Streisand Effect

Idea In Short

Streisand effect is the involuntary effect that attempts to suppress information lead to unforeseen consequences. The origin of this term is the US actress and singer Barbra Streisand. In 2003 she took legal action against the publication of aerial photographs of her home on the Internet. But, because of this action, the general public became aware of the picture and the image spread quickly and uncontrollably across the Internet.

Barbara Streisand is one of the few people that won the EGOT (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony) awards.However, for the uninitiated, the Streisand effect begins in 2002. Barbra Streisand learns that a photographer had captured aerial images of her Malibu residence and published them on a website illustrating coastal erosion. One of its 12,000 images happened to show her Malibu, California home. Streisand claimed that the photographer had invaded her privacy. The semi-reclusive star brings a lawsuit claiming invasion of privacy.

Streisand effect - the verdict

The lawsuit turns out to be unsuccessful. The court concludes that these distant aerial shots don't reveal anything truly private about Streisand. Nor do the photographer's actions constitute something that would be highly offensive to a reasonable person. In 2005, a photo of a urinal from a Streisand home then appears online. A take down request is issued. That leads Mike Masnick, a writer for the blog TechDirt, to muse:

> How long is it going to take before lawyers realize that the simple act of trying to repress something they don't like online is likely to make it so that something that most people would never, ever see (like a photo of a urinal in some random beach resort) is now seen by many more people?

The resultant publicity prompted hundreds of thousands of people to download the photo.

Prior to this lawsuit, the photo had been accessed only four times. Masnick coined the term Streisand effect. This effect refers to the phenomenon where an attempt to censor information unintentionally publicizes that information. According to Wikipedia, the Streisand Effect is an example of psychological reactance. People, once aware that some information is kept from them, are significantly more motivated to access and spread that information. Despite the unfortunate association of this effect with a Hollywood superstar, censorship backfire applies not only to the rich and famous, but also normal people. This effect is simply a byproduct of our celebrity culture.

Phillip Bonaffini and Bridgeport Hospital

The case of Phillip Bonaffini and Bridgeport Hospital demonstrates that the Streisand effect can involve ordinary citizens. In 1997, Bonaffini sued the hospital on the grounds that his wife contracted an infectious disease while undergoing cardiac surgery at the Bridgeport hospital and died. The hospital settled the suit. One of the conditions of the settlement was a confidentiality agreement that prohibited Bonaffini from discussing the case publicly. However, in 2002, however, Bonaffini was quoted in a Chicago Tribune story about infectious diseases in hospitals. The Bridgeport Hospital perceived this as an apparent violation of the settlement agreement and sued Bonaffini. This move received immediate national media coverage and made the hospital appear insensitive to the plight of the grieving spouse and his codefendant, a former patient confined to a wheelchair. In response to the negative publicity, Bridgeport Hospital quickly withdrew the suit. This decision confirms the view that:

> legal action intended to relieve a public relations headache had created a public relations nightmare instead

Deutsche Bahn

Nobody is immune from falling victim to Streisand effect. Even such large companies as Deutsche Bahn had to learn from it the hard way. In 2009, Deutsche Bahn warned blogger Markus Beckedahl from netzpolitik.org for his critical reporting. Beckedahl had leaked an internal memo from the Berlin state data protection officer on a data-related scandal at Deutsche Bahn. Beckedahl published the memo in its entirely on his blog. This prompted Deutsche Bahn to issue him a warning. Subsequently, this warning made it to the media and

the dispute well known across Germany. A wave of sympathy and support rolled over netzpolitik.org in Web 2.0. At the same time, a real shitstorm spread over Deutsche Bahn for several weeks.

