

## CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE PARTNERS

## Are Your Customers Ready to Defend You?



The conventional view of customers' word of mouth is as a promotional, positive source of information. Companies seek to develop *customer-advocates* who can serve as positive spokespeople for their products and brands. Our work with select groups of (Clients') existing customers shows that customer advocates can be a very effective *offensive* marketing tactic.

### But, A Good Offense Can Also Be a Great Defense

Occasional stories in the news remind us that these same devoted customers can also be used as an effective *defensive* tactic for companies or brands in the face of negative 'social media storms'. Consider the recent cases of Heineken Beer and Starbucks Coffee. Heineken was the subject of an aggressive social media-driven trashing after banners bearing its brand name were seen in online photos of dog fighting (leading viewers to surmise that Heineken had sponsored the event). Starbucks, at about the same time, faced its own social media 'attack'. A group of vegan, vegetarian and kosher customers trashed the chain when they learned that the pink coloring in some of Starbucks' drinks and baked goods came from a dye made from ground-up cochineal beetles.

Both Heineken and Starbucks immediately recognized their problem and their need to neutralize or dispel the defaming stories. Heineken, in fact, had no connection with the dog-fighting (their ring-side banners remained at the venue from a previous event they'd sponsored). And, while beetle-based dyes were indeed used by Starbucks, the same dyes are in widespread use. Heineken severed all ties with the facility while Starbucks announced that it was in the process of changing its source of coloring to a tomato-based dye. Both companies worked diligently and quickly to respond to these crises through multiple media channels as well as by responding to many of the posted comments directly.

### Online - A 'Gift' That Keeps On Giving

But, because nothing seems to vanish from the internet, their respective PR teams likely will see occasional flare-ups of the stories for months to come. The question remains, how effective are company denials by themselves? It seems to us that both companies would have been better served by invoking the assistance of *customer-advocates*. These passionate, brand-loyalists could, through their own public and private social media communications, have been equally effective in helping to defuse the detrimental publicity.

Once a brand has identified its best *customer-advocates* (depending upon the category, 20%, 10% or even fewer of all retained, satisfied customers) they can be nurtured to become even more effective pro-brand communicators. They should be given: special care and access to the company; privileged communications with stories to share; and "conversation catalysts" enabling their conversations with others. (We call this 'identifying and arming' advocates.) Once such a process is started, *customer-advocates* can serve not only as an offensive force for a brand, but as a defensive team as well. To learn more contact:

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