—was found out by *Gawker*. You see, he'd been posting images of scantily-clad underage girls on the Internet, which is what began the deeper investigation into who he really was. But more than that, if you found images of racism, porn, incest, or other highly offensive things on Reddit, it was almost certain Violentacrez was behind them. In fact, he created a subreddit called "Creepshots" where users posted covert photos taken of women in public—usually close-ups of their body parts. And the subreddit thrived.

Violentacrez created another subreddit called Jailbait, with the sole purpose of "creating a safe place for people sexually attracted to underage girls to share their photo stashes." While you or I might call those people pedophiles, the subreddit called them "ephebophiles." Violentacrez and his fellow moderators worked hard to make sure every girl posted in Jailbait was underage. They deleted any photos whose subjects looked like they were older than 16. It soon became one of the most popular subreddits on the site and the term "jailbait" was the second biggest search term for the site. Eventually it landed on CNN, and Anderson Cooper called out both Reddit and Violentacrez. The subreddit was banned—reluctantly because it's against the Reddit terms of service to police the user content and because their community was incensed at the very idea of being "policed"—and, with it, all content featuring minors.

Lock up your children! Protect the women! Throw away the keys!

Like “real life” bullies, trolls need to get a rise out of their victims if they are to enjoy the interaction. But it’s not all as bad as Violentacrez, particularly in the business world. Yes, you will have trolls attacking you, especially as you participate more and grow your brand online. Yes, they will make you angry and emotional. Yes, they will get a rise out of you. But it’s how you handle them that makes all the difference between them feeling like a mosquito bite in the middle of summer, or them forcing your focus away from your job completely.

The best way to stop trolls is to create an environment that is unfriendly to trolling. We’ve done that on Spin Sucks by carefully cultivating a professional, kind, and smart community. We painstakingly review all comments and determine their validity. If we remove someone, we explain to everyone else why we did that, citing something in our policy the person violated. Today, the community does the rest of the work. The good news is it’s unlikely you’ll be trolled—unless you’re Coke or GE or Facebook—until you’ve built a name for your organization online. With that, hopefully, comes a community of people who adore you—or at least respect you. They’ll stick up for you, often without you having to ask.

Public Attackers

More likely, however, you will find you know your attackers. It could be your colleagues, a former employee, a disgruntled customer, a competitor, or a blogger who doesn’t see eye-to-eye with your business practices. Trolls can be right inside your organization, using their keyboards to harass their colleagues.

A few years ago, morale dropped considerably inside our organization. We couldn’t figure out what was going on. People were nice to one another in our weekly staff meetings. They joked and laughed with one another. Nothing seemed amiss when you saw the team interacting. But get someone alone, and all they did was complain about how much they hated their job or their colleagues or the work they were doing. People kept calling in sick. Some who were always on time—or early—began coming in late and leaving early. Anonymous employee satisfaction surveys showed a huge drop from the previous quarter, but we couldn’t get to the bottom of it. Until an email was sent not meant for the eyes of the CEO.

As it turns out, the mid-level managers were bullying the young professionals through email. And it was horrible. Some of the things they were saying to one another would make even the most hardened person blush. It was not only unprofessional, it was mean, rude, and disturbing. It was astonishing and it was tearing down our culture. It became pretty apparent two things were happening: First, there was a ringleader (who we discovered later), and second, they were saying things to one another in email they *never* would say in person. But here’s the catch: In the office, they sat less than 20 feet away from one another. So, to their faces (and to the executive team), they were all smiles and jokes and fun. But behind the computer screen? Well, it was appalling.

So, we banned email. Not external email—of course they still had to be able to email clients. But they were not allowed to email one another. They had to—gasp!—talk to one another. Actually stand up and peer over the cubicle walls to have a conversation, or walk around a wall and through a door to talk to someone else. Not only did it work like a charm, with morale rising almost visibly; the ringleader was found out and promptly fired.

This is a case of how troll-like behavior can happen in person and likely something most business leaders have encountered at some point in their career. As you begin to think about how to manage this kind of behavior online, remember there are tips and tricks you learned in your climb to the top that will help. The behavior is different, the tips aren't different, just the tools are different.

Keeping that in mind, trolls can also be bloggers who—though they don't work with you and never have—have an opinion on how you run your business and aren't afraid to tell the world how they feel about it, using search-optimized posts to make sure their message stays on the first page of Google results forever.

