the CUSTOMERS are REVOLTING

Customers don't suffer in silence anymore. Today they make their gripes public on the branded websites of the very businesses they attack.

Online customer attacks have struck some of America's biggest brands, and the volume and scope is growing dramatically. You no longer have the luxury of time to respond. An attack can go global in a matter of hours.

Attack of the Customers explains how social media can be used to destroy as well as to build. It offers actionable strategies to prevent and prepare for disasters before they strike your company. And it shows you how creative engagement can turn critics into raving fans.

Your old crisis communications plan won't cut it anymore. Learn the new realities of customer engagement at the speed of the Internet.

"If you've ever worried that social media could be the death of your company, this book gives you the ammo to persuade others that it's possible and you the tools to stave off disaster. Ignore this book at your peril." ***—Mike Moran,*** *co-author, Search Engine Marketing, Inc., and author, Do It Wrong Quickly*

"Don't wait to pull this book out when you're in the middle of a social media crisis. Read, learn, and train against the knowledge captured here to manage your risk now." ***—Jeremiah Owyang,*** *Industry Analyst, Altimeter Group*

"Gillin and Gianforte give us the new playbook on how to turn critics into promoters." ***—Erik Qualman,*** *author, Socialnomics and Digital Leader*

"As Paul and Greg show with fascinating real-world examples, customers complain because they care. In these pages, you'll learn how to respond effectively and how you can grow your business in the process." ***—David Meerman Scott,*** *best-selling author, The New Rules of Marketing and PR*

Cover Design by Lori Faure
Photograph ©John Lund/Blend

ATTACK OF THE CUSTOMERS

PAUL GILLIN with GREG GIANFORTE

ATTACK OF THE CUSTOMERS

Why Critics Assault Brands Online and How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

PAUL GILLIN
with GREG GIANFORTE

Attack of the Customers

Why Critics Assault Brands Online and How To Avoid Becoming a Victim

By Paul Gillin
with Greg Gianforte

AttackOfTheCustomers.com

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the authors have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of its contents and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. Consult with a professional where appropriate. The authors shall not be liable for any loss of profit or any commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential or other damages. Do not read while operating heavy machinery. May cause agitation.

For questions about reprints, excerpts, republication or any other issues, send an e-mail to info@attackofthecustomers.com.

ISBN: 1479244554
ISBN-13: 978-1479244553

For Lillian and Blair

Contents

Introduction

This is a book we've both wanted to write for a long time, but for different reasons.

The Internet is radically reshaping channels of communication and giving voice to the voiceless. The sudden empowerment of billions of people to speak seamlessly to one another and to the institutions with which they interact will have long-term consequences that we can't even imagine. One thing is for sure, though: People are going to bitch and moan a whole lot more, and we think that's really interesting.

The Cluetrain Manifesto — the 1999 essay that foretold the disruptive power of social media — laid out the premise that markets are conversations. Conversations are inherently two-way, and organizations that refuse to engage in them will increasingly find their viability threatened. When people self-organize against institutions that have lost their trust, the impact can be swift and sweeping.

Nowhere was that more evident than in the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. Dictators who had ruled their people with brutal efficiency for decades were brought down by demonstrations that were organized primarily over social networks. At the same time, the Occupy movement in the U.S. called attention to the growing disparity between rich and poor in a country struggling to crawl out of recession. Like Arab Spring, the Occupy movement was primarily built on Twitter hash tags and a bottom-up organizational approach that enabled protesters not only to move fluidly around Manhattan but to spread the movement to dozens of other cities.

The same factors that affect those kinds of political changes are also at work in business. Online attacks by customers, shareholders and activist groups are growing in number and in scope, and many businesses now invite attacks without even knowing it.

Because of Facebook.

Brands have flocked to the global campfire, drawn by the promise of cheap word-of-mouth promotion driven by legions of adoring fans, but many don't realize the Faustian bargain they're entering into. Social networks are all about engagement, and public conversations can invite critics as well as fans. Few companies are prepared for this unsettling reality. Critics have historically been ignored or dealt with in hushed private negotiations. Now they're not only griping in public, they're doing it on branded destinations set up by the very companies they complain about.

Businesses that have been a victim of customer attacks have mostly bumbled their way through a response. Many go silent, which makes them look evasive or clueless. Some have tried to censor critics by deleting their complaints, which is like throwing kerosene on a brushfire. Others block customers from speaking at all, which makes you wonder why they bother being on Facebook in the first place.

Altimeter Group has tracked a significant increase in social media crises over the last 10 years. From 2001 to 2006 – when blogs were about the only social media tools available – the average was less than two crises per year. From 2007 to 2011, it had jumped fourfold to nearly nine per year.[1] It's probably no coincidence that 2007 was the year Facebook broke out of the pack and Twitter went mainstream. Whether this growth is explained by an actual increase in customer attacks or by greater media attention is an open question. We believe it's a little of both. Customers have become more comfortable with the tools needed to organize a campaign, the population of social networks has exploded and the media have had to learn to do more with less.

While the overall number of major crises is still small, lesser skirmishes break out nearly every week. Brands are learning to manage them before they get out of hand, but the process has taken on the characteristics of a brushfire. Every time you think you have one outbreak under control, the smoke starts rising somewhere else.

While we were writing this book during the first half of 2012, new attacks were in the news nearly every week. Several of these stories are explored in more detail in the following pages:

- Lowe's, the home-improvement giant, suffered a crush of negative publicity over the backlash from its decision to pull advertising from a reality TV show featuring Muslim families. Supporters and critics descended upon the Lowe's Facebook page to debate the company's actions, often using racist and inflammatory terms. Lowe's eventually deleted the entire comment stream and issued an apology.

- Angry fans of the Swedish car company Saab took to the Facebook page of former Saab owner General Motors to vent their rage at the Swedish company's bankruptcy filing. For more than a week, GM's Facebook page was overrun by protesters charging that the U.S. automaker's ownership of Saab had ruined the company.

- Fans of the popular fun site 9gag.com swarmed the Nescafé Facebook page after the company failed to choose 9gag's operator, Janos Szolnoki, as the finalist in a contest to win $5,000. Szolnoki, who planned to use the money to help his disabled brother, got 47,000 likes for his entry, but he didn't make the final round. Supporters set up their own Facebook page, Occupy unfairNes-cafe, to rally their cause.

- Chiquita's decision to boycott oil extracted from oil sands in Canada aroused a protest from activists who said the company's practice of continuing to buy Arab oil was hypocritical. A protest site called ChiquitaConflict.com was set up. Because Chiquita doesn't enable people to post to its Facebook wall, critics set up Boycott Chiquita - Support Ethical Oil and amassed a following of more than 2,200 in a little more than a month.

