

Brands need to be prepared for the influence of 'people power' says Punch Communications

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London, UK (RPRN) 01/27/12 — This week gym-chain LA Fitness bore the full brunt of 'people power' as the public took to Twitter to express their distaste with the company's lack of empathy in refusing to release a couple from their contract. Despite the pregnancy of the woman, the job loss of her husband, and the fact they both moved away from the area of the gym and did not have a car, LA Fitness insisted on holding them to their two year contract – until 'people power' took to Twitter following the Guardian highlighting the story. Due to unrelenting pressure, the fitness chain eventually gave in and let the couple off.

With the proliferation of social media, everyone has an opinion, and consumers are fast to criticise corporations that they see are treating their customers or employees unfairly. **Public relations consultants**, therefore, need to ensure their

Punch is a boutique PR agency with the skill set and client base of a global agency.

crisis communications plans are updated to take into account the risk of 'people power' damaging their brand.

Victoria Harris, account director at PR, social and **search agency**, Punch Communications, comments: "Traditional crisis communications strategies considered what steps would be taken to communicate any negative news to the media. However, with the proliferation of the internet and social media over the past decade, it is the consumers themselves that are bringing companies to task for their behaviour, not the press."

It is essential that a marketing representative is responsible for regularly checking what people are saying about you online, to ensure that any damage to your reputation can be quashed as soon as possible. Marketing departments should liaise regularly with customer services teams to identify any potential complaints that could escalate. However, it is also important for companies to ascertain where the line is drawn. Businesses need to make a profit, and therefore each instance must be judged individually, as there is always a potential risk for 'mob culture' to develop through social media, which is not necessarily grounded in fact.

Victoria continues: "The majority of brands now have a strong social media strategy in place with which to promote their products and services, but not all have developed a PR plan for addressing when public opinion turn. It is vital for companies to update their crisis communications plans to account for the power of the people, so they don't have to learn the hard way, like LA Fitness."

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