Case in point. There is an entrepreneur in Los Angeles who is trying to change for the better how premature babies receive nutrition in a neonatal intensive care unit. Premature babies are more prone to diseases and bacteria as their little bodies grow outside of the womb. One of the worst diseases—necrotizing enterocolitis (or NEC)—kills nearly 80 percent of premature babies who develop it. The risk of a baby developing it can be greatly reduced if fed a 100 percent human milk diet. Because mom's milk won't have fully come in when a baby arrives early, she needs help supplementing with a fortifier. In the past, most hospitals would supplement with cow's milk to provide the extra fat and calories a baby needs to grow and thrive.

When the American Academy of Pediatrics made a recommendation that babies younger than six months old be fed a 100 percent human milk diet, a nonprofit model popped up to take donated breast milk and provide it to hospitals for the NICU.

This entrepreneur, who has experience in the blood industry, wanted to see breast milk tested at the same level as other bodily fluids. Therefore, he took the reigns of a for-profit company to put the donated milk through a battery of tests to make sure it was safe, then develop a fortifier, and get it into the hospitals to help save lives.

But, as a for-profit organization, they see a lot of negative blog posts written about them and their business model, some even going as far as to attack this man and his executive team personally by calling them “evil” and “blood suckers.”

We have worked with hundreds of clients throughout the years, so we have seen unethical, dishonest, and flat out wrong business practices. This entrepreneur and his team are not any of those things. Their vision is to help the world's tiniest, most precious babies. The babies who are born weighing less than three pounds. The babies who can't nurse. The babies who can take only drops of milk at a time. The babies so underdeveloped they have a fairly high risk of contracting an intestinal disease—which is almost always a death sentence.

They have spent years—and millions of dollars—on research to make sure premature babies have the nutrition they need in their first few weeks on earth. They have created testing no one else does to ensure the safety of their product. And, yes, they are a for-profit company. It costs money to run all those tests. But there are some bloggers who have a big problem with the for-profit angle and have taken it upon themselves to tell the world how this big, bad, for-profit company is taking advantage of parents who have premature babies.

These bloggers who fight them with their words refuse to meet with anyone from the company, and refuse to take a tour of the facilities. They just sit behind their computer screens and throw bombs on the Web for moms to find when they're researching the best thing to do for their newly born premature baby.

The company became a client because we believe in their mission and vision. As we began work with them, we set a plan in place to not only respond to all of the criticism, but to invite the bloggers into the California headquarters to tour the facility and meet the researchers and scientists behind the product. Most, of course, declined, citing busy lives or not being able to take time off work, but a few have taken us up on the offer...and almost all of them changed their minds about this big, bad, evil empire.

For those who declined, however, the conversation was very public in the comments of each blog post. Some parents commented saying they appreciate that the company responds and is open to the criticism. Other parents have said they're creeped out when the organization comments on their posts. But something magical began to happen: Parents chimed in saying things such as, "If you use the company name in your updates, you should expect they're paying attention" or "I imagine the company has Google Alerts or some kind of monitoring set up so they know when they're mentioned online." A community not intentionally built is now sticking up for the company, and it's a great thing.

Typically people who post under their own names just want to be heard. We all want to know someone is listening and will help us with our issues or concerns. A simple "We hear what you're saying. If you wouldn't mind sending us your email address or phone number, we're happy to talk to you about this" works 99.9 percent of the time. Think about the last time you were unhappy with a product or service. Did you have to go through the phone tree that never got you anywhere? Have you posted something online to never hear from the organization? It's super frustrating, right?

When I speak, I tell this story quite often. I tell it so often, in fact, I've heard rumors that other speakers tell it, too.

In 2008, I was flying to Denver to speak to two CEO groups for Vistage International. It was the week before the Memorial Day weekend, and we'd planned to meet our friends, after my work was complete, in Beaver Creek for the long weekend. I had rented a car for Wednesday through the following Monday.

I "grew up" in a big PR firm where the car rental company of choice was Avis. Because I've traveled at least once a week for most of my career, I was part of their Princess Platinum club (I made that up—it was whichever club is their highest). That status

traveled with me after I left the PR firm and started my own business, and I kept it because I continued that kind of travel schedule. I had no reason to leave them and I was treated very well.

The Vistage speaking coordinator called to see if I could add a day on the front end of the trip to speak to one more group. Not a problem on my end, and we called Avis to have them add to the reservation. We were told they were out of cars and I'd have to find one for that first day somewhere else. Politely explaining I was in their Princess Platinum, we asked if they could send a car from another location. The customer service rep said they had a car at another location, but that I would have to "take a cab" to get there.