- Adidas was forced to pull a line of sneakers from the market just days after introducing them after criticism erupted over the design of the shoes, which featured attached rubber shackles. Adidas said the design of the JS Roundhouse Mids was intended to be "whimsical," but that didn't satisfy critics that included the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who said he intended to call for a boycott in 50 markets if the shoes went on sale.

- ChapStick and Huggies were among the companies that withdrew controversial ad campaigns because of charges that they offended different constituencies. ChapStick's ad showed the rear end of a young woman searching the sofa cushions for her lip balm. It drew hundreds of comments on the Facebook page. Huggies was the target of a petition on Change.org demanding that the diaper maker revise its male-oriented campaign to depict fathers as competent caregivers.

- Progresso Soup's whimsical weight-loss ad campaign threatened to be undermined by complaints about the company's use of the controversial chemical bisphenol A (BPA) in its packaging. BPA has been linked to everything from infertility to cancer and cardiovascular disease. A petition on Change.org amassed more than 110,000 signatures and scores of angry comments accumulated on Progresso's Facebook page before the company issued a statement promising to investigate alternatives.

- Chick-fil-A unleashed a social media storm by stating that the company contributed to anti-gay groups. A backlash that started on Facebook spread to mainstream media and even national politics, where former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee championed a counter-demonstration to support the restaurant chain.

- Progressive Insurance was savaged in social and mainstream media over a blogger's allegations that the company represented a driver who caused an accident that killed his sister, who was a Progressive policyholder. Although Progressive's actions weren't unusual under the circumstances, the charges undermined its carefully cultivated image as a friendly company and drove customer perceptions to a four-year low.

We come at this topic from very different perspectives. Paul has long been fascinated by the inversion of influence that social media enables. When he was writing *The New Influencers* in 2006, he spoke to Vincent Ferrari, a 30-year-old New Yorker who had posted a hilarious recording of a frustrating conversation with a high-

pressure America Online customer service rep on his blog and become a media celebrity in just six days. Ferrari's recording sparked major changes in AOL's customer service organization and probably contributed to the company's decision to exit the business of selling dial-up Internet service.

The idea that one person's experience could spark that kind of institutional change was mesmerizing, and the timeframe now seems downright pokey in the age of Twitter.

Greg is a serial entrepreneur who founded RightNow Technologies with the mission to rid the world of bad experiences and in the process helped nearly 2,000 large consumer brands make customer experience the centerpiece of their market differentiation. Their software, now under the Oracle umbrella, is still the market-leading solution for managing multi-channel interactions between large enterprises and their constituents. RightNow conducted major studies around the world for many years to document the growing importance of customer experience to loyalty and business results. While CEO of RightNow, Greg typically visited executives in over 200 client firms each year across many industries and has addressed thousands of customers on the importance of customer experience.

This book is about how to anticipate, prepare for and defend your organization against customer attacks, but more importantly it's an argument for building an organization that values critics as allies. When customers complain, it's because they care. Organizations that shut them down lose the benefit of feedback that can make them better companies. We live in a time of unprecedented competitive pressure and markets that brutalize companies that fail to continually innovate. Why would any company want to ignore advice from its most important constituents?

Companies that are widely considered to be leaders in social media actually encourage customers to air negative experiences so that they can deal with them quickly and retain them as customers. Walmart, which has had plenty of experience with criticism, uses a Facebook app from Get Satisfaction on a dedicated feedback page and a small team of employees to redirect complaints toward a satisfactory resolution. Much-admired companies such as Southwest

Airlines and Dell Computer not only don't censor critics, they thank them.

That's because they know a secret: When customer complain openly, "not only are we able to fix their problem 98% of the time, but 42% of the people we refer to as 'ranters' actually become 'ravers,'" says Richard Binhammer, who was one of the early architects of Dell Computer's social media strategy. "That doesn't mean just saying thank you. It's about actively going from being a demoter to a promoter."

For many years businesses have had the luxury of managing customer dissatisfaction on the assumption that it was difficult and expensive for people to share experiences. Magazines such as *Consumer Reports* built a franchise on aggregating consumer opinion, but today there are literally hundreds of websites that do the same thing at little or no cost.

We've heard many marketers express fear over these developments. Their companies have a cultural aversion to negativity, and they worry that a few vocal critics will unravel years of reputation building.

In fact, that almost never happens. People accept the fact that every company has some unhappy customers, and they don't expect perfection. The occasional malcontent can do very little damage if a company has good practices in place to address problems and an open approach to listening. When problems occur — and this is common to many case studies cited in this book — it's because one customer's experience strikes a chord with others who have the same problem or because a controversial business practice has been dramatized in some way.

In Chapter 3 we describe one of the most famous attacks in recent memory: Dave Carroll's "United Breaks Guitars" spoof video of the damage his Taylor guitar suffered at the hands of Chicago baggage handlers. Carroll's attack tapped into the deep-seated resentment that many frequent travelers feel about the impersonal nature of air travel and about the bureaucracy of many institutions that

frustrates our attempts at resolution. We are all Dave Carrolls at some level.

Raising the Bar

As frustrating as online attacks can be, they ultimately make us all more honest and accountable. We believe they raise the bar for everyone. The days are long gone when automakers could force inferior vehicles down the throats of customers who had few alternatives or when fast food restaurants could deliver calorie-laden menus to people who couldn't afford anything else. Globalization has given us plentiful choice, and social media disrupts the big advertising budgets that used to keep a few wealthy brands on top. Companies can no longer spend their way out of lousy products and a poor customer experience. Innovation, quality and a commitment to customer service have become the most important success factors in markets that commoditize with amazing speed.

Attacks have taught even the biggest brands how to be humble. There was no better example of this than Domino's Pizza, which featured a series of critical customer tweets in an ad campaign that promoted the company's commitment to improving the quality of its product. We love the Domino's example because it shows how a company can turn negativity to its advantage. We wish more companies had the courage, humility and sense of humor to view criticism as an opportunity to do better.

Jenny Dervin, the corporate communications manager at JetBlue, tells the story of how crisis invigorated her company and made it one of the most admired airlines in America. JetBlue struggled with growing pains during its first six years, culminating in an incident on Valentine's Day 2007, when an ice storm forced several of its aircraft to idle for as long as nine hours on tarmacs throughout the Northeast. The culprit was a company policy that discouraged flight cancellations. That may have made good business sense, but it was lousy customer relations, and the firestorm of anger that the incident unleashed caused a "radical change in the company," Dervin says.

Three years later, communications staffers took advantage of a break in the spring leadership conference to send out a single tweet: "What would you say to JetBlue leadership in 140 characters or less? They're watching."

As executives returned to the conference room a cascade of live responses began to pour in over Twitterfall, a service that displays messages in a waterfall format. Executives "were glued to the screen," Dervin remembers. "It was a moment, a pure exchange of ideas between leadership and the people who are affected by those decisions."

