

## **South Africa: Four Web PR Mistakes That Woolworths Could Have Avoided**

Anna Malczyk, 26 October 2010

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South African retailer Woolworths made the decision to pull religious magazines off the shelves last week: apparently, they don't sell well. As soon as the news hit the internet, a veritable storm of comments - mostly negative - began appearing on the company's Facebook page. The page has over 34,000 fans, many of whom are now furiously debating the issue. Christians are complaining bitterly that Woolworths is discriminating against them, calling the company hypocritical for profiting from religious holidays like Christmas. Other commenters are replying by ridiculing these beliefs and opinions. A few try to rationalise what is happening and defend the company, but their voices are lost in the indignant stream of protests and counter-arguments. What went wrong?

### **Bad initial framing of the issue**

Everybody knows that religious topics can quickly incite heated and personal debate. Woolworths made a very bad call by framing this issue as one that involves "religious magazines". Their actual reasoning is sound: the stock isn't selling well, so it needs to be removed in favour of more popular products. But they should never have brought the religious aspect to the fore. Rather, they should have stated that magazines with low sales are being removed, and left it at that. Since most of the affected magazines are Christian, and since most South Africans hold this belief, they immediately opened themselves up to impassioned protests.

### **Not managing the media**

Any company that uses online marketing tactics must have a well-defined communications strategy for situations when things go badly wrong - a plan that outlines who to contact and what to say in a web PR crisis. For most of the day, Woolworths was silent about the matter in the media. All news articles and comments were written by third parties, most of whom had other agendas, like attracting readers and sensationalising the story (News24 had an acerbic "Woolies bans Christian mags" headline, for example). Woolworths did not make their side heard, which meant that misinformation and bad public perceptions spread quickly.

### **Not engaging with the fans**

The most heated and angry debates happened on Woolworths' Facebook fan page. While social media is generally a very powerful tool for marketing, it does have its hazards. The main risk is that the customers have a lot of power over the brand - when something bad happens, the customers will magnify the issue considerably with their complaints and comments. An active community can quickly drive brand perception downhill, so it's vital that official contacts from the company engage actively and constantly on these forums. Apart from a few initial messages, Woolworths staff remained silent for most of the day - even in the face of genuine questions and concerns.

### **Not moderating comments**

Not engaging with customers is one thing, but not moderating comments that border on hate speech is something quite different. The warring sides in this debate have used every tactic imaginable - humour and irony, ridicule, name calling, swearing and long, often hurtful rants. If fans are being attacked on the Woolworths page, how likely are they to return later? While deleting comments is inadvisable (and very bad for web PR), there are other options, like cautioning the users, blocking them from posting or even reporting them if the messages are particularly frequent and vile. Their subsequent decision to do a U-turn and go back on their initial decision to pull the magazine seemed to cause another heated discussion. Was this all a PR stunt? Either way, their brand received a lot of negative attention, the results of which are yet to be seen.