

GS Insight

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Creating a Silver Lining: *Lessons from the “Steve Bartman Incident”*

The Chicago Cubs have set a standard of futility for major sports franchises. The team won its last World Series in 1908. The Yankees have won 27 championships in that time. The Marlins and Diamondbacks, which joined the league in 1993 and 1998 respectively, have three titles between them.

Still, the Cubs enjoy an extremely large base of fans that are so loyal that many of them actually believe the team's ineptitude must be the result of a curse.

It is this history that makes recent events so remarkable. With a three-run lead late in game six of the League Championship Series, the Cubs were on the verge of reaching the World Series. Inside Wrigley Field, fans buzzed in anticipation. Thousands more gathered near the stadium to celebrate. Millions of others were glued to their TVs.

Then, a ball drove foul toward the stands. Not noticing that a Cubs player had actually gotten in position to make a spectacular catch, several fans reached out for the ball, and one diverted it from the fielder's glove. The player was visibly upset, and the team seemed to feed off his emotions - making physical and mental mistakes that cost them the game.

The news media chronicled the play in great detail. And, when one newspaper published the name of the unlucky fan that had interfered, news crews descended on the residence of Steve Bartman.

The Cubs lost again the following night - ending their playoff run and making Bartman a household name and a hated scapegoat.

Similar to events that occur each day in the business world, some public relations opportunities were seized, while others were missed.

“Head-in-the-Sand” PR

Although Bartman released a prepared statement following the event, he refuses to speak with the media or appear publicly.

By most measures, Bartman is a good person and a great Cubs fan - a volunteer little league coach who donates gifts he receives to a charity. He's not even the only one who reached up to grab the fly ball - he's just the one who actually succeeded in getting his hands on it. He was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

No one believes he meant to interfere, and very few people really believe he cost the Cubs the game. But by avoiding the media and the public, he reinforces the perception that he purposely did something wrong, and solidifies his reputation as a “bad guy.”

Similar events occur in business. Every company makes mistakes, so even the most well-intentioned, ethical business is vulnerable.

Bottom line: an ever-skeptical public is watching, waiting to form an opinion. Unless your predicament is caused by rampant ethical violations or negligence, the manner in which you manage it will often overshadow the reasons behind it. Bury your head in the sand like Bartman, and the perception of impropriety can hurt you more than the actual problem. Communicate proactively and honestly, and you will not only improve the situation, you will maintain - or sometimes even enhance - your company's image by earning the trust of your stakeholders.

Take healthcare provider Baxter International, for example. As soon as that company learned in late 2001 about the possibility of a link between its dialysis filters and the deaths of 51 people, it issued an immediate recall of the product, cooperated with authorities, launched its own comprehensive investigation, identified the probable cause and took swift action to remedy the problem. Within weeks, the company had even begun compensating families of those who died. During this entire process, Baxter proactively shared all of its findings with the public as well as every party associated with the filters or investigation.

Although the media covered the news story, it did so in a very factual and local manner. There was no 60 Minutes



exposé into the deaths, no lingering national coverage of the issue. The ultimate tragedy for any corporation is to have its products implicated in the deaths of customers, but Baxter's forthright, direct and responsible handling of the situation may have actually enhanced its reputation as an honest company that cares about the well-being of its patients.

Bartman's life would be a lot better if he had appeared publicly and granted interviews to the press, apologized for the mistake while also laughing about the absurdity of it all, and shown everyone he is actually just a real person. Given this perspective, would he continue to be the butt of so many talk show jokes or editorial cartoons?

We don't think so. On the contrary, we believe most people would embrace Bartman, rally around him, and make him a figure of hope for championships to come.

Turning Bad Into Good

Although businesses should never attempt to profit from an actual crisis, looking for the leadership positioning opportunity hidden inside a more routine problem is critical. For savvy marketers, these negative situations or mistakes can actually be their greatest opportunities - a point clearly understood by the folks at Harry Caray's Restaurant (named after the legendary, late Cubs broadcaster), who recently purchased the baseball Bartman deflected for \$106,600. The restaurant currently has the ball on display, and is taking suggestions about the method by which it should be destroyed - thus lifting the curse, in theory - during its annual "Toast to Harry" event.

Was it money well spent? Absolutely! Although most businesses would never even consider spending that much money on an object that conjures such negative emotions from its customers, Harry Caray's saw an opportunity.

The purchase generated a tremendous amount of publicity, including immediate coverage in more than 500 newspapers, nearly every Chicago media outlet, and national vehicles such as NBC's Today - literally reaching millions of potential customers across Chicago and the nation. Already a hotspot for those who prefer to eat and drink in a place associated with Harry Caray and the Cubs, the restaurant surely saw an immediate increase in sales, and will likely have its best-ever turnout for its "Toast to Harry" event, which ESPN and MSNBC have asked to televise live. The long-term benefits should be even greater.

Chances are, your customers and prospects have a common problem they are passionate about. By understanding the issue, taking a position and leading efforts to overcome it, your business can attract prospects, increase customer loyalty, enhance employee moral and even demand premium prices. When the issue heats up, the benefits become even greater.

If you work for an energy supplier, for example, the problem is that heating and cooling costs have become a serious financial burden for most homeowners. So, the folks at ComEd, a Northern Illinois energy concern, who clearly see the leadership positioning presented by this challenge, are conducting an integrated campaign to educate consumers about energy efficiency. At a time in which ComEd could simply reap the near-term benefits of higher prices, the company is actually telling customers how to use less of the product it sells! But, by truly helping its consumers overcome problems, the company is earning trust and building loyalty that will pay dividends for years to come.


Your Opportunity

Accidents happen. Products fail. Things won't always go your way. You can ignore the situation and suffer

the consequences. Or you can survive nearly any crisis, turn challenges into opportunities, and convert opportunities into successes.

Realizing that challenges are inevitable and planning to manage them - and look for hidden opportunities - is critical.

Bartman never really had a chance.

But you do. 

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