Domino’s Pizza and the Viral Video

Brooke Stull
Comm 400
Final Report
Susan Merryman
Summary of Domino’s Social Media Crisis Situation

The Incident:

On Monday, April 13, 2009 two Domino’s Pizza employees posted a YouTube video that sent the pizza chain into a social media crisis. The video of two employees committing health department violations like sticking cheese in their nose and putting pepperoni in places where the sun doesn’t shine-- went viral. The video was viewed nearly 1 million times and posted on various outside blogs and message boards. Meanwhile, the online conversations were exploding about this incident via blogs and Twitter. According to the New York Times, by Wednesday April 15, 2009, references to this incident were in five of the 12 results on the first page of a Google search for “Dominoes.”

What’s happening in Domino’s HQ?

Domino’s was first alerted of the video on Tuesday, April 14 and immediately identified the two employees and dismissed them from the company and put a warrant out for their arrest. Domino’s executives did not take an aggressive approach to responding because they didn’t want to let more people know about this issue than already had visibility to it. Domino’s didn’t even issue a formal press release to mainstream press. What they did not realize was by not responding they were just adding fuel to the fire. The company could not get the video removed from YouTube right away because they were not the owners of the video. YouTube told Domino’s that a signed statement from one of the employees in the video was needed in order for the removal of the video. After nearly 48 hours had passed since the video was uploaded,
Domino’s finally responded. To address the concerns on Twitter Domino’s created @dpzinfo account. They also created a YouTube video of Patrick Doyle, president of Domino’s USA, reassuring customers of the safety and cleanliness of Domino’s.

**Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday, April 13</td>
<td>Appalling video was posted to YouTube by two employees in N.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday, April 13 (evening)</td>
<td>Domino’s was notified of video by a blogger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday, April 14</td>
<td>Domino’s fired two employees and put a warrant out for arrest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday, April 14</td>
<td>Domino’s brought in local health department to the N.C. Domino’s to have everything inspected and all open containers discarded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, April 15</td>
<td>YouTube removed the video.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, April 15</td>
<td>Domino’s created a Twitter account and posted a YouTube response video.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What is being said?**

A Domino’s spokesperson told *The New York Times* on Wednesday, April 15:

“We got blindsided by two idiots with a video camera and an awful idea. Even people who’ve been with us as loyal customers for 10, 15, 20 years, people are second-guessing their relationship with Domino’s, and that’s not fair.”
As reported on April 20, 2009, in *The Wall Street Journal*: Richard Levick, president of Levick Strategic Communication, gives an F to Domino’s response for the first 24 hours, but an A for everything after. “Don’t wait. Your response time is only 24 hours.”

According to a national study conducted by HCD Research using its Media Curves Web site found 65 percent of respondents who would previously visit or order Domino’s Pizza were less likely to do so after viewing the offending video. (*The Wall Street Journal*)

“Not being a skilled player in social media is no longer a competitive advantage, in marketing and reputation management. It has become a distinct competitive disadvantage.” (Jane Genova: Speechwriter - Ghostwriter blog)

**Summary of Situational Learning**

**The Learning Experience:**

This was a great learning experience for companies nation-wide. Social media brings a whole new element to crisis planning in communications and companies need to acknowledge that. An article in *AdAge Magazine* outlines great tips for preparing for this type of crisis:

1. **Identify your crisis team first.** They can be public relations, outside lawyers, digital communications, human resources and an executive team.

2. **Imagine your nightmare scenarios.** Prepare for them by making sure you own all search-engine-optimization keywords that can be used by the opposition.
3. **Track the blogosphere and other social media.** Be connected with major players on the Web, such as Facebook or Twitter, and be responsive as possible.

4. **Don’t wait.** Your response time is only 24 hours.

To some companies, this list may seem like old news. But, to those companies that don’t know these four things— they have the potential to make a social media crisis turn catastrophic! Domino’s has served as a learning experience for many companies when it comes to social media crises.