Throughout the day, executives repeatedly cited comments from the Twitter stream for guidance in making decisions. The experience demonstrated that "it's not about office politics; it's about making customers happier," Dervin says. Two years later, the American Customer Satisfaction Index ranked JetBlue as number one in America in customer satisfaction.

Putting It All in Perspective

We've divided this book into two major sections. The first focuses on attacks: why they happen, who's behind them, how they spread with lightning speed and what companies can do to respond to them. We share many anecdotes and perspectives both on the attackers and their targets. We look at what motivates attacks, how they unfold and the interplay between social and mainstream media that can elevate them to national or even global prominence. We also spend some time on customer review sites, which are revolutionizing industries ranging from hospitality to healthcare.

The second part is about building an attack-resistant company. Much of this section is based upon Greg's experience building five successful companies over a 25-year period. In the course of steering Brightwork Development and RightNow Technologies to market leadership, he spent time with thousands of customers learning what makes their businesses successful. His passion for bootstrapping is rooted in a belief that great companies are built not on the backs of large venture capital investments but on a commitment to doing what's right for the customer. He spelled out some of his

experiences in his 2008 book, *Eight to Great: Eight Steps to Delivering an Exceptional Customer Experience*. We have revised and updated those lessons to adapt them to this new age of the empowered customer.

— Paul Gillin and Greg Gianforte, November 2012

Chapter 6: Ordnance

ord•nance (noun) \ˈȯrd-nə(t)s\ Military supplies including weapons, ammunition, combat vehicles, and maintenance tools and equipment.

— Merriam-Webster dictionary

Social media has unquestionably been the most potent driving force behind the growing incidence of customer attacks in recent years. Campaigns that once used to require armies of volunteers writing letters, lobbying media and organizing protests are now conducted with hash tags and Facebook pages. Petitions no longer have to be fielded in shopping malls; collecting signatures is as simple as convincing people to click a button. Critics can organize global campaigns without changing out of their pajamas.

We're still in the very early stages of understanding how this all changes relationships between organizations and their constituents. The new economies of scale and velocity require us to discard some old assumptions.

For one thing, the ease with which campaigns are organized today can make them look bigger than they really are. A decade ago, a petition with 50,000 signatures demanded attention. Today, the Change.org petition site hosts scores of active petitions that have many more signatures than that. Does today's online petition merit as much attention as one that was fielded with shoe leather and pencils just a few years ago?

Then there's the time factor. Because attacks can form so quickly, organizations under attack feel pressured to respond in kind, but decisions made in haste are rarely the best ones. Our expectations are rooted in a time when things unfolded much more slowly and raising one's voice required time and commitment. We assumed that a few vocal critics represented many more silent ones. Today, that may not be the case, but our response reflex hasn't yet adapted.

Finally, the rules of interaction have changed. Just five years ago it was almost unheard of for a company to invite its critics to vent their anger in an open forum bearing its brand. Today, that's the cost of being on Facebook. Few organizations are culturally prepared for this kind of transparency, but it's clear we're not going back to the old days. Complete openness demands that we change our assumptions about how we deal with our constituents.

Start by understanding the tools that critics use. An angry customer has an unprecedented arsenal of communications weaponry available, most of it at little or no cost. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses. In this chapter, we examine the tools that attackers use, running down the list in alphabetical order.

Blogs — They Still Matter

The most mature form of social media, blogs have found their niche as a long-form communications tool that's well suited to analysis and exposition. Some of the most famous customer attacks, including Jeff Jarvis' "Dell Hell,"[1] Vincent Ferrari's AOL cancellation[2] and Bob Garfield's "Comcast Must Die" started on blogs. However, recently the popularity of blogging has been eclipsed by social networks, which are simpler to use and come with a built-in audience.

Corporate blogging is in decline. The Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth documented a decrease in blogs maintained by both the Inc. 500 and Fortune 500 companies in 2011,[3] the first downturn in the study's five-year history. However, declining corporate interest in blogs is probably due to the fact that it's simply easier to use Twitter or Facebook.

Among enthusiasts and professionals, blogs continue to serve a vital function. Technorati's 2011 State of the Blogosphere survey of more than 4,000 bloggers found that 45% of them have been blogging for more than four years and that the average blogger maintains three blogs.[4] Forty percent of respondents said they blog more than three hours per week. Nearly 80% have a college degree.

In contrast to the idle chatter you find on Facebook or Twitter, blogs are usually serious discussion.

Seven in 10 survey respondents said they blog to gain professional recognition, and 68% said they do it to attract new business. More than two-thirds said they believe blogs are being taken more seriously as sources of information.

Blogs permit more creative latitude than any other medium, and they can be a pretty powerful tool in the hands of a good writer. For a lot of big brands, bloggers are now respected channels to their customers and are important sources of information. Among the brands that regularly host blogger events or have formal influencer relations programs are Procter & Gamble, General Mills, Molson, PepsiCo and Ford Motor Co. General Mills has a members-only club called MyBlogSpark.com, where invited bloggers can get inside information and early access to new products. Software giant SAP has hosted an international conference called the Influencer Summit for several years to cultivate technology bloggers.

Bottom line: Blogging has matured and so have bloggers. Today's bloggers are more committed, more serious and more knowledgeable than the dabblers of a few years ago. Blogs don't amplify an attack as much as social networks do, but they aggregate and analyze better than any other form of social media.

Blogs are also notable for their influence on mainstream media. Every major newspaper hosts contract bloggers, and major news sources such as The Huffington Post, TechCrunch, Daily Beast, Engadget, The Consumerist and The Politico are, in effect, built on blogging platforms or feature the work of prominent bloggers. Journalists looking for experts go first to Google, which favors bloggers for their focus and distinctive voice.

One individual with a blog can gain considerable prominence in a specific topic. For example, Paul has written a blog called Newspaper Death Watch, which chronicles the changes in the newspaper industry, since 2007. The site is a top Google result for many search terms related to the state of newspapers, and Paul has been interviewed or cited by *The New York Times, The Economist, The New*

Yorker, NPR, the Al Jazeera television network and many other outlets as a result. He gets a couple of inquiries a week from reporters or professional journalists seeking his opinion, and the site draws about 500 visitors a day, all because Google deems his content to be useful to his narrow readership. There are thousands of other examples just like this.

In certain industries, blogs are now seen as equivalent in influence to mainstream media. The annual BlogHer conference is a major venue for consumer packaged goods companies to announce new products and curry the favor of influential mom bloggers. General Mills has chosen diet blogger Lisa Lillien of Hungry-Girl.com to announce several of its new products. "She's one of the most cogent voices in the weight management field," said public relations manager David Witt.[5]

We hope we've made our point by now: Bloggers are a major factor to contend with, and in many industries we believe they deserve as much attention as mainstream news outlets. When they mass for an attack — as they did in the Motrin Moms or Komen for the Cure cases — they can catalyze other social media channels and legitimize an issue for mainstream media. Serious bloggers should be treated with respect and given access to your most knowledgeable people.

