

British Petroleum Runs the Social Media Gauntlet

Introduction

British Petroleum rose to media infamy after an unfortunate accident led to a three-month-long oil leak that despoiled the Gulf of Mexico and the southern coast of the United States. The disastrous offshore leak that occurred in the summer of 2010 continues to have serious repercussions for both the coastal environment and British Petroleum's public image. BP's efforts to combat this crisis through social media were largely regarded as unsuccessful, but this large company's failed attempt makes a valuable case study for future practitioners in the field.

History

With roots in the early twentieth century, the British Petroleum Company was formally established in 1954. At the time most of its operations were in the Middle East, but it quickly expanded to Alaska and struck oil in the North Sea. Today, it operates in more than eighty countries and is the third-largest energy company in the world. Its largest division is BP America, which produces more oil in the United States than any other American company.

Challenge

On April 20, 2010, an explosion on the BP-operated *Deepwater Horizon* oil-drilling platform released a rapid flow of oil on the bottom of the ocean. The explosion killed 11 workers aboard the rig and injured 17 others. The leak was finally stopped on July 15, 2010, after it had released nearly 5 million barrels of crude oil.

British Petroleum's early response to the crisis was generally seen as less about public engagement and more about spin control. BP's social media campaign did not start up in earnest until a month after the spill was announced. The company purchased promotional placement on Google and Yahoo to control search results for terms such as "oil spill" and sent viewers to positive articles about the clean-up. Later, the company spent \$50 million on a TV campaign to promote BP's positive role. These expensive efforts did not help, instead "feeding a meme that BP is tone-deaf — more concerned with polishing its reputation than cleaning up its mess."²⁶

Reaching for more social media platforms, BP's CEO, Tony Hayward, gave a public apology on YouTube. The video drew several parodies and was generally not received well.²⁷ More parody accounts were hounding BP on other social networks. On Twitter the account @BPGlobalPR quickly gathered 175,000 followers by mocking BP's failure to resolve the oil spill.²⁸ BP's official Twitter account, @BP_America, had been used by the company as a broadcasting channel and very little for community interaction.²⁹ The parody account had more than ten times as many followers as the company's official Twitter page, allowing the parody to dominate the online conversation. Meanwhile, dozens of anti-BP Facebook groups sprang up, dwarfing the company's presence on that platform as well.

Results

For many years BP's core business did not seem to call for, or even suggest, pursuing a social media strategy. The unfortunate result was that when a crisis occurred and BP desperately needed to communicate its message to the public, the company's attempt to bootstrap a social media presence by purchasing public attention was seen as inauthentic. This negative reaction illustrates the importance of starting a social media campaign immediately before problems arise and have to be cleaned up.

After engaging the media, BP's initial strategy was to refuse direct responsibility for the leak. When Tony Hayward was interviewed on the *Today Show* he said, "It wasn't our accident, but we are absolutely responsible for the oil, for cleaning it up, and that's what we intend to do."³⁰ This statement may have been partly motivated by legal concerns, as a full apology would open BP up to greater liability in court. However, this half-hearted approach did little to win over the general public. As a consequence of the accident and the weakly perceived PR response, BP fell from being the most highly ranked in customer loyalty in the oil industry to being the lowest ranked.³¹ It will clearly be some time before its reputation fully recovers.

Rather than engaging in a top-down image management campaign, British Petroleum could have been better served by a more subtle social media campaign. One of its biggest mistakes was "failing to take advantage of social networking to open a clear line of communication with people living on the Gulf Coast and around the world."³² There was an opportunity for BP to take revolutionary steps by engaging with those affected by the spill in more personal ways than grants of aid or clean-up assistance. That chance was missed in BP's case, but other companies can learn from its mistake by creating social media accounts for damage control, hopefully well before they are needed.

Review Questions for British Petroleum Case Study

1. What benefits would BP have gained from starting a serious social media campaign a year before instead of a month after the oil spill? Be as specific as possible.
2. While the parody account was posting on Twitter, BP asked for the account to be shut down. The social media site refused, saying that parodies were allowed under its terms of service. Is there a better way BP could have handled the accounts making fun of them?
3. BP was criticized for underestimating the extent of the oil spill at first: the company is said to have underestimated the leak's size by as much as a fifth the real amount. Would BP have been better off to report a higher number and perhaps risk overestimating the extent of the leak? Why or why not?
4. Go on YouTube and view Tony Hayward's apology. Was this a well-constructed social media message? Should YouTube have been used differently, the same, or not at all in presenting BP's case? Explain your argument.
5. Do some external research and look up the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Compare and contrast Exxon's and BP's responses to their respective crises. How successful were they in comparison? How much of the difference can be attributed to a change in the times, different corporate cultures, or media strategies? Cite your sources.

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