

News drives search, search drives news, and the importance of being there when...



Bell Pottinger Group

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By Kevin Murray and Nicholine Hayward

In today's turbo-charged media environment, a company's web and communications strategy can make or break its reputation and subsequent commercial success.

Here, Kevin Murray and Nicholine Hayward explain how online visibility, particularly on search engines and social media, is a critical factor in managing reputation.

These days, news drives people online to search for more information.

Equally, if a lot of people are talking about issues online, it can drive news reporters to write on the subject, and create headlines.

It seems blindingly obvious behaviour, but few companies have taken these new behaviours to heart and developed communication strategies which recognize these new realities.

At Bell Pottinger, we call this strategy: "Be there when..."

We can see this phenomenon every day. Whether it is trying to find out more about earthquakes in Haiti, floods in central England or cars that need to be recalled, news drives search.

And, if you track the way people behave online, you can even see the evolution of their thinking, and track where they go with their searches.

'Oops, it's raining rather heavily, and the BBC is talking about floods. I'd better check...' Then, 'Uh oh, where are the places most vulnerable to flooding?' Then, 'I'm in one of those areas, I'd better just check on flood insurance...'



If you are an insurance company, do you have a strong web presence on the subject? Do you offer valuable help and advice on the subject? Are you THERE, when people search? If you are not, they will find other voices that are!

Hey, how about proactively generating news ideas in order to drive people to search, and then ensuring there is something for them when they go online? Now, there's a thought!

Too many companies fail to recognize this new behaviour, and do nothing to be there when people search. Being there means having a presence, through search optimisation, with information of your own to satisfy the curiosity, or needs of your audience. Immediate benefit? Inquiries go up, sales go up. Less immediately cash generating, but still good for the brand, is that thousands more people are also immediately exposed to your wares and your thinking.

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Imagine the frustration of an airline which had not responded well to a complaint about a broken guitar by a country and western journeyman singer!

The song, laced with humour and scathing criticism, packaged in a catchy tune, soon became a YouTube hit – and a global media story – and cost the airline much much more in the end.

As several CEO’s have told us, this new world of citizen power is forcing companies to review and sharpen up their internal customer handling and complaints procedures.

But the very same companies haven’t yet turned these new behaviours to their advantage. Using the web, social media and other digital tools is not some bolt-on extra. It needs to be central to communications strategy.

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An interesting case study on how people behave online when news blows up, involves the topic of Toyota recalls.

The Toyota story illustrates how a company's reputation and subsequent commercial success, depends very much on how it responds in the event of a crisis – in this case, the recall of its vehicles for safety reasons – and how its online visibility, particularly on search engines and social media, is a critical factor in managing that reputation.

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As Google is overwhelmingly the first port of call for anyone looking for news and information online, let's start by using Google Insights for Search, a tool that reveals patterns of demand, to show how the recent Toyota story precipitated a rush of people to the search engine.

If we track searches for the term 'Toyota' in the UK alone over the last five years, we can see how the recall is the biggest event in the company's recent history, by a long margin.

We can also look at the top and fastest rising searches around the brand for the seven days around the peak of the crisis on Thursday 4th February and see how the recall dominates the list.

If we look at data from the US, where the story had been around for slightly longer, and therefore offers a bigger base of data to work from, we can see the fall-out for the crisis, in terms of interest in the stock price.

This corresponds with the recent news that the recall wiped 22 per cent, or US\$30bn (£19bn), from its market value since the middle of January, so presumably these searches were being made by a combination of existing and potential stockholders. Likewise, we can clearly see how interest in used Toyotas in the US has taken a dive while searches for used Fords have correspondingly risen, which accords with Toyota's own assertion that the recall could cost up to US\$2bn (£1.25bn) in lost output and sales.



A pedal that sticks is clearly more of a problem, but it was only when the story shifted a third time, to the far more serious issue of brakes, that the media, the online public, and Toyota themselves swung into action.