Change.org — Frictionless Protest

This online petition site has quietly become one of the Internet's most influential voices for change, with membership expected to exceed 25 million by the end of 2012. Described as "one of the most influential channels for activism in the country" by *The Washington Post*, it is capturing the attention of everyone from presidents to PR people.

"[A]nyone, anywhere — from Chicago to Cape Town — can start their own grassroots campaign for change using our organizing platform," Change.org says on its description page. "Your campaign can be about anything from supporting curbside recycling programs to fighting wrongful deportation to protecting against

anti-gay bullying." The service is particularly popular in campaigns that involve the environment, human or animal rights, health and consumer advocacy. But some of its biggest successes have related to more prosaic causes, such as hidden fees or product ingredients. Change.org has been criticized for its business model, which sells petition signers' e-mail addresses, but that doesn't seem to be slowing its momentum.

There are several other online petition sites, including PetitionBuzz.com, Care2.com, iPetition.com and SignOn.org. However, Change.org has the most momentum. Starting a petition is as simple as filling out a short Web form, and about 10,000 new petitions are started each month. They range from popular political causes, such as ending human rights abuses in Myanmar, to highly localized and specific issues, such as a plea for the St. Michael Catholic Academy of Austin, Texas, to allow more students to use a shaded grassy area on hot days. Most petitions go nowhere, but a few attract significant attention.

The largest petition ever started on Change.org was filed by the parents of Trayvon Martin, the 17-year-old Florida youth who was shot and killed by a self-appointed neighborhood watch leader in February 2012. It amassed more than 2.3 million signatures in less than three months.[6] Whether the petition played any role in the ultimate arrest of the shooter and resignation of the police chief in the case is hard to tell, but there's no question that it was a catalyst for awareness.

Petition signers can easily notify their social networks of causes they support through automatic links to Facebook, Twitter and e-mail address books, and the site makes it easy to embed an advocacy badge on a website or blog. Change.org also has a detailed guide on how to promote petitions, including tips on the finer points of posting to Twitter and the basics of influencer relations.

Change.org maintains a running list of news stories related to its petitions, and the site stamps a "Victory" ribbon on those that succeed. Two of its most notable successes are Molly Katchpole's protests against Bank of America and Verizon that we described in Chapter 5.

"The way forward is through better storytelling," wrote Jonathan Alter in an essay about Change.org. "Online campaigns work best when they have narratives behind them — plucky stories of average people crowd-sourcing their way to power, as Katchpole did against Bank of America."[7] It so happens that mainstream media outlets look for some of the same features, which is why Change.org is a popular hangout for journalists.

There are no hard and fast rules for how to respond to a Change.org petition. Some drives have gathered more than 180,000 signatures and gone nowhere, while others have forced change with just a few thousand names. However, business leaders should be aware of the growing influence of the site and should keep a watchful eye on their Google Alerts for mention of their name or names of competitors with the Change.org domain. With plans to expand to more than 20 countries by the end of 2012, the site appears to be a force to be reckoned with for the long term.

Consumer Advocacy Sites

"Million-Miler Sues United For Being Downgraded To Second-Tier Status"

"Shuttered Best Buy Puts Illinois Town $200K Deeper Into Debt"

"Walmart Store Has No Room for Veterans On Memorial Day Weekend"

"Many Insurers Changing Prescription Categories So Customers Pay More for Already Expensive Meds"

Readers of The Consumerist (Consumerist.com) may recognize those headlines as typical of the advocacy site, which has posted thousands of experiences submitted by its readers since late 2005. The four above all appeared on a single day: May 29, 2012.

The Consumerist is the best-known example of a genre of pro-consumer websites that includes titles like My3Cents.com, RipoffReport.com, FightBack.com and TheSqueakyWheel.com. In

its own way, each fights for the little guy in the ongoing battle against big-box retailers, airlines, fast food restaurants and other businesses people love to hate.

Most use the same formula: Consumers can submit stories about experiences they've had (usually negative), which are then categorized by industry or company. In some cases, facts are checked, but usually the site operators lack the resources to verify much. Liability is managed through disclaimers that put the onus of truth on the contributor.

One of the largest such sites — Ripoff Report — has actually turned disputes between consumers and companies into a revenue stream. The site has more than 675,000 consumer complaints in its database, and its policy is never to remove any of them. Companies that believe their reputations have been sullied can submit a rebuttal, but they also have the option to pay Ripoff Report to act as a mediator between complainant and accused. This policy is controversial, to say the least, but Ripoff Report has never shied from controversy. It's been sued dozens of times.[8]

Consumer advocacy sites have been around for more than a decade, but they were mostly ignored by businesses in their early years. All that has changed, though, as new word-of-mouth channels have emerged to amplify messages.

Ben Popken had a lot to do with that. The editor of The Consumerist from its early days until late 2011, he oversaw an evolution both in the site's advocacy role and in its responsibility to the brands it took on.

Now a Brooklyn, N.Y.-based freelance writer, he speaks of what he learned from his years as a consumer advocate. "People wanted to vent. They wanted to know there was somebody out there who wasn't a robot or a hold signal," he said. "We built an incredible community where a story might immediately draw dozens or hundreds of comments from others with advice."

At first, most brands reacted to The Consumerist with indifference, but that changed "because we were giving companies such a spank-

ing that they had to notice us," Popken said. "Companies learned they couldn't just sit around; they had to act quickly. Every company now seems to have someone who monitors Twitter or the Internet to put out fires before they become the next big story on Consumerist or NBC News."

The Consumerist's approach to its mission has evolved from the early days, when most reports were published with little verification. "As our reputation grew, we realized that if we were going to be taken seriously, we had to give [the companies people complained about] a sporting chance," Popken said. Since its acquisition by Consumer Reports in 2008, The Consumerist has become more vigilant about verifying complaints and seeking response.

Popken is proud of The Consumerist's role in breaking some major stories. It was the first site to draw attention to America Online's famously high-pressure customer retention policies, and it published a well-regarded series of investigations into "cash for gold" operations that buy jewelry from desperate sellers at far less than market value.

The Consumerist coined the term "grocery shrink ray" to describe the practice by which some packaged food makers quietly reduce package size without changing price. It also invented the "executive e-mail carpet bomb," in which consumers derive e-mail addresses of top executives from public sources and deliver large numbers of complaint letters directly to senior management. "It's incredibly effective because the people at the top are often so disconnected from their customers," Popken explained.

Perhaps the greatest endorsement for the value of unfiltered customer feedback as practiced by consumer advocacy sites is the Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC), which in early 2011 introduced SaferProducts.gov, a public database that publicizes complaints about safety problems involving any of the 15,000 kinds of consumer goods it regulates.

