

Internet Mobs

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Hardly a week goes by without a story about a company or personality who has tried to remove damaging information from the web. They find to their dismay that the data has been replicated by hundreds of users – a spontaneous internet mob. The music industry is fighting a losing battle with users online who share copyrighted music and purposely break through Digital Rights Management security. News events radiate with amazing speed through e-mail, chat rooms, web sites, bulletin boards and blogs. Suddenly, hundreds of online participants discuss rumors, call for action, condemn or defend points of view. Think of the chatter when socialite Paris Hilton went to jail, the yearlong trauma of Duke University lacrosse players falsely accused of rape, Presidential candidate John Kerry versus Swift Boat veterans and President Bush with documents that purported to reveal his Air National Guard service. Internet mobs have formed spontaneously to discover the identities of individuals, such as anonymous persons posting videos on YouTube. Other internet mobs have formally organized to hunt spammers and put them out of business. Still others have caused problems for the Chinese government, which subsequently banned organizing on the internet.

A internet mob is an ad hoc or existing collective of people online who take action without geographic or time boundaries. Their action may be expressing an opinion, the most common event, or sponsoring an activity. Internet mobs can form anywhere at any time. This is why monitoring is essential. A challenge to PR practitioners is how to communicate to internet mobs in order to take advantage of opportunities or to defend clients. Is it possible, for example, to defeat an internet mob or does a victim have to “take it” from a collective of bloggers, bulletin board writers and web page writers?

Group behavior

Internet mobs exhibit group behavior in an electronic realm. Their force comes partially from power technology provides to them – e.g., sharing of information, distribution of investigation across a wide area to surface hidden facts and the power of opinion. They may be spontaneous groups that debate a topic, send messages, trade information, spotlight information, then disappear. They may be organized groups with formal rules for participating such as bulletin board groups or collectives of blogs. They may be

combinations of spontaneity and formality – i.e. existing collectives that spring into action when key news or events occur. Political blogs act this way.

Mob members may be self-elected or selected. They are usually groups without intimate relationships, and they may be of any size and from any location. Their common motives and goals may or may not be lasting. They may reflect status and hierarchy particularly in relation to expertise on an issue. They may have accepted norms and values, and they may have sanctions, if one breaks a norm, especially by shouting down a dissenter or preventing the dissenter from posting messages to the group. Mobs also can decline through diminished participation and verbal aggression.

Internet mobs arise from both idea contagion that melds individuals into a crowd, such as discussing and debating a hot news topic, and convergence of like-minded individuals, such as opponents of Digital Rights Management for media. Although internet mobs do not negate individual responsibility, once one joins a crowd, it is easy to get lost in the crowd's cultural bent and ethics. This is the great problem of enforcing music copyrights when worldwide mobs have decided to share music without respecting copyright.

Internet mobs may or may not be “Smart mobs.” A “Smart mob” is an “ad hoc social organization using network technology to increase understanding and efficiency.” In other words, the collective intelligence of a mass of users combines to create an efficient solution. One example used to portray a “smart mob” is eBay's rating system. Buyers and sellers rate each other individually and collectively to keep the process honest. Mass ratings outweigh any one assessment. Another example is use of the internet to arrange protests and street demonstrations. Organizers use e-mail, web pages, bulletin boards and text messaging to coordinate the movement of people invisibly and to frustrate authorities. “Smart” does not imply that the result of mob action is better or more informed: It may mean greater noise. Collective intelligence implies openness, and some internet mobs are open but not all. They may have at their core individuals who will not tolerate any point of view other than their own – e.g. digital rights management is wrong. In that regard, Internet mobs can engage in groupthink, which seeks consensus without fully evaluating ideas. There is more than a little groupthink on the web.

Lending to Groupthink is peer pressure to conform to value and belief systems. You see this in relation to political sites and blogs. There are also elements of herd behavior driven by emotion and irrationality. Internet mobs can exhibit hysteria and mass panic. Post 9/11 there was wild speculation and conspiracy theories. Similar outbursts occur with diseases in which affected groups insist on the validity of a cure or error of a government agency that prevents the use of medicine or product.

Two kinds of internet mobs

Internet mobs are spontaneous or directed, or a blend of the two. Spontaneous internet mobs are without common culture or values other than one event or issue that draws them together for a time. It is possible for a spontaneous internet mob to become directed, if individuals seek to organize and formalize the mob structure. It is more likely that mob interest will dissipate as a news story goes away, for example. With directed internet mobs, there is a guiding force that keeps the mob motivated, organized and focused on a goal -- e.g., activists targeting Wal-Mart and Microsoft. Directors of internet mobs mobilize mobs constantly to prevent them from dissipating. Mobilization may come in the form of new information and new charges or criticism. The mob director provides a channel for the mob to express its anger and fans that anger as well. Ultimately, the cohesion of the mob is directly dependent on shared assumptions. E.g., Swift Boat veterans who railed against Presidential candidate John Kerry were embittered and determined to stop him.

Three criteria differentiate spontaneous and directed internet mobs:

- Spontaneous mobs tend to lessen within a short time. Directed mobs have persistence.
- Spontaneous mobs lose focus. Directed mobs stay focused.
- Spontaneous mobs do not have a core group of motivators. Directed mobs do.