So let's go back and look at the data for the last year and explore how the story unfolded, particularly in terms of the relationship between news coverage and search demand.

Firstly, if we use the Google Trends tool to compare news coverage with search demand in the US over the last year, we can see now there was a series of recall stories, but these only caused minor blips in search. The story of the San Antonio plant reducing production, in August 2009, although receiving very little media coverage, drove a much bigger increase in searches. However, the sudden increase in news demand in late January, by contrast, resulted in a surge in searches. To try and understand what it was about the recent news that drove this surge in media coverage and search, let's look at the different kinds of searches. Firstly, we can see that in September 2009, the issue was perceived to be around the floor mats. This doesn't sound like a serious safety issue, so it wasn't widely reported, there was very little 'buzz' on the social networks and search demand was modest.

Even when the focus of the story switched to the accelerator pedal, the story gained very little traction. A pedal that sticks is clearly more of a problem, but it was only when the story shifted a third time, to the far more serious issue of brakes, that the media, the online public, and Toyota themselves swung into action.

What happened next is a classic example of news in the digital age. If we add in searches for 'Toyota Facebook' and 'Toyota forum' we can see how, as the buzz around the crash and the problems started to escalate, so did demand for the forums and Facebook groups and pages. The consumer was clearly looking to social media for answers – and not just from the brand – but also from other consumers.

What's also interesting is that news of fatal crashes caused by faulty Toyota floor mats started to surface in September 2009, but searches on the 'deaths' didn't gain momentum until late January, after the searches for Toyota Facebook and forums had started to rise. In fact, the events of September had no effect on searches for 'Facebook' or 'forums' indicating that consumers didn't see this as an issue affecting the wider population. It also indicates the extent to which consumers were getting their news from the social networks and how Toyota's presence on these networks has been a critical factor in the information – and advice – they were receiving.



So now we've seen what happened from the consumer's perspective, let's look at Toyota's response. Firstly, to Toyota's credit, its people have worked extremely hard in all channels, to reassure and support both the media and the public. For example, the company's Twitter account, its YouTube channel and website have been extensively deployed as a way of getting the company's news out to its audience as quickly as possible. The company has created a special section on its website, has made safety videos regarding the accelerator pedal, and has filmed messages from its key executives. It has Twittered extensively and created a dedicated Facebook page.

Of course, leaving aside the issue that Toyota denied the existence of a safety issue at all, until they were forced to, there are a few gaps. For example, the company has no search visibility for some popular search terms such as 'Toyota brakes', a key focus of consumer concern. They - and the editors - have clearly faced a mammoth task in keeping the Toyota Wikipedia page under control, as you can see when you look at the editing history of the page. But overall, the company has made itself, and its response to the crisis, very easy to find and the fulfilment path for consumers, very simple to follow.

By comparison, when bird flu struck at a Bernard Matthews turkey farm in 2007, the company didn't even make a statement on its website, never mind any other channels, until two weeks after news of the outbreak hit the airwaves.

This has been helped in large part by the fact that Toyota already had a lot of these channels in place. The company already had a respectable following on Twitter and on Facebook and its YouTube channel was well established. This meant that the company could concentrate more on its response to the crisis than on trying to create, optimise and publicise new platforms from scratch. It's also worth noting that these channels and platforms have also given Toyota's advocates the outlet and the opportunity to speak up in the company's defence. This positive commentary would go unheard otherwise.

Of course, Toyota could have gone one step further and had prepared content ready to deploy in the event of a crisis. Just as the media had prepared their editorial covering the death of the Queen Mother well in advance, so might Toyota have considered what safety, service or employment issues might conceivably arise and had a response, in the form of video or web content, or a search campaign, ready and waiting. It will need to be adapted to the specific circumstances of the crisis, but an editing job is relatively straightforward by comparison and the company's response can be more carefully considered than in the heat of the moment. So, keeping all this in mind, how might you use this new behaviour to your company's advantage? How should you use news drives search to create relationships with customers you didn't know you could reach? Interesting thought.



Bell Pottinger Group

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