The respected government agency's approach to quality control is strikingly similar to Ripoff Report's. The CPSC doesn't apply any formal review process to the reports consumers post. Companies

that disagree with reviews can post responses but not take down the original complaints. A spokesman said the service has been a valuable source of guidance to the agency in deciding which safety issues to pursue. "Consumers are helping us focus on those things that really matter to them," said Alex Filip, deputy director of the Office of Communications.

Facebook — Prepare to Engage

Facebook is the place to be for most brands these days, but it's also the place to be attacked. Many of the biggest social media-driven crises of the last few years have been driven, or substantially influenced, by Facebook.

As we noted in the introduction, Facebook can be a risky proposition. If you set up a page and permit visitors to post to it, be prepared for complaints. You're a facilitator, not an editor, so don't try to control what people say beyond the basic standards of decency.

A well-crafted Facebook policy is important to avoid the kind of no-win situation in which Nestlé found itself in the palm oil debacle detailed in Chapter 5. If your policy is to permit negative comments to stand, then be ready to accept the consequences. If you explicitly bar negativity, then you'll have fewer fans and productive conversations with your customers. Censorship is an invitation to disaster. Successful brands have learned to not only live with complaints but embrace them in the spirit of improvement. They know that receptivity is good for their image.

Even if you don't have a Facebook page, your brand may still be represented there. Critics can set up pages, too. While that isn't necessarily a problem for you (there are hundreds of "Walmart sucks" pages, for example, but nearly all are empty), a lightly trafficked hate page can become a lightning rod when triggered by an event or negative news report. Facebook comments are a bounty for journalists who use them to seek quotable critics.

Each Facebook page has one or more administrators, some of them identified and some not. If a hate page pops up targeting your

brand, don't panic. It probably won't go very far. If you do notice regular activity, it's a good idea to attempt to contact the administrators. Let them know you're watching, and you might even befriend them.

Never threaten or lecture these people. You have no leverage over them, and anything you say is likely to be republished if it can embarrass you. Make an earnest attempt to establish a dialogue out of public view. If they decline to engage, find out everything you can about them in case you're ever forced into a confrontation.

The marketers at ChapStick evidently didn't learn from Nestlé's experience. In 2011, the lip balm maker launched an edgy ad campaign that included a photo of a woman searching behind her sofa, apparently for her ChapStick. The photo was taken from the rear, and some people considered the image to be sexist and demeaning. They took their protest to Facebook.

ChapStick — which ironically urges people to "be heard at Facebook.com/ChapStick" — deleted negative comments en masse, which only made things worse. "The image isn't even that big of a deal — it's ChapStick's reaction to the criticism that galls," wrote Tim Nudd in an Adweek column headlined, "A Social Media Death Spiral."[9]

ChapStick's formal apology, issued six days after the flare-up began, gave critics new ammunition. The message referred to some of the comments it removed as spam, which it defined as "multiple posts from a person within a short period of time." This definition can also be applied to a vigorous conversation, so the crowd went wild again. "So, to those ChapStick fans whose comments were deleted — it was all your fault, you obnoxious, foul-mouthed, menacing spambots!" Nudd chided in *Adweek*.

The lesson: Have someone play the role of cynic and tell you how your statements can be used against you. Because your critics will do that if they can.

Don't expect to get air cover from the social network itself. Facebook's terms of service[10] are good at covering issues of intellectual

property and privacy, but the social network stays away from First Amendment issues, libel and controversy. Its only relevant prohibitions in those areas are:

> *You will not bully, intimidate, or harass any user.*
>
> *You will not post content that: is hateful, threatening, or pornographic; incites violence; or contains nudity or graphic or gratuitous violence.*
>
> *You will not use Facebook to do anything unlawful, misleading, malicious, or discriminatory.*

None of those prohibitions would have done Nestlé or ChapStick much good. When crises erupt in Facebook, it's because the situation *isn't* covered by standard disclaimers. With so little case study evidence to work from, communicators are pretty much making it up as they go along.

The best defense against an attack on your own Facebook page is to post a sub-page explaining your policies on appropriate content. Nestlé and Coca-Cola call this page "House Rules," and McDonald's labels it "Play Nice." In most cases, the language merely restates existing Facebook policies, but some brands press the rules a bit more.

For example, BP America's disclaimer says its Facebook presence is intended to "engage the public in an informative conversation about our efforts to meet growing energy demands around the world." It further reserves the right to delete content that is "obscene, indecent, profane, or vulgar … contain threats or personal attacks of any kind [or] are defamatory, libelous or contain ad hominem attacks."[11] That gives BP pretty wide latitude to regulate discussion, since the definition of "ad hominem" is so broad. BP had better be careful, though. If it defines the term too broadly, it risks making ChapStick's mistake of dismissing critics as spammers.

If you have to deal with a rebellion, treat everyone equally and don't edit selectively. Take a page from what Lowe's did in December 2011 when its Facebook page was swarmed over the retailer's decision to pull its ads from a reality show about ordinary Mus-

lim families living in America. More than 9,000 comments were posted in 24 hours, many containing hateful language toward Muslims, and the attack generated widespread mainstream media coverage.

Lowe's chose to stay silent about the affair for a while, then it deleted the entire conversation and explained that the issue had gotten out of hand and that its Facebook page was not the appropriate place to discuss it. Fallout was minimal. Comments and media coverage were mostly favorable to Lowe's because the company didn't discriminate against any individual or group. It merely said the discussion should happen somewhere else.

The culture of Facebook assumes that conversation will be open and honest. If you approach Facebook expecting to control the conversation, be ready for trouble. If you're not ready to take a few arrows, then don't go there.

Hate Sites — Second Life from Search

Once a primary attack vector, hate sites have declined significantly in popularity as social networks have streamlined the process of building a destination and audience. Hate sites typically use a bastardized domain like USAirways-Sucks.com, GapSucks.org, IHateStarbucks.com and Iams-Cruelty.com, and feature news and forums that criticize the target company.

The problem with hate sites is that they require time and technical expertise to maintain, and their effectiveness depends upon search engine visibility and links from others. People who set them up often lose enthusiasm for the cause, leaving online ghost towns that haven't been updated in years. In contrast, Facebook comes with a lot of ready-made tools to build awareness, low administrative overhead and built-in community features. It isn't surprising that Facebook has displaced hate sites as a primary attack vector.

Because websites are more configurable than Facebook, some serve a purpose as a home base for campaigns whose principal activity has migrated to other platforms. An activist may post back-

ground documents, contact information, and press releases on a hate site and then take its active campaign to social networks.

