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Fighting the Invisible Enemy Gets Tougher

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By Mike Beirne

The search engine optimization war is a daily battle, and Delta Air Lines has been winning the skirmishes of late. Since mid-December, the carrier pushed DeltaReallySucks.com off the first page of Google results.

That site was created by a former customer after a series of bad customer service experiences and now boasts about two million hits annually.

"Those guys are coding their page so they can appear above us," said Kristen Manion, Delta's gm-direct and interactive marketing. "We do everything in our power to get in front of them."

Delta is not alone. Wal-Mart, Kmart, Allstate, Geico and Farmers Insurance Group are all proof that unhappy customers are more vested than satisfied consumers in having their stories told.

The top 10 Google search results conducted recently for the above brands included at least one disparaging Web site and, in some cases, two. The more a Web site is linked to other sites, the higher it climbs in search engine rankings. Companies are also up against negative criticism on message boards and social networking sites.

Such tenacity can create a bad impression considering that 62% of search engine users click on the first page of results, per a Jupiter Research and iProphet study conducted last year. Forty-one percent don't look beyond the top 10 entries. That behavior could be problematic for Farmers Insurance, whose results include a site that incorrectly mentions the company was rated the worst among auto insurers in overall customer satisfaction by a J.D. Powers and Associates study.

Fighting "cybersmear" is no easy task. The Communications Decency Act of 1996 provides immunity to Internet service providers and users of interactive computer services who publish information provided by others. Plus, message board posts are often made by anonymous users. It costs a great deal of time, energy and money to attempt to unmask the authors of negative posts.

Experts say such criticism is inevitable.

"(Marketers) are not going to suppress the bad news; that's the old media way of thinking," said David Hallerman, senior analyst for eMarketer. "They need to do more things that people will want to read about that will put them in a positive light."

Delta succeeded partly by adding Web links with Delta newsroom entries, company blogs and animated shorts about airline etiquette playing on YouTube.com. The Atlanta carrier has quadrupled its resources since 2005 to win favorable placement in paid and in natural search results. Delta monitors its Web presence and online conversations about the brand daily.

Choice Hotels does the same.

"We've had online brand protection for years and each year we step it up a bit more," said Mary Beth Knight, svp, e-commerce and worldwide distribution at Choice Hotels, Silver Spring, Md. "You have to take protecting your brands very seriously. There are a lot of people around the world who expend an awful lot of energy to hijack brands online."

Overwhelming negative content is usually a company's only recourse because lawsuits are time consuming and the defaming party typically is anonymous.

"The damage is being done anyway, so you're better off cleaning up your online image," said Gary Greaves, president of Credo Media Group. The Boca Raton, Fla., shop repairs reputations for individuals and businesses that are unable to manage their Web presence. Among his clients is a CEO with an embarrassing past history and a manufacturer who lost business and laid off employees after disparaging postings by a former worker.

Internet Engine, an Internet marketing shop in Libertyville, Ill., helped a boutique hotel client move favorable guest reviews to the front of the line. Previously, a complaint about customer service had become prominent in search engine results and business declined. Tweaking meta tags on positive customer reviews and linking the desirable content that made it more relevant for Internet searches accomplished the task. When the offending blog disappeared from the first page, business increased.

But search engine optimization tactics do have their limits. If the negative attention is overwhelming, there may not be enough money or time to affect the search rankings.

"You can't kill bad news," said Tom Disch, Internet Engine president. "You can make it less relevant, but just like with public relations you can't create good out of bad."

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