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After a stunt backfires ...

Experts say the kind of marketing strategy that riled Boston requires a mea culpa followed by action

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Guerrilla marketers such as Interference Inc. conduct unconventional campaigns that leave people talking. But the Manhattan company's latest stunt for the Cartoon Network has left people talking for the wrong reasons.

Now the firm known for pushing the envelope has to take a conventional approach to repair its reputation in Boston, where the electronic light boards Interference placed around the city triggered bomb scares and the closures of some bridges leading into the city.

The company's response must involve a multipronged approach, said Helio Fred Garcia, president of the Logos Institute for Crisis Management & Executive Leadership, in Chappaqua.

The key to protecting your reputation in a crisis is to show that you care, that you are doing something about it, and that whatever caused it to happen will be fixed and not repeated, said Garcia, who is also the co-author of "Reputation Management: The Key to Successful Public Relations and Corporate Communications," (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, \$45).

"Companies can be forgiven when bad things happen to them or when bad things happen because of them, but they won't be forgiven if they don't seem to care," Garcia said.

But such openness doesn't come easily to many companies, he said.



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"The impulse of most corporations is that, 'We don't want people to talk, so we will shut up,'" he said. "Silence kills reputations."

Gary Lewi, a senior executive vice president for the Manhattan public relations firm Rubenstein Associates, said Interference's first act should be to smooth things over with Boston. "The fact is they still have to start with a clean sheet of paper when it comes to the city of Boston," Lewi said.

He suggested that the company volunteer to create public service announcements for a municipal hospital, "as a way of demonstrating a sincere commitment to apologizing."

On its Web site yesterday, the company issued an apology.

"We at Interference, Inc. regret that our efforts on behalf of our clients contributed to the disruption in Boston," the announcement said in part. The Associated Press reported Turner Broadcasting, which hired Interference, has offered to pay Boston's emergency response cost and those of neighboring communities, put at roughly a million dollars.

Barry Berman, a professor of marketing at Hofstra University, suggested the company go so far as to dismiss the campaign's creator, as in: "I'm going to show that there was a major judgmental error made, and the way I am going to prove that is to say that the person is no longer on staff."

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