Any company that's a candidate for attack should be sure to register variations of its domain that could potentially host hate sites. It's impossible to cover every base — the range of existing hate sites for just one airline include DeltaSucks, Delta'sTheWorst, NeverFlyDelta and DontFlyDelta — but the "IHate" prefix and "Sucks" suffix are obvious candidates.

Hate sites have one distinct advantage that can't be easily duplicated in other forums: search engine visibility. This can drive you crazy. A critical site that was abandoned years ago may show up on the first page of certain Google search results long after the original owners left town. Can you force hate sites off the front page of Google? Experts differ.

The issue of negative search engine optimization — sometimes called "Google bowling" — "is a highly debated question," said Mike Moran, co-author of *Search Engine Marketing, Inc.* "Some believe that it can work, and others don't."

The question is about how Google treats links from known spam sites or "link farms." These are clusters of websites set up by people who try to manipulate search engine results by creating a large number of essentially meaningless inbound links. Link quantity and quality are critical considerations in search rankings.

Search engines play a constant cat-and-mouse game with link spammers. They disregard links from known link farms, but new farms pop up every day, so it's hard for the search engines to keep up. We know that links from known link farms don't help a site's search visibility, but can they actually hurt? If so, then theoretically it would be possible to force a hate site down in search results by bombarding it with links from known link farms.

But Google isn't about to say whether that strategy would work. It doesn't want to give away any information to people trying to game the system. What we do know is that trying to elevate your own search visibility through link-farming is a losing game.

J.C. Penney was caught with its pants down in early 2011 when prominent search rankings for many of its domestic items drew the attention of SEO experts. It turned out that link farms were a critical factor, and Google promptly downgraded J.C. Penney by dozens of positions for many key terms. J.C. Penney maintained that it had no knowledge of the manipulation.[12]

Moran said the safer way to force detractors off the first page of search results "is to put out better content. It's actually easier than ever to move bad things out because newer content has more impact than ever before."[13]

Reddit — Explosive Potential

Have you ever heard of Reddit? We didn't think so. Social news sites have never been high on marketers' priority lists because of their reputation as being a playground for teen boys and nerds with few social skills. But that doesn't make them any less influential as news amplifiers.

Consider these numbers: 3.5 billion page views, 43 million unique visitors and more than 4,000 active communities in August, 2012, according to the site. Internet news sites saw a 64% increase in referral traffic from Reddit between June and July of that year.[14] Those statistics dramatize the amazing growth of this community that describes itself as "the front page of the Internet."

Reddit's star has risen as its predecessor, Digg, has faded. Both use a similar metaphor. Members submit links to pages, photos and videos they want to promote, and content rises and falls based upon votes by the members, or "redditors." There are 25 main communities — give or take — and more than 67,000 subcommunities.

Reddit's average member is a young male with some college education, and the site is particularly popular with techies.[15] There are very few rules, which makes Reddit a magnet for profanity, vulgarity and childish behavior. However, there's a lot of intelligent conversation that goes on there as well.

A particularly popular feature called "Ask Me Anything" allows anybody to promote their expertise, and celebrities, including Barack Obama, Jimmy Kimmel, Ron Paul and Stephen Colbert, have made guest appearances there to chat with members. On any given day, there are usually a couple of conversations going on with notable people.

To our knowledge, Reddit has not yet been a major contributor to a customer attack, but this site is growing fast and deserves attention. At its height in the early days of social media, Digg was capable of sending tens of thousands of visitors to a website in a matter of minutes. A negative customer story that hits the front page of Reddit can do the same. For now, redditors seem more interested in the cool and bizarre than in beating up on companies, but that could change.

Twitter — Attack Accelerant

"We've all heard that a million monkeys banging on a million typewriters will eventually reproduce the entire works of Shakespeare. Now, thanks to the Internet, we know this is not true."

Berkeley professor Robert Wilensky uttered that memorable quote in 1996. Were he speaking it today, he might refer instead to Twitter.

Twitter is the enigma of social networks. It's limited to text messages of 140 characters. It doesn't support photos, videos or applications natively. Instead of friends, it uses the simpler connection metaphor of follower or subscriber. Even its website is so weak that only a minority of its members use it.

How does a service with so little going for it create so damn much trouble?

The answer lies just above the number 3 on your keyboard. The hash tag (#), which was created by the Twitter community to help bring order to the service's inherent chaos, has become one of the Internet's most powerful organizing and amplification tools. It has

helped Twitter become a core utility for arranging everything from book signings to mass protests. It has also established the popular microblog service as a prime channel for customer complaints and a favored tool of the critics we call "Casual Complainers." The #fail tag, which denotes poor performance by a person or company, is monitored by millions and is not one you want to see next to your name.

More than five years after Twitter launched, we still hear questions all the time about its value. To the uninitiated, it's a cacophony of voices sharing mostly useless information. And to a large extent that's true. The low barrier to entry and ease of use are two of Twitter's most endearing points. People can share anything, and they do. The power of Twitter comes from filtering out the junk and focusing on what's important to you.

Twitter's simplicity and accessibility are its strongest features. Messages can be sent and received on nearly any cell phone. Updates are instantaneous, which makes Twitter a valuable news tool. When seeking updates on a breaking news story, Twitter is often a much better source than the traditional media. Instead of relying on just one channel for information, you tap into the collective reports of many. Within a few seconds of news breaking anywhere, it's on Twitter. People with large Twitter followings can quickly magnify a complaint with a single re-tweet, and the media have learned to use Twitter both as an amplifier and a leading indicator of developing news.

While Twitter has occasionally been used to originate major attacks, its 140-character message limit doesn't permit much poetic license. Attackers are more likely to post their gripes on a blog or Facebook and use Twitter to extend their reach.

Twitter, Facebook, e-mail and other social networks are all amplifiers to some extent, but Twitter is unique in that its content is public. Facebook members share messages and links mainly with people they already know. In contrast, following a hash tag enables you to see all messages from all Twitter users about that topic. As a result, awareness can spread more quickly on Twitter than in any other social medium.

While the number of links shared on Twitter is less than one-third the number shared on Facebook, Twitter links are clicked on about 12% more often, according to a study by ShareThis, Starcom MediaVest Group and Rubinson Partners.[16] Sharing a tweet with one's followers is a two-click process on most PCs and mobile devices. This ease of sharing is why Twitter's amplification power is so great. About 40% of messages on Twitter include a URL. This makes Twitter a rapid vehicle for spreading long-form content such as videos and blog posts.

Another distinguishing — if not unique — value of Twitter is its speed. Messages can be fired off in a few seconds and instantly reach a global audience. The combination of speed and hash tags has made Twitter an effective medium for managing crowds. During the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York in 2011, for example, the #needsoftheoccupiers tag made it possible for supporters to identify and respond to requests from protesters for everything from books to pizza.[17] Organizers were able to move protests fluidly around the city by posting new locations to the #OWS tag.