**What Domino’s Learned:**

Tim McIntyre, vice president of communications for Domino’s, spoke to the *Consumerist* about what Domino’s has learned from the YouTube situation. McIntyre said:

> “The thing that I learned during this process was that even in the old days, say, last year [laughs], you could handle a situation, put out a fire. You could put it out, make sure that everybody was safe, determine the cause of the fire and then tell people everything. We found the cause of the fire, we put it out, we figured out a way to prevent it, and here’s what we’ve learned. Now it’s as if there’s an audience out there. If there’s a crisis or an issue — I don’t even want to call it a crisis, but that’s probably the best word. If there’s a crisis happening in the social media realm, or if there’s a fire in the social media realm, there’s a segment of the population that wants you to put on a microphone and a webcam and describe what you’re doing as you’re doing it. They want you to describe how you’re putting out the fire. And that’s an interesting phenomenon.”
I think it’s great that Domino’s has realized that they did some things right and some things wrong. They know how to move forward and have been great teachers in social media crisis.

**Analysis of Situation**

**Principles that were followed:**

Domino’s was faced with an unprecedented crisis. But, they still followed some of the principles of crisis communication. Just because social media may alter the vehicles in which we communicate-- it doesn’t mean the principles and messages drastically change. For example, Domino’s was familiar with the inner workings of the organization. After the video went viral, they immediately knew how to identify the employees and dismiss them from the company. They also shut down the North Carolinian Domino’s shop and had the local health department scope out the potential health risks. Domino’s also had a digital team that was preparing to enter social media. It was a good move on Domino’s part to have this team already in place. The company did have a consistent spokesperson when speaking to media. However, the person featured on the YouTube video was the president of Domino’s-- not the same company spokesperson speaking to media. In this case, I think it is appropriate to have a separate spokesperson for the video because the president is looked to as a public image of the company. Also, it makes more of a statement to have the president on the video than the main communications person.
What worked?

First of all, I think the response video was very effective. It was essential that they communicate on the channel in which the crisis occurred. In the Consumerist, Tim McIntyre discussed how the crisis died down shortly after they responded. “During this first week when this happened, awareness and chatter about Domino’s just spiked. It was unprecedented. But then 24 hours later, bang! It fell right back down to normal levels. There was an incredible spike. People looked at it, heard about the story, made their comments and went on. And did we feel the after effects for a while? Yes.” Had Domino’s not responded to the social media world, I think this could have turned even worse. I also think it was beneficial that they were monitoring the conversations on social media platforms. Domino’s is now on Twitter and Facebook and they are doing a great job even though they were forced into that realm.

What didn’t work?

Domino’s waited too long to respond. They should have anticipated that it would not die down and should have jumped out there sooner. Since they were one of the first companies to respond in such a way, a lot of people cut them some slack. However, if another company has a video go viral-- they better have been taking notes from Domino’s. With a lack of social media presence at the time, Domino’s wasn’t extremely familiar with the vehicles they were submerging themselves in. Although they had a team in place, they didn’t have a social media strategy in place at the time.
What would I have done differently?

Considering my interest in social media I would have already been in the platform, especially with tech-savvy competitors like Papa John’s. I would also make sure that my team is constantly monitoring online conversations to help anticipate and dissolve potential issues early. The more you let a conversation grow, the more likely it is for the conversation to turn ugly. By intervening early, you get the facts out there for everyone to see. One of the cardinal rules of social media is that it is an on-demand atmosphere. This means that after 24 hours, it’s past the point of relevance (or past the point of expecting a response.) Domino’s gets criticized constantly for not getting out there sooner and expecting that the conversations would die down. I would have pushed the video sooner and thought of ways to ensure our customers that our pizzas are safe to eat. Over all, Domino’s did a great job of getting out there and doing something new. But, companies need to pay attention-- this is what is expected for future social media crises and there better be a plan in place!
Sources:


http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1892389,00.html


http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/apr2009/ca20090421_555468.htm


http://www.prsa.org/Intelligence/TheStrategist/Articles/view/8226/102/Domino_s_delivers_during_crisis_The_company_s_step