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Online revolutionaries

By Juliette Garside

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Revolutions used to happen in the streets - these days they take place online. And the targets are more often big businesses than bad governments. Banks, in particular, are feeling the brunt of grassroots internet campaigns.

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HSBC has just been forced into a U-turn over graduate overdrafts after the National Union of Students campaign used Facebook to generate a massive protest. The HSBC incident followed hot on the heels of a widespread revolt against the high charges levied for bounced cheques and un-authorised overdrafts. The advice site MoneySavingExpert.com became a focus for the protest, with more than 4m copies of a template letter threatening banks with legal action downloaded from the site.

Martin Lewis, who set up the site four years ago with £100 and now has 3m visitors a month, is not one to underplay the power of the internet - nor his own influence. "The bank charges campaign is the biggest consumer revolt since the poll tax riots. The big difference is that this campaign was done from armchairs and not from the street. To make campaigning work you have to make it easy for people, and the web does that beautifully."

Crucially, customers not only complained about charges, they took direct action. The story began last year when Plymouth law student Stephen Hone sued Abbey over two £32 fines. Abbey settled out of court, and as others brought similar complaints many banks followed suit. The hope, presumably, was to avoid setting a legal precedent which would have outlawed excessive charges. Pay off the moaners, and rely on the fact that most of us are too apathetic to take legal action.

But the template letters have been used so widely that an estimated £2.6bn has been claimed back. The Government has had to step in to freeze compensation claims, pending the outcome of a High Court test case. Attempting to brush the issue under the carpet has cost the banks a vast sum, and there could be more pain to follow.

"A site like mine compares to the largest of trade unions now in terms of influence," claims Lewis. "The structure of collectivism has changed." Indeed, the right to protest is protected online as it is on the streets and in industry. Courts and trademark bodies are increasingly supportive of individuals and pressure groups when someone registers a domain name similar to that of their target so long as the site is non-commercial, with no subscriptions and no paid advertising.

Oil company Shell found this out when it tried, unsuccessfully, to claim ownership of the name Royaldutchshellplc.com. The website belongs to Alfred Donovan, now in his 90s, and his son John. The Donovans owned a chain of petrol stations in east London and Essex and created sales promotions campaigns for Shell. But they fell out with the company and aired their grievances online.

Their site became a hub for activists and disgruntled former employees. It has been used to mobilise support for environmental campaigns by the likes of WWF, the environmental lobbying group, against drilling in the Arctic and Russia, for groups worried about Shell's social impact in Ireland and Nigeria, and by the company's former group auditor Bill Campbell to raise issues about employee safety.

So-called "gripe sites" are as old as the web itself, but not everyone with an axe to grind can create a buzz. Katy Howell is managing director of online PR agency Immediate Future, and has worked for Sony and Samsung: "There are a lot of people complaining. But when somebody hits a chord a blog swarm occurs. People start linking to that site."

Howell employs web mapping software which allows her to track where comments about her clients are originating and whether they are reaching critical mass. The influence of a commentator is measured not simply by the amount of traffic to their site, but by the number of other related sites which reference their comments and contain links to it.

The process mimics academic publishing. Authors of new papers will underpin their statements by references to previously published papers. The line of influence is acknowledged and traceable.

Google uses similar techniques to decide which sites to put at the top of its search lists. The more links to its site a blogger has, the higher it appears on Google. Once a campaign

begins to appear at the top of Google, it has reached critical mass and its target should begin to worry.

Mike Butcher, editor of internet start-up blog TechCrunch, says the linking process that allows campaigns to gather force has been accelerated and brought into the mainstream by social networking sites. "It started off in the blogosphere but it took dedicated hardcore techie people to create that effect. In social networking you create a profile and immediately start talking to a wider audience."

Sites like MySpace and Face-book automate linking by asking new members to hand over their email address books so that messages can be sent out to friends asking them to join. Those who do can choose to receive alerts about new content posted by their network of friends.

A new generation of "micro blogging" social networks looks set to accelerate the process further. Twitter.com lets members send alerts to mobile phones and instant messenger windows, meaning the information is more likely to be read immediately.