Better to sit out than to warn

As these cases signify, the awareness of the potential of a possible Streisand effect is therefore one of the core competencies of every consultant who also deals with Internet matters. Even if the choice of legal remedy is lawful in the case of doubt, the resulting damage can be many times greater than the status quo. In the interests of the client or the company, this is certainly no longer the case. Sascha Lobo, a controversial and prominent German blogger, sees it in the same light. At the re:publica 2010, he gave a lecture titled, How to survive a shitstorm. In this talk, Lobo derives the conclusion that simply doing nothing or at least sober objectivity is the best strategy to deal this effect. Such an approach could thwart unintended and sometimes irrelevant reporting in Web 2.0. This approach also applies to companies and private individuals alike and helps mitigate misinformation spread.

Avoid mis-information generation

As a consultant, if you still have the chance, endeavor to staunch misinformation from spreading. You can also prevent the creation of mis-interpretations. This would mean that you should employ this lever before it is too late and the Streisand effect takes hold. If the information is not yet on the Internet, it cannot spread either - a simple calculation. At this stage, warnings and interim injunctions - to enforce a [preventive] injunction - can then be quite suitable legal tools. Precise research into the degree of dissemination of the information in question is therefore a basic requirement to coordinate a possible strategically clever legal procedure.

Consultants require PR skills

For consultants, in case of doubt, the red line is:

> Stay away from organizational politics, publicity activities, warnings and injunctions, because there is a risk that negative reporting will be even greater as a result

When assessing whether legal proceedings could cause a Streisand effect in individual cases, the result always depends to a certain extent on the other side. If two companies argue about irrelevant things, nobody will really want to take notice. Such incidents happen all the time and nobody is really interested in it. However, if a company cautions a blogger or a private person, it becomes critical. The general public may perceive this as David Vs. Goliath situation and the temperature could really get hot! Quite quickly! Suddenly, inconsequential things blow out of proportions. You should immediately engage a lawyer that is well versed in such Internet developments. She / he will recognize such intents and advise you on the right course of action. Because of the fine line between good and great consultants, you will do well to, at least, immerse yourself in the areas of media law. This will automatically make you a PR advisor to your client. And, if there is a fire at your client or in their company, which often happens with Fortune 500 firms - your target clientele - you would be the chosen firefighter and not an arsonist. And, that comes with brownie points in terms of career opportunities, promotions, long-term engagements, preferred supplier agreements, etc.

Inspiration from J&J

When it comes to a corporate crisis, Johnson & Johnson (J&J) and its subsidiary Tylenol are no newbies. What the company demonstrated in the 1980s is an example of what any company should do in responding to stakeholder concerns. With its handling of the Tylenol tampering in the early 1980s, J&J secured its status in the history books for effective crisis management. Since then, J&J has won numerous accolades for consumer safety and for its social responsibility initiatives. In 2010, Barron's magazine named Johnson & Johnson #2 among the World's Most Respected Companies. Targeted at top investors, the survey ranked winners according to their strength of management, business strategy, ethical business practices, competitive edge, shareholder orientation, and consistent revenue/profit growth. J&J also ranked 11th place in DiversityInc magazine's 2012 DiversityInc Top 50 Companies for Diversity list. As consultants, advising your client on a wide recall might sound daunting, but this might be the very reason that you have been engaged! So, have the backbone and advise your client on the right course of action to take! And, to justify your billability!

Summary

Companies make mistakes. They are run by humans, just like us. Mistakes are just inevitable. As consultants, we need to be prepared for such client situations. We need to help the client architect a disaster response plan, in case they don't already have one. This plan should focus on open and honest communication, instead of trying to suppress information. Dealing with disasters is a price that organizations and their consultants have to pay to play in today''s fast-paced, ever-changing business world. The good news is that we can get through those disasters and recover from them. If you study at any meaningful business, you will find at least one crisis that they weathered to get to where they are today. Ultimately, the Streisand effect should serve as a reminder for us that the truth will out eventually. In times of crisis – or even just in times of chaos and uncertainty – the best thing we can do is to be open and honest. People will respond to that honesty and help you to forge truly authentic connections with the people you''re trying to reach. Remember: honesty and integrity are the new norms in the digital era. Good luck.