

# Connecticut LawTribune

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## REPUTATION MANAGER

### Responding To Negative News Isn't Always A Good Idea

By ANDREA OBSTON

At first glance, the idea of not responding to negative news seems counter-intuitive. Haven't we told our clients to respond early and often to negative news stories? Didn't, in a previous column, I say "no comment" or delayed comment can threaten a reputation? Yes to both questions.

But the opposite is also true. Allowing clients to "man the battle stations" every time they feel slighted by traditional media or a blogger with a chip on his shoulder is also a mistake. There are times when not reacting publicly to something negative is the best strategy.

Consider this: My firm worked for a client that provided services to the elderly. They created a program with a bank to help trust officers spot older adults that needed support beyond their financial needs. It was a good idea and something the local newspaper recognized with a large news story.

Everyone looked like heroes and the bank was delighted with the coverage—until the same newspaper ran a story a few weeks later about a similar partnership with another elderly services provider. What particularly bothered them was the quote by the provider that this was the *only* such service in the state.



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The branch manager could not be dissuaded from demanding a retraction. His irate phone call to the publisher probably gave him a chance to blow off some steam, but a six-part series that the paper had scheduled with us was mysteriously cancelled.

What's the lesson here? When do you tell your client it's best to let a negative or incorrect story play out without a response? And when is it time to jump on a story before things get out of hand? Here are a few questions to help sort this out:

**1.) Does the story have the potential to do your client long-term damage?** There are forgivable flaws in a news story and non-forgivable flaws. There's a big difference between a story about something inherently wrong or dangerous in a client's product and one that says something the client doesn't like.

**2.) Does the story show up in one place or several places? Is the issue being echoed by customer complaints?** With today's Internet-based tools, it's easy to monitor much of the news floating around on the web. Google News offers free News Alerts that will send e-mails when a client's name pops up. Technoroti allows them to also monitor influential bloggers in their industry. In addition, they should regularly check customer complaints. These are all indicators that preventive actions may be needed.

**3.) Is responding to a lone negative story going to give the issue legitimacy and longevity?** My firm once worked for a healthcare agency whose competitor manipulated a young journalist into writing a negative story about the care they were giving to one of their patients. The

patient in question repeatedly defied my client's advice and refused their help. We knew the story would be negative and it was. The agency's board went into an uproar, arming itself for a nasty letter-writing campaign to the newspaper's editor. We advised against it. Our experience told us the letters to the editor had the potential to keep the story alive for weeks. The board held off. As it turns out, the agency only got two calls about the story—both of which praised the agency.

**4.) Is the crisis indicative of a larger problem?** If a news story or an enterprising blogger writes about a small issue that's really the tip of the iceberg, responding becomes a matter of survival for a company. It took over a year for Ford and Firestone to publicly acknowledge that tire separation on the Explorer was a serious problem. Internal memos indicating the problem were circulated in March 1999 but the recall of 6.5 million tires, the second biggest in history, didn't happen until August 2000. By then, consumer confidence was in the basement and claims had mounted into the hundreds of millions.

**5.) Is an error in a news account indicative of the need to communicate better?** Companies that have an ongoing and honest relationship with members of the traditional and "new" media are far more likely to get a fair shake than those that don't. Good reporters want to air both sides of a story. Bloggers and other "citizen journalists" are less likely to seek a balanced news approach, but should still be included in public relations' outreach since relationship-building always pays dividends.

In an old public relations textbook, I found this piece of advice: "Squawk if you've been wronged." Today, making those decisions isn't nearly as black and white. ■