At this point, it was very early in the world of Twitter, but being an avid user (especially back then), I went online to see if they had an account there. Guess what? They did! Their Twitter handle is (or was at the time) @wetryharder. So I tweeted, "@wetryharder Having a problem extending an existing reservation in Denver. Can you help?"

Crickets. Nothing. Not a peep. But a few minutes later, Hertz tweeted me. They said, "So sorry to hear about our competition. We can help!" They helped me get a car for my entire trip, gave me the same status I had at Avis, and sent me on my merry way.

About a week after I got home, Hertz tweeted me and asked how the trip was, how the car was, if customer service was helpful—they were gathering market research. Then they said if I rented from them again, they would give me their Gold status for free. I did and I haven't gone back to Avis since then.

Remember this was in May of 2008. In September of that same year, I received a letter in the mail from Avis asking what it would take to get my business back. Four months had gone by before they realized someone who typically rented at least one car a week from them was gone. The original tweet went unanswered. Hertz was monitoring the social networks and Avis was not. And they lost a loyal customer because of it.

Sometimes we just want to be heard.

The Trolls, Critics, and Attackers

Livefyre is a plugin you can use in WordPress that allows people to comment on your blog. It's one of the best because it cuts down on not just spam, but anonymous attackers. It requires people to create an account, which automatically dissuades most from commenting anonymously. But there are a few who will create fake accounts for the sheer purpose of attacking you or your community. You can't prevent people from saying negative things on your social network pages, but—for the most part—those are real people, too.

If there are negative comments, remember most people want to be heard. First, get to the bottom of the complaint. Sometimes what you perceive as someone being a troll or stirring up dirt for the sake of doing so will turn out to be a valid complaint. Figure out where the complaint is coming from and whether or not they're right. While you're doing research and talking with your team, respond immediately to the

person with, “We hear you and we’re getting to the bottom of this. Give us a few hours and we’ll update you along the way.”

Then do as you said you would. If the complaint is valid, comment again and ask the person to privately send you their contact information. Take the conversation offline and help them with the issue.

A company of 70 assisted-living and retirement homes in the Midwest hired us a few years ago to see if social media could help them communicate with the children of their residents. Knowing, of course, the children are typically the decision makers.

Through our research, we discovered a Wii had been installed in every common living area throughout the entire organization...and residents were playing games on the consoles. Such a fun little nugget—we filed that away for later use, hoping we could eventually use it. When tasked with the idea of using social media to engage the resident’s children, we knew we had to find a way to showcase these Wii competitions and see if we could extend them beyond each community.

Coming up on March Madness, we suggested they create the NCAA of Wii players and have the residents compete with one another. As they played, it was recorded in real time and uploaded to the community’s website and through Facebook. Then friends, families, and other residents could vote on the winner for each specific community. Just like in college basketball, each team could advance on and eventually face off in a “national” championship. It was a lot of fun, and people really got into it—sharing the videos, asking for votes, and suggesting games to play. And, let’s be real, retired people playing Wii is pretty fantastic.

One week, in the middle of all of this, the CEO and I were traveling to a conference together. The night before it began, we were in the hotel bar chatting about work and he asked to see this creation of ours. I pulled out my laptop, opened Facebook, and scrolled through the different pages to show him how active and engaged his communities were in this contest.

And then something alarming happened. As we were scrolling through, someone posted on the page a very scathing comment. It was unprofessional, it was mean, and it used a lot of swear words. The woman was the daughter of a resident, and she was angry after receiving a call from her mother, who was extremely upset about her visit to the resident’s beautician that day. Apparently she’d had her hair colored and it turned blue. Not an uncommon issue among elderly women, but blue hair is very upsetting.

The CEO backed away from the computer and put his hands up as if it were on fire. We talked about what to do, and then he timidly put his hands on the keyboard and typed, “I’m the CEO and I just saw this. Would you mind sending me your phone number so I can call you?”

The woman did so and he took out his cell phone and called her. Right then and there. He learned this wasn’t the first time her mother’s hair had been turned blue by the hairdresser and the salon refused to do anything about it. She was upset at their lack

of empathy and customer service. He let her vent for a good 10 minutes and then offered her mom three free salon visits. He also called the salon manager and had a talk with her to be sure that never happened again.

The woman was so pleased with the responsiveness, she went back to the Facebook page and posted about it. Today she is one of the company's biggest fans.