Dealing with an internet mob

Once mob behavior has begun, it is almost impossible to stop until it peters out of its own accord. It is unlike one-to-one engagement in which a practitioner deals with a solo blogger. It is one-to-many communication that is a great deal more difficult to achieve. There is a hilarious short story written by humorist James Thurber that highlights mob behavior in action. **The Day the Dam Broke** relates an incident – real or imagined – in which the populace of downtown Columbus, OH suddenly thought a dam upstream from Columbus had broken and a wall of water was sweeping toward the town. The entire town – old, young, abled and disabled -- ran for high ground where they stood waiting for a flood that never came. This kind of reaction happens online when news and rumor sweep through the internet before people ask questions. Reason is lost in the noise.

Thus, practitioners have little choice but to stop a mob fast, if it is precipitating a crisis, or ride it fast, if it is an opportunity. Once mobs get on the move, facts may mean nothing and opinions exacerbate mob reaction. Even if facts are clear and quickly verifiable, they might not suffice. Practitioners have to do their best anyway to get facts out firmly, clearly and cogently until the mob's force diminishes, and some people begin to listen. That may not avoid damage, but it can help limit harm. Particularly if a company is accused of misdeeds, such as poisoning consumers with faulty toothpaste (a circumstance that happened with a Chinese manufacturer), there may be little a company can do to salvage its reputation if, in fact, it is innocent.

On the other hand, if a mob's focus benefits an issue or organization, practitioners have only a little more time to supply information, service or product to maintain mob interest. This is the hallmark of a fad. When fads erupt, companies sell as quickly as possible knowing the fad will fade. In Washington, DC, political handlers are well aware of the need to ride news and investigations swiftly to gain advantage. If they are fortunate, a scandal will develop "legs" and continue for months with subsequent resignations or other damage to the opposition. If not, the scandal disappears from mainstream media and eventually slides out of blogs and bulletin boards where there is a tendency to hang onto issues longer.

A second kind of mob action is more difficult to handle. That is when the mob has facts that drive its focus and cannot be offset. This is what happened to Senator Trent Lott, the former Senate Republican leader, when he made unfortunate remarks at a birthday party for now-deceased Senator Strom Thurmond. Video and text of the remarks radiated through blogs and generated an internet mob demanding Lott's resignation. Lott did step down.

A similar incident help cost the election of a Virginia Senator, George Allen, when he used an inappropriate slang term to refer to an opposition observer at a campaign rally. An internet mob used the incident and others to portray the senator as racially insensitive. The senator apologized the next day but it was too late. Politicians and political candidates today watch their every step because electronic devices from cell phones to video cameras track them. Dealing with incidences in which a mob has facts on its side requires rapid acknowledgement and fast action to limit damage. Even a day might be too long to counter mob response.

The worst mistake is to threaten or attack an internet mob. A mob can bite back, especially when it is a matter of information one would like removed from the internet. Data can be and are stored anywhere. Threats are a typical lawyer's mistake. Time and again, legal threats turn into folly because they focus the mob's attention, increase the size of the mob and fail to

achieve the end result. One should be calm and authoritative with facts at hand and helpful in tone rather than haranguing.

If one is dealing with a directed mob, the first task is to find its source, the individual(s) who drive it and provide it with its motivation. Sometimes mob directors are clearly identified and sometimes they aren't. When they are hidden, use monitoring and tracking of IP addresses to determine who is posting most frequently in order to identify ring leader(s). There are services that do this now, such as Buzzlogic (<http://www.buzzlogic.com/>). Approach the mob director(s) first and assuage them, if possible and ethical. Meet with the director(s), listen and accommodate. This is what Dell Computer did after a journalist attacked them in his blog using the headline "Dell Hell." The reporter's gripes sparked mob action against Dell that the company stopped by finally meeting with him. See (http://publications.mediapost.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=Articles.showArticleHomePage&art_aid=33307)

If the mob director(s) are not listening and will not be assuaged, consider going to other media to counter accusations the mob is making. For example, go public in traditional media. Acknowledge the mob action, explain the facts and defend a position. Chances are traditional media are well aware of the mob action anyway. Journalists pay attention to blogs and bulletin boards.

Another tactic is to start your own mob to counter the mob against you. This is what is happening in the political realm with mobs of Democratic bloggers pitted against mobs of Republican bloggers, liberals versus conservatives, libertarians against both Democrats and Republicans. The resultant noise may not clarify issues, but it may obfuscate any one mob's contentions and neutralize them. This is easier to do in a political environment than in the corporate marketplace. On the other hand, if a company cultivates bloggers and is transparent with them, they may be more willing to establish their own mobs in defense of a company's position.

Mob behavior will not lessen or disappear online. It is part of personal expression and the desire of individuals to form groups. It is important then, for PR practitioners to be aware of mass movement on the internet that may enhance or jeopardize a client's reputation. Active monitoring is essential. Getting a report once a month that summarizes what has been said is too late. This places a burden on PR departments but also an opportunity to show the value of public relations in protecting and advancing a client's interests.

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