Twitter has attracted an enthusiastic audience but not a very diverse one. The service is particularly popular with professional communicators, journalists, marketers, technology professionals and social media enthusiasts. Celebrities have embraced it as a way to connect directly with their fans (for example, more than 1,700 NFL players are on Twitter, according to Tweeting-Athletes.com), and media organizations have adopted it en masse to get bonus visibility for their coverage before it hits the newswires.

Acceptance by such visible people has perhaps made Twitter's influence disproportionate to its actual numbers. In fact, most Twitter members use the service very little. A 2009 study by Sysomos reported that 85% of Twitter users post less than one update per day, 21% have never posted anything and only 5% of Twitter users produce 75% of the content.[18]

However, even that small number can unleash an overwhelming amount of information. Dell Computer, for example, monitors about 25,000 messages per day in social media, most of them from Twitter, said Richard Binhammer, the former social media ambas-

sador at Dell Computer. Dave Evans, author of *Social Media Marketing: An Hour a Day* and vice president of social strategy at Social Dynamx sums it up: "When you really stare down the Twitter firehouse and see what's coming at you, it's scary."

Bottom line: While Twitter may be small compared to Facebook, its vocal and influential member base can trigger a storm of controversy with amazing speed.

Twitter has played an amplification role in nearly every social media attack of the last four years. Journalists monitor trending hash tags to detect stories bubbling up through social media. Many create filtered tweet streams of the companies, government agencies and celebrities they cover. You should do the same for your company and brands.

Although major attacks rarely begin on Twitter, the service is a good way to identify problems before they get out of hand. One reason airlines watch Twitter so closely, for example, is that frustrated customers take first to their smart phones when delayed on the tarmac or frustrated at the ticket counter.

You've Been Hijacked

One unique form of Twitter attack is "brandjacking," or false accounts that appear to be real. The critic may use an account name that's substantially similar to a visible person or brand to post satirical or embarrassing messages.

The most notable example of Twitter brandjacking was @BPGlobalPR, which popped up during the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and began skewering BP as the company desperately struggled to stop the Deepwater Horizon disaster. The account attracted 160,000 followers — more than four times the following of BP's real North American Twitter account — and generated huge amounts of media coverage. The fact that the author remained anonymous until months after the crisis contributed to public curiosity.[19]

A rogue employee at publisher Condé Nast created an account that relayed bizarre comments overheard in the elevator. @CondeElevator was quickly shut down but not before its follower count exceeded 80,000. A similar account about elevator gossip at Goldman Sachs (@GSElevator) was still active and being followed by more than 260,000 people as of this writing. It's doubtful the investment banker would want its customers to hear comments such as "Retail investors should be circumspect of any offering they're able to get their hands on. If you can get it, you don't want it," but private conversations like that are now public record.

Twitter has cracked down on parody accounts that deliberately misrepresent a brand, but the policy doesn't apply to individuals, and variations of brand names are still allowed. Celebrities such as Hosni Mubarak, Roger Clemens and William Shatner have been portrayed by fake Twitter accounts, and brand variations such as @ATT_Fake_PR and @FakePewResearch provide satirical and often very funny send-ups of their targets. If you've been brandjacked you can appeal to Twitter directly, but be prepared to wait. If the satirist works within Twitter's guidelines, you have to take a more conventional crisis management approach.

The best defense against a Twitter attack is to listen. Free Twitter clients such as TweetDeck and HootSuite do a good job of catching mentions of your brand or products. If the volume of mentions is large, or if you want to filter for sentiment to detect a surge in negativity, you'll need a paid listening tool such as Radian6, Lithium or Sysomos.[20] Listening is easy and low-risk, but think twice before you let your branded Twitter account wade into a conversation. The precedent you set may come back to haunt you when people begin to expect a response. Unless you're prepared to devote resources to engaging on Twitter every day, the safest course is just to keep your ear to the ground.

We can't think of a good reason why every company today shouldn't have a branded Twitter account. Even if you use it only to disseminate press releases, it at least plants a flag in this increasingly critical community and it acclimates you to the culture and style of Twitter participants. Knowing who's influential can help you get messages to the right people in the event of a crisis.

Many consumer-focused companies now use Twitter for front-line customer support. Twitter can be a great tool for such purposes, but be aware of what you're getting into. When you set the precedent of addressing complaints within hours or minutes, customers will come to expect the same service all the time. Failing to deliver it can create a problem. Listen for a while to get an idea of the magnitude of the support task you'll face, then staff appropriately. Once you start proactively addressing customer complaints in public, it's very difficult to go back.

YouTube — Attack TV

Video has a unique power to spark emotion, as it has done in everything from natural disasters to political campaigns to the Occupy Wall Street movement. With video cameras embedded in nearly every cell phone that's sold today, any moment is now a potential media moment. For better or for worse.

The rapid rise of YouTube as a cultural phenomenon has been stunning. In early 2012, video uploads to YouTube hit 72 hours per *minute,*[21] a tenfold increase since 2007. As of this writing, YouTube was logging 4 billion video views per day and was the Web's number two search engine. With such vast reach, it's no surprise YouTube has also become a favored tool for attacking brands.

Some of the most notable YouTube attacks have used an organization's own collateral against it. The "Onslaught" TV ad produced by Unilever subsidiary Dove is a notable example. The 2007 ad chided the beauty industry for using images that taught young girls to equate self-esteem with physical appearance. It wasn't long before attack videos appeared that juxtaposed Onslaught with advertising for Unilever's Axe antiperspirant that featured scores of bikini-clad models.

Most people probably didn't know that Axe and Dove shared a corporate parent, and the spoof video, "A message from Unilever," ignited an unpleasant flurry of media criticism.[22] "Only one in 100 people may know that Unilever owns both brands," said Jim Nail, who was chief marketing officer for media-monitoring service

Cymfony at the time. "But that one person is likely to be participating in social media."

YouTube was the catalyst for 11 of 50 social media-inspired crises analyzed by Altimeter Group in a 2011 report. The attacks commonly take two basic forms:

Caught in the Act

These are embarrassing events captured by customers, usually on phone cameras, that demonstrate poor practices or customer service breakdowns. A 2007 video showing a dozen rats scurrying around a Greenwich Village Taco Bell embarrassed parent KFC and the New York Department of Health, which had passed the restaurant just a month earlier. KFC was forced to permanently close the store as well as nine others in New York City.

In December 2011, a U.S. resident's security camera captured a 20-second clip of a Federal Express delivery man unceremoniously throwing a computer monitor over a 5-foot iron fence instead of delivering it to the front door. The video was viewed more than 2.4 million times on YouTube within 24 hours, and FedEx was forced to swiftly post an apology video. If you search for UPS, FedEx and other home-delivery services on YouTube, you'll find lots of examples of drivers caught in traffic violations or mishandling customer deliveries.