Of course, it's not always going to be the most senior person in the organization to respond to a fan's criticism, but it isn't hard to turn a critic into a fan if you apologize and fix the situation.

When this happens to you—and it will happen to you—there is a four-step process you should employ.

1. **Get to the bottom of the initial complaint.** Sometimes the critics might be right. If they are right and not complaining just to complain, listening to what they have to say will lead to identifying and solving an issue before it grows too large or gets out of hand.
2. **Consider the source.** On the other hand, if the person is there only to cause trouble, you can ignore them. Responding will only add fuel to the fire, which is what these people feed on. Most of you will know who your trolls are because they show up consistently and try to take you down. All of our clients have a list of people they should ignore. Consider it your mental black list.
3. **Weigh the influence of the person.** If the critic isn't on your black list and you're not sure of their complaint, consider how much influence they have within your industry. While you don't want to be disrespectful of anyone complaining, you can definitely prioritize responses based on the person's influence.
4. **Reply and then listen.** If the complaint is valid, you should reply to the person—publicly—and then ask them to provide their contact information through a private message. Replying publicly allows other people to see you're handling the situation, and then you can take the conversation offline. In the very best case, the person will post publicly again after the situation is solved, as happened with my friend.

Seven Steps to Dealing with Criticism

All of this isn't meant to scare you. Most of you will have sites, communities, and content that increases your brand awareness, helps you position yourself in your market, and generates new leads. But there will be occasions when people will want to tear you down. Sometimes those people will be anonymous—in those cases, you can decide to ignore them. In other cases, they'll be people you already know—they may have vocally complained about you in the past, or they may be a friend turned foe.

Whoever it is, it's important to be strategic about dealing with criticism. The following seven steps will help.

1. **Create an internal policy.** Everyone on your team—both internally and externally—needs to understand what your policy is for managing criticism online. A bad situation can be made worse by a well-intentioned employee or external partner who doesn't understand your policy. The policy should lay out who will respond to critics online, what they'll say, how quickly they'll respond, and what to do if someone not authorized to comment sees or receives a comment.
2. **Be cautious.** When dealing with critics, particularly if they're anonymous, you don't know how severe the reaction could be or how successful they may be in creating an online crisis involving hundreds or thousands of others. A good rule of thumb is to publicly say you hear them and you'd like to discuss offline. Then take it to the phone or in person. Get it out of writing so you can hear the tone of voice and see body language. The last thing you want to do is get defensive or engage in a back-and-forth debate online.
3. **Assume the best.** Even if you think the answer is obvious or right in front of their face, sometimes the critic is misinformed, or doesn't know where to look for the information on your site, or may be unwilling to search. When they complain about the obvious things, be helpful, pleasant, and nondefensive. You should never assume malicious intent until you've covered the obvious.
4. **Consider the medium.** Unless you run a sports, religious, or news site, it's unlikely anonymous trolls will want to spend their every waking moment criticizing you. So keep your goals in mind. Consider the medium of the criticism. If it's directly on your blog or on Facebook, it's far more difficult to ignore than in a tweet.
5. **Deleting posts.** While deleting posts may remove the damage for the time being, when people discover you're doing so, they'll take you to task for that...and it won't be pretty. Consider a politician who lies about his affair. Soon enough we all find out; cue news conference, with (or without) his family standing next to him, to admit the affair he lied about for months. It's far worse to be found out later than to attempt to ignore it to begin with. And, when you're transparent about your blemishes, an amazing thing happens: Your community comes to your defense.
6. **Use common sense.** Take your corporate hat off and think like a human being. No one wants to be talked to in corporate jargon or be showered with pre-approved PR messages. Be understanding, listen, and make things right. Don't act like a robot that can only repeat one or two messages. Use common sense when responding. Ask yourself if it's a real complaint or someone just harassing you. If it's the former, be patient and give the person time to vent their frustrations.
7. **Have a written external policy.** The policy should describe when you will delete comments or ban a commenter, and establishes the tone of the conversation allowed on the site. For instance, the policy at Spin Sucks is that you can't swear (we'll edit out the swear words if you do) and the discourse must be professional. We once had a troll who copied and pasted his rude comment to the top of the

stream every time the community pushed it down. He had been responded to, so we told him that if he continued to do that, his comments would be deleted and he would be banned. He stopped doing it. The written policy helps you moderate the conversation in a professional but open way.

It's a very uncomfortable position to be in. None of us want to be criticized. But, as the saying goes, if people either love you or hate you, you're doing something right.

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