Mini-Case: University of Texas Fights with a Website

In 1999, the Public Affairs Office at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston set up a web page to fight rumors. Faced with a fiscal problem and a projected deficit, several hundred jobs had already been eliminated and other jobs would be eliminated in the future. The campus rumor mill was abuzz with gossip about which programs would be cut. The Public Affairs Office realized the rumors were sapping morale and threatening productivity. “Our biweekly employee newsletter, with its slower response time, didn’t seem like the proper vehicle,” said Chris Comer, UTMB’s director of communications (Lucey, 1999, p. 6).

The university webmaster and art director worked together to create a website called “Rumors and Trumors.” Accessed through a flying saucer button on the university’s homepage, the site permitted employees to ask about the rumors they heard. The Public Affairs Office then tracked down and posted the answers. The site became a trusted and effective source for employees. Hundreds of rumors were explained or zapped, and morale was improved.

Fighting back with a proactive website is one tactic. If the company has a website and does not address a circulated rumor on it, it may make the company appear guilty. This happened in July 1996 when TWA Flight 800 went down off the coast of Long Island. The TWA website did not address the rumor circulating widely that the plane was shot down by a missile during a nearby U.S. military exercise. Alaska Airlines, on the other hand, put details of its 2000 crash online within an hour of the accident. (See that mini-case, p. 105.)

Janal (1998) advised three tactics for fighting all cybercrises, including e-mail rumors: pay attention, read the rumor and think about it, and put up a fight. Companies and organizations should be ever-vigilant, watching for e-mail rumors. Encourage employees to notify the public relations department, or another designated department, when they notice e-mail or word-of-mouth rumors. If the complaint is legitimate, an appropriate solution to the complaint,
and perhaps publicity about the correction, should be posted on the company’s website, through the news media, or through some more appropriate outlet. If the rumor is unfounded and the source of the rumor is known, respond to the rumor. If the source is not known, respond to the listserv or Internet service provider (ISP) associated with the e-mail message that distributed the rumor. Fight in the news media and on websites. But do not wait for the rumor to go away. “To many people,” said Janal, “silence equals assent.”

At times, a decision must be made between fighting a rumor with public relations or with lawyers. Public relations is the first step. If that does not work or is not feasible, call the lawyers.

Many companies establish a policy forbidding employees from making statements about the company while they are employed or after they depart. Employee comments on an attack site violate that agreement and expose the employees to punitive measures. This may work well in some environments, but it seems difficult to enforce, particularly with fired or other former employees who are frequently the culprits behind e-mail rumors.

Another tactic is to ignore the problem. Most Internet experts do not embrace this as a tactic and say it would be like a duck sitting in the water hoping the hunter’s shot will miss. However, companies have been successful with it—watching and waiting and riding the problem out. If this tactic is taken, ongoing monitoring of the situation is crucial.

Kotcher (1999) advised the following:

1. Your company must respond to the e-mail rumor. If you remain silent, the only side of the story revealed is your enemy’s.
2. Think strategically. Devise the best plan for the problem.
3. Speak with one voice. A clear, consistent message is mandatory.
4. Communicate your concern. Even if you are not guilty of the charges, be concerned.

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5. Adopt an appropriate tone. Choose formal or informal language depending on the nature of the crisis.

6. Seize the opportunity. This is a chance not only to diffuse the crisis but also to build new alliances and reach goals.