

PRWeek

Two years ago, Sony PlayStation learned a humbling lesson that fundamentally altered its communications strategy. In 2006, the company broke into the blogosphere with a fictitious blog and viral video called “All I Want for Xmas is a PSP,” supposedly

authored by two friends. But the endeavor backfired when the blog Something Awful revealed that it was a gimmick conceived by Zipatoni, Sony’s then-marketing agency.

Rather than shrugging the incident off as an opportunistic experimen-

tation of a then-still emerging blogosphere, Patrick Seybold, director of corporate communications and social media at Sony PlayStation, recognized the company had made a huge misstep and now needed to urgently win back consumer trust.

“The PR department wasn’t in-

involved at all [in the fake PSP blog], which I think was mistake number one,” he says. “I think [those involved] thought it would be a good way to drum up some pre-holiday momentum [for the PSP], but I think we all know now it probably did everything but that.”

Game changers

► After a huge misstep in the blogosphere, Sony PlayStation has come back with a plan to engage consumers and win back trust. By *Aarti Shah*



Voce's Mike Manuel teamed with Sony's Jeff Rubenstein and Patrick Seybold (l-r) to lead the launch of a corporate blog for PlayStation

SONY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

- The company uses a branded player for high-definition online video, it previously used YouTube, Crackle, and Vidler
- Uses Twitter for product and consumer updates
- Has a Facebook page with nearly 24,000 fans. The site is occasionally used to organize meet-ups with fans

But even before the controversy came to light, PlayStation's PR team had already set in motion plans to launch a corporate blog with Voce Communications. The scandal, however, gave the project a decidedly urgent purpose.

"In our first sit-down with [the PlayStation team after] the incident, we led with a comment someone [made on a blog] that basically said, 'How can I ever trust a company that thinks I'm this dumb?'" recalls Mike Manuel, new media strategist at Voce.

Though blogs were still uncharted territory for most companies at that point, Manuel knew Sony needed to take this blog in a new direction.

"To an extent, it's hard to come too heavy with the hand with a

company [that] was experimenting," he adds, "but that wasn't a good idea – no matter how you slice it."

A RECEPTIVE AUDIENCE

On June 11, 2007, Seybold officially debuted the blog by telling readers: "Now, what we've learned, perhaps the hard way, is that a blog like this is really about you and the things you want to hear, share, and discuss."

And its skeptical audience has apparently embraced the company's renewed attempt at transparency. On the comments section for the inaugural post, readers largely applauded the effort. And while some comments expressed skepticism, few explicitly referenced "All I Want for Xmas."

And Seybold didn't censor comments on the site unless they were obscene or derogatory. But even more challenging, he learned, was striking the balance between posting content about Sony's corporate culture and product news, and doing so in a way that engaged consumers and media.

According to data collected by Voce using Google Analytics, PlayStation blog visits are 400% higher, page views are 94% higher, and new visits are 16% higher

compared to video game sites of a similar size.

Posters on the blog include Sony executives like president and CEO Jack Tretton, developers, and members of its 16-person in-house PR team. Shortly after the blog launched, Sony hired Jeff Rubenstein, former reporter and blogger at the *Orlando Sentinel*, as its social media manager to ensure the site stayed true to its original objectives of transparency and consumer engagement.

For Rubenstein, the leap from gaming journalist to corporate blogger was unexpected, but the way Sony handled its blog drew him in.

"Sony appeared to be amid a turnaround," he recalls. "It really looked like it was turning a corner from a difficult launch [of PlayStation 3]. People were excited about the brand again."

And based on his experience in the media, Rubenstein suspected that the forthright tone of the new blog would put to rest the credibility issues Sony had grappled with after its initial blogosphere fiasco.

"The new blog had started on the right foot," he says. "It was a more humble, here-for-you approach."

SALES IMPACT

Shortly after joining, Rubenstein saw firsthand the impact the blog has

on sales, especially for games with limited marketing budgets. For instance, PAIN – a comedy video game – was featured on the blog and then picked up by most major gaming sites and blogs that linked back to the PlayStation blog post.

"[A PAIN executive] thanked the blog for first-week sales," he recalls. "That was a big win for us... Then other people started saying internally, 'Let's give this a try.'"

Last month, NPD Market Research reported PlayStation's sales forecasts are on the upswing. The console has long been considered to be trailing Nintendo's Wii and Microsoft's Xbox 360, but its Metal Gear Solid 4 was the best-selling game in June and PS3 sales were up 311% from June of last year, according to NPD. Seybold says he never considered PlayStation to be an underdog in the gaming market; instead he focused on the console's longevity.

"We look at the long-term vision, and frankly the blog is a way to let consumers know that the PS3 lineup we have now is the best game lineup we've had on any platform," he says. "[Prior to the blog launch], I think we had [a] public perception of being confident. The blog added a sense of humility, but mostly it's about being transparent." ■