Butcher has a friend who is planning her wedding using Twitter and a network of 500 members, but he says the technology could have its uses for campaigners too, such as anti-war protester Brian Haw, who has been camping in Parliament Square for a number of years, despite police attempts to move him on. "Haw could cook up an instant crowd via Twitter if he were about to be arrested."

Despite daily evidence that corporate reputations can sustain rapid and lasting damage online, many brands have been slow to defend themselves on the web. Paul Mead, managing director of VCCP Search, specialises in online crisis management and is currently working on the bank charges issue for one of the organisations concerned. VCCP is owned by Chime Communications, whose chairman, Lord Bell, the grandfather of modern-day British PR, clearly realises the importance of protecting his clients online as well as in traditional media.

Mead warns: "Whether or not you decide to get involved, knowing about those conversations is absolutely vital. You can detect storms that are brewing, spheres of influence that are growing."

He says too many chief executives are afraid of the online space and as a result choose to do nothing about it. He cites the Cadbury salmonella scare, the British Airways cabin crew strike and last week's National Express coach crash as examples where the companies concerned did too little to get their messages across online. Those searching for

information on these events would have been hard pushed to find anything but links to negative coverage.

Mead suggests several strategies to counter this problem. Advertising messages can be placed on Google or Yahoo!. In order to appear in the unpaid search results - the ones readers pay most attention to - companies can make sure messages about the crisis are placed on their own website so as to be easily picked up by search engines. Press releases should be distributed to the widest possible array of online news sources, and written in a search-friendly way, with keywords used prominently.

Howell at Immediate Future suggests forming good relationships with online communities - by helping them organise events or competitions, or review new products. "One of the advantages of being in the conversation before the crisis hits is you can build friendships, people who will rush to your defence when something goes wrong."

She rarely intervenes directly in conversations, recommending executives from the company speak out rather than leaving it to the PRs. Underhand tactics such as pretending to be an ordinary member of the public can backfire spectacularly. Saintsforever.com became a popular forum for Southampton FC fans who wanted to oust the club's chairman Rupert Lowe. Last year they claimed that staff at a PR agency employed by Lowe to fight his corner had posted supportive comments on the site, while posing as fans. He is no longer chairman.

Those who engage openly and respond to complaints fare better. In 2005, US journalist Jeff Jarvis wrote about his struggles with PC maker Dell's customer support on his blog, BuzzMachine.com. Jarvis was soon joined in his Dell Hell rants by many other unhappy customers, and the company's share price took a hit.

It belatedly responded by setting up Dellcommunity.com, a forum for its customers to air their gripes and put forward suggestions. Thousands flocked to the forum and the company has since used the feedback to tailor its products. When Microsoft launched Vista, the latest version of Windows, earlier this year, Dell's customers asked for the right to have the older version pre-loaded on to new machines, and the company won brownie points by complying.

Refusing to engage can be dangerous. Anyone typing Land Rover into Google will find that after the corporate website, the next link in the list is for a blog entitled "The Truth about the Land Rover Discovery 3". Set up in 2005 by a customer who had been given two duff models by the company and eventually claimed his money back, it details a long list of complaints about poor product quality and lack of customer service.

The author, Adrian Melrose, offered to hand his site over to Land Rover so that it could use it to create a customer forum. The company declined. As Melrose put it: "Land Rover isn't committed to opening a dialogue with their customers. What a pity, because their customers are doing it without them."

John Straw of online business consultancy Disrupted Horizon believes the internet will force a sea change in the way companies market themselves and develop new products. "If you build a product that is under par you are going to get found out. People will be able to verify marketing messages. In this environment customer service becomes a marketing tool, and if you are really bad at it that will go viral."

The revolution may have moved from the street to the armchair, but it has been slow to reach the boardrooms.



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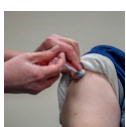
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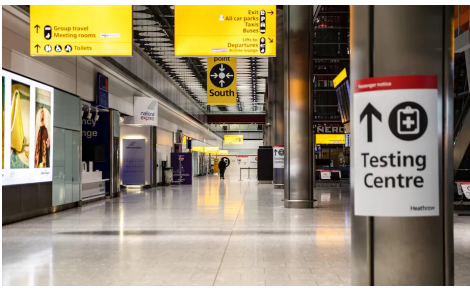


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