There's not much you can do to anticipate or defend yourself against those kinds of attacks except to have a crisis plan in place. Companies that have large customer-facing organizations are the most vulnerable, and leaders need to realize that these days their customer service reps are potentially their weakest link. Any interaction with a customer is a potential video or audio clip. Both candidates in the 2008 presidential election were embarrassed by comments caught on cell-phone cameras, and political action committees now routinely employ stalkers to follow opposing candidates and to exploit every opportunity to catch them in a misstatement or lie.

Block that Comment!

There isn't much you can do when bloggers gang up on your business or products, but at least you can prevent the negativity from spilling over onto your own blog, right? Um, not really.

While corporate blogging has declined somewhat with the rise of alternative platforms, the fact remains that 23% of the Fortune 500 and 37% of the Inc. 500 still maintain public-facing blogs, according to the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth.[23] Many large companies have multiple blogs.

All blogging platforms support reader comments, although the feature can usually be turned off. Don't do that, though. Conversation is the essence of social media, and disabling comments turns a discussion into a monologue. You're better off having no blog at all, in fact, because restricting discussion makes you look clueless or arrogant. These days, critics simply take their gripes somewhere else.

It's better to post a "terms of service" statement in a separate page that outlines what you will and won't permit. Keep your list of prohibited content short and sensible: no offensive or hateful language, stalking, spamming, obscenity or intellectual property theft. We like the policy on General Motors' FastLane Blog.[24] It accepts the fact that dissent is part of an open discussion and it strives simply to keep the conversation civil.

We recommend against following the example set by Delta Airlines, whose user agreement runs to an incredible 6,600 words.[25] It's not surprising the Delta blog generates so little discussion. Anyone who would wade through such a ponderous legal document to post a comment would have to be very committed. Perhaps Delta's tome is a veiled message to critics to get lost.

The classic example of caught-in-the-act was the 2006 America Online incident we noted in the introduction. A recorded phone call of a customer service rep's overly aggressive efforts to retain a customer went viral and spread to national media in just five days.

AOL issued a formal statement saying the incident was an anomaly and that the rogue employee had been fired. It either didn't notice or ignored the fact that hundreds of people were lodging complaints about similar behavior in online forums. Then The Consumerist published an internal AOL document that proved that the rep's behavior was not only common but was actively encouraged by AOL management.

AOL shot itself in the foot. It had essentially sacrificed an employee for doing what he had been told to do, although perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. Its apology looked deceptive. No one was particularly surprised when AOL announced a few weeks later that it was getting out of the consumer Internet service provider business.

Spoofs

Sometimes a company's advertising messages can turn into parody videos that are meant to embarrass the firm or poke fun at its messages. These run the gamut from harmless to vicious, and responses must be tuned to avoid inflaming the situation further.

Spoofs can actually help boost brands, especially if they're creative and non-confrontational. Unilever has seen both sides of the issue. The "Onslaught" parodies cited earlier caught the company in an embarrassing double standard. However, an ad spot created in 2006 as part of the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty sparked several parody videos that enhanced the brand.

"Dove Evolution" depicted a rather plain-looking model being transformed into a billboard beauty thanks to makeup, professional photography and Photoshop. The ad, which was created exclusively for online presentation on a budget of only $135,000, has garnered over 15 million views on YouTube as of this writing and won several awards.

A professionally produced parody called "Slob Evolution" emerged not long thereafter. It shows a handsome young man being transformed into an overweight oaf using the same techniques as the original Dove video. It was nominated for several awards, including an Emmy, and has been viewed over 1.5 million times. Other knockoffs featuring an Asian subject, a drag queen and even a pumpkin have also appeared, driving over 5 million views and helping to spread awareness of the original Dove campaign.[26]

So, in the course of one year, Unilever experienced both the best and worst of what video parodies have to offer.

But not all parodies are so complimentary. Reports that the popular Chick-fil-A chain gave generously to anti-gay groups sparked a protest video in March 2012 that shows a trio of drag queens wallowing in sandwiches and waffle fries while singing, "Someday somebody's gonna make you want to gobble up a waffle fry. But don't go, don't you know Chick-fil-A says you're gonna make the baby Jesus cry." (It sounds better than it reads.)

The "Chow Down (at Chick-fil-A)"[27] spoof crossed over 1 million views in the first six weeks and seems destined to become a viral classic. It also presaged a much bigger controversy that erupted over Chick-fil-A's political leanings a few months later (see Chapter 10).

You need to walk a fine line when responding to spoof videos. One that doesn't push an agenda is probably harmless and may even be helpful. Cadbury Schweppes' innovative 2007 "Gorilla" campaign — which featured a character in a monkey suit drumming to Phil Collins' song "In The Air Tonight" — spawned many imitators with the company's tacit approval. "We feel that imitation is the most sincere form of flattery," a spokesman told the U.K.'s *Birmingham Mail*. "It's fine by us, and we will let it ride so long as it doesn't get out of hand."[28]

However, parodies that use a company's logo, theme music or advertising storyboard to its detriment can cross the line into brandjacking. That's next to impossible to combat because once a video is on the Internet, it quickly gets copied and reposted else-

where. In 2010, Greenpeace created a gory parody of a Nestlé commercial for the Kit Kat candy bar showing an office worker biting into an orangutan's finger instead of a chocolate wafer. The video was a takeoff on an actual Kit Kat commercial and was intended to attack Nestlé's use of palm oil. Australia's *Daily Telegraph* but two years later copies were easy to find in several places, including on YouTube.

About the Authors


Dana Gillin photo

Paul Gillin is a writer, speaker and online marketing consultant who specializes in helping businesses use content to reach customers. A popular speaker and writer, he has addressed more than 100 groups and published more than 150 articles since 2008. He is a veteran technology journalist with more than 25 years of editorial experience, including 13 years exclusively online.

His books include *The New Influencers*, *Secrets of Social Media Marketing*, *The Joy of Geocaching* (co-authored with wife Dana) and *Social Marketing to the Business Customer* (co-authored with Eric Schwartzman). Paul is a columnist for *BtoB* magazine and a director of the Society for New Communications Research. His blogs are PaulGillin.com and NewspaperDeathWatch.com.

Greg Gianforte has started five successful software companies. He founded RightNow Technologies in 1997 with a mission to rid the world of bad experiences. The company enjoyed 15 years of continuous growth. At the time of its sale to Oracle in 2011, it had more than 2,000 large customers, 1,100 employees and $225 million in annual revenue.

Among his many awards are Ernst & Young's Pacific Northwest Entrepreneur of the Year and the Leader Award from *CRM* magazine. he was inducted into the CRM Hall of Fame in 2007.

His books include *Bootstrapping Your Business* and *Eight to Great: Eight Steps to Delivering an Exceptional Customer Experience*.