

The challenge of negative word of mouth: Part 1

 By [Jason Stewart](#)

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I'm going to be sharing my agency's step-by-step process on how to combat negative word of mouth (WOM) in two consecutive articles. This first article looks at sustained negative word of WOM and how to effectively deal with it.

Setting the scene

Social media is fast growing up and forcing most brands to wake up to what's really happening within their market space. Before the dawn of social media, brands were protected from customer complaints, negative word of mouth and bad reviews. This all happened offline and consequently allowed for a very large disconnect between consumer and brand. This has all changed dramatically.

If something goes wrong anywhere along the line of consumer interaction, there's a very high chance that it will be spoken about online. Fortunately because such comment is in the public domain, we also know who is saying what, and where - giving us the opportunity to rectify matters.

Responding to negative WOM

What's the best way for a brand to respond to negative word of mouth? You first need to identify the type. There are two very different kinds - Situational and Sustained negative Word of Mouth. Situational negative word of mouth occurs from a once-off error, mistake or bad service, and is experience specific. I'll tackle it in my follow-up article.

Sustained negative word of mouth is more insidious and a long term challenge. It usually stems from a repetition of situational experiences that together have created a large-scale perception that comes to be believed (whether true or not). Sometimes the belief might seemingly evolve "out of nothing" and become a form of brand myth or legend.

The impact

We have worked with a number of brands that understand that negative word of mouth impacts on future growth. As more people say bad things about you, more also stop purchasing your brand offering, in the same way that, inversely, as more people say good things about you, a positive cycle of purchasing is kick-started.

Every brand should actively seek to increase its recommendation rate and amount of word of mouth. If the WOM content being spread is damaging, the brand first needs to stop the negative message being spread before positive word of mouth can be incubated, stimulated and ventilated.

Before sharing our personal strategy that we have successfully implemented for our clients' brands, I must qualify that our strategy only holds water, if it is based on a product that does actually work and if the message being communicated is indeed untrue. If you have gained a less than glowing reputation because of a bad product, you cannot hope to change the public perception until you have a much better product on offer. We are not spin doctors. Spin-doctoring only courts disaster.

Dealing with sustained negative WOM (perception, urban myth, lies)

Sustained negative word of mouth is more challenging than situational negative WOM. It stands to reason because it has built up critical mass and is now believed as the truth. Our objective is to completely destroy this belief, which means that a considerable force needs to be used to break the momentum of the message and to shatter the belief in the message.

We've had two particularly interesting brand challenges. One product was believed to kill or at best result in a plethora of life-threatening diseases. Another product was believed to be a diuretic and instead of being purchased as a status symbol (as the brand had hoped for) it was purchased to deal with constipation. Both those perceptions and the messages driving them were completely untrue, yet were built up over the years and had never been challenged by the brand until they had become concrete. Not all brands deal with such extreme cases, yet all negative perceptions are damaging and need to be scuppered.

The solution

1. Identify the negative message and the false evidence that is being used to justify the untrue claim.
2. Identify the 'Haters' - Those people that are passionately spreading this message because they believe the potential harm of using the product is so great that they must tell others. There are a number of ways that you can do this:
 - a) Use the Net Promoter Score. This identifies how a consumer ranks the likelihood of recommending a product to someone else. It gives you an indication of whether they are potential brand advocates, or, as importantly, how big a detractor they are, and consequently the likelihood of them being an impassioned spreader of negative WOM.
 - b) Alternatively, you can track online WOM and identify the individuals who are spreading negative messaging. This can be done using tools such as BrandsEye or SaidWot. These tools search the internet for reference terms and comments related to your brands. They track the sentiment of those comments and identify the comment's initiator by, for example, tracking back through re-tweets.
 - c) You can also use Customer Complaints. If someone took the energy to complain to a brand, you can be sure they have spoken to others about it (offline and online). These individuals are therefore passionate about the subject matter.
 - d) Lastly, you are able to identify 'Haters' in the offline and real world. People who spread negative WOM in the office canteen, around a braai, while dropping their child at crèche and so forth. We have a specific methodology for doing this, which involves going into specific environments which are conversation hotspots for brands, and identify people who are the loudest, most influential and most "anti" your brand.
3. Create new content that is believable, true and remarkable. It must deal with the negative messages in a way that leaves no doubt that the message was wrong and that the product is in fact the best offering the 'Haters' have available to them. To achieve that, the content needs to be evidence-based, simple and easy to understand. The messages need to be targeted at the 'Haters', to convince them and to counteract their previous message.
4. Package the content in a way that is social and shareable. All content needs to be easy to pass on both on and offline. This includes links, forward, share, like, comment, tweet buttons as well as video, email and mobile options. It can also be as rudimentary as brochures and posters that deal with the issue, You will be amazed at the lengths to which a 'Hater' will go in order to rectify their mistake. For example, not only phoning people and sharing content

online but even putting up a poster at work.

5. Repetition is very important and is needed to help change the momentum of belief so as to build on the critical mass of the new message. Edelman shared results from their global survey revealing that 63% of people need to see three to five repetitive positive actions to believe a change has been made for good. So don't think that you can shout only one message. You need to package five different evidence-based stories that can be believed and then shared.
6. Develop a platform that allows your brand fans to respond to other customers, based on their personalised positive experiences. This is very effective, as people trust others so much that they will automatically trust your brand. We have a tool that allows for this, linking customer queries and complaints to your brand's most passionate advocates. This also creates more testimonials, recommendations and product reviews.

In Part 2, I'll look at negative WOM that's situationally-based and offer a solution on how to counter the problem.

ABOUT JASON STEWART

Jason Stewart is the co-founder and MD of HaveYouHeard (www.haveyouheard.co.za), a communications agency immersed in culture to influence it. With 11 years' trading experience and offices in Johannesburg, Cape Town and London, HaveYouHeard uncovers unique insights to create innovative ideas that influence the audience by bringing the brands it partners with to the centre of culture.

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