

Reputation management: Who comes up tops Woolies (chicken) or the mouse?

By  Danette Breitenbach

11 May 2023

Two public relations reputation management experts weighed in on the recent Woolies chicken-mouse incident. Both agree that the brand's response was spot on and that there really was not much more Woolies could do.



Source © Ballito Lifestyle Centre [Ballito Lifestyle Centre](#) Woolies' response to the recent chicken-mouse incident was spot on says PR experts

Regine le Roux, managing director at Reputation Matters says the incident shows that no entity is safeguarded from a crisis situation.

"But if you are proactive and foster your reputation as Woolworths does by being committed to quality and responding quickly in a crisis situation, it does help to take the knocks when there is a crisis situation."



Woolies, there's a mouse in my chicken...

Danette Breitenbach 5 May 2023



Dustin Chick is the partner and managing director of Razor PR, a M&C Saatchi company, which has won the top award for the best reputation management campaign in the EMEA region at the Sabre Awards.

He says; "Woolworths responded in good time; they took a clear and relevant action beyond just communicating, and they closed the loop. Most importantly they took accountability for the events at hand."



Dustin Chick partner and managing director of Razor PR, a M&C Saatchi company

Reputation: Your long-term licence

Chick explains that reputation is, in effect, your long-term license to operate in a market and society.

“It is highly tangible (and yet also invisible all at the same time) and provides a reason to believe and trust a product, its organisation, and even its leaders.”

Chick says reputation is so much more than the theory of what it is. “It is a fundamental felt experience of a brand. How a brand behaves (or doesn’t) frames the reputation it is known for.

“Not communicating what you want to be known for is a far greater risk than the perfectly crafted holding statement in response to something,” he says.

Yet, he says still many make a fatal error of judgement when it comes to reputation management. “They believe it is something that matters in response to an event rather than something that positively frames the environment you operate in.”

Le Roux says the fast response of Woolworths (crucial during a crisis), shows the retailer had its crisis communication action plan ready.

While a brand can never anticipate what crisis it will need to contend with, she says being proactive and having a plan in place, will help you to know what channels to follow and what needs to be done and communicated when faced with a crisis.

“You shouldn’t only start thinking of how to deal with the crisis, and who you need what information and approvals from midway through a crisis; being proactive is essential.”



Regine le Roux, managing director at Reputation Matters

The role of social media

Any discussion on reputation management has to consider social media.

“We must understand the fundamental role of social media as a channel here, as it frames everything about our response

(or even a clear choice not to respond),” says Chick.

He explains that while this differs from brand-to-brand, it is something that must be agreed at a strategic level.

“If your channel is about resolving customer issues, then set it up and empower the people behind it to do this.

“If your social media is about brand building, then craft and use the content strategies that allow this, while also knowing that you need an effective catch-and-resolve process for customer issues because they will come.”

The resolution, he adds, is not ever going to be a statement or a gif.

Bad service is just that, bad service

Key to this, Chick says is a deep appreciation that comms is not always the solution to the problem – often because comms was not the cause of the issue to start with.

“You will never communicate yourself out of a bad reputation if you behaved yourself into it. There will never be a 140 character tweet that will magically remove the worm from a burger,” says Chick.

“Remembering that for customers it is the experience of your company that frames how they feel about you, then the intervention is something that must equally address this.”

He adds that bad service is also not a crisis, its just that, bad service. There is no silver bullet statement that will transform it into good service. It’s people telling the truth about how they experienced you.”

He says what you need to do, and what Woolies did, is run towards the fire and fix it by doing something.



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As Le Roux explains. “Woolies was transparent and immediately informed us of the actions taken the store immediately underwent a forensic deep clean. They also let us know the immediate next steps to resolve the issue and prevent it from happening again.

“They also linked their statement to their value of being committed to the wellbeing of their customers and people as well as to policies and created peace of mind that they would be rolling out measures nationwide.”

An important part of the crisis management process is being empathetic and taking responsibility. Le Roux says Woolworths did this, when they said: “We recognise that we have let our customers down on this occasion and would like to express our sincere apology. We are taking every measure to ensure this never happens again”.

The ultimate game of double jeopardy

In the Woolies case, what more would they or could they be expected to do? “Indeed, what is the perfect 140 character answer to the question beyond what they have already said?” asks Chick.

He maintains it’s the ultimate game of double jeopardy.

“It is one thing to be upset at a failure to respond, or even a poor unaccountable response – but a whole other thing when

the response is both on point and on time. It frames the most important reality of social media: you don't need to attend every fight you are invited to."

So it appears that the answer to the question: who comes up tops, the Woolies chicken or the mouse, is Woolies (and its chicken).

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from VMts.

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