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### **When your business is targeted, use damage control**

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In the age of instant communication and mass e-mail, your business could go from its normal day-to-day operations into the midst of a public relations firestorm at the drop of a hat.

Smithfield Foods Inc., the world's largest pork producer, deals with a number of organizations targeting its tactics every day, from unions to environmental and animal rights groups.

The current battle is against the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which has been trying to unionize the company's Tar Heel plant in North Carolina for more than 10 years.

The union recently launched a \$200,000 advertising campaign in the Washington, D.C., and Prince George County regions, complete with radio, television and bus ads, door-to-door outreach, and phone calls from celebrities like Danny Glover to local residents.

The union also has a number of U.S. Congress and D.C. council members on board.

The "Buy Better than Smithfield" campaign is asking consumers to purchase alternative products to Smithfield, which it claims exploits and mistreats plant workers.

Smithfield launched a Web site, [www.smithfieldfacts.com](http://www.smithfieldfacts.com), last year in an effort to respond to the union's claims about the Tar Heel plant.

The company also issued a press release June 19, quoting Director of Corporate Communications Dennis Pittman regarding the D.C. advertising campaign.

"These misleading and deliberately inflammatory ads are a continuation of the union's pressure tactics against Smithfield," Pittman said in the statement. "The UFCW's real motive is to avoid a free, fair, secret-ballot election conducted by the National Labor Relations Board in which employees decide whether they want to be represented by the union."

Smithfield's dealing with the union's campaign is a large-scale version of a PR issue any company could one day deal with.

Dean S. Goldman, president of Goldman & Associates Public Relations with offices in Norfolk and Richmond, said the first line of defense against attacks on your company is a good communications plan.

"A company really has to act before it's attacked," Goldman said. "You have to make sure you're communicating well. It's critical that you prepare."

Goldman said in the case of unions, a company should understand once a union decides to target a company it won't do so with a singular, isolated attack.

"Unions will utilize the news media and go into the community and churches, speak to employees, families and customers to exploit dissatisfaction and concern," he said. "You can

expect a multi-headed attack.”

David Rourk, president of Rourk Public Relations in Virginia Beach, said one of the worst things a company can do is ignore an attack.

“Do not assume people will automatically dismiss the attacker,” he said. “Just because you’ve successfully developed a brand for years or decades doesn’t mean you can rest on your laurels.”

Goldman also advises against a “no comment” approach.

“Use every opportunity to get a message out,” he said. “You can’t stick your head in the sand.”

Rourk recommends a plan to combat negative attacks with a news release that dissects information and presents facts and cites incorrect statements. Then a company should put the information on its Web site and communicate openly with reporters.

“Talk positives as often as possible,” he said. “Protect your brand and use the situation to strengthen it.”

Goldman said having a comprehensive communication program between the public and the company and between the company and its employees can often prevent attacks.

“You’re going to get wind of these issues from employees if you have good communications,” Goldman said.

Members of a PR team shouldn’t be the only ones dealing with the public, Rourk said.

“If the issue is important, reporters should talk with senior organizational leaders – not only the PR team,” Rourk said. “The PR team should prepare the battlefield, but leadership should be the on-the-record voices.”

In the rush to get a message out to the public after a negative claim, company officials are prone to mistakes.

One of the biggest mistakes, Goldman said, is having an inconsistent message.

“Make sure whenever you talk that your message is the same message,” he said. “Or it will come back to haunt you.”

In some cases it may also be advantageous to go on the offense when being attacked by an organization, Goldman said.

“Question their motives,” he said.

While there’s a lot to think about, decisions must be made quickly, making the Internet a useful tool for both companies and the organizations that target them.

“Every business that has the potential to end up on page one should have an off-line Web site that covers a variety of crisis scenarios and can be tweaked and online quickly,” Rourk said. “Speed is the name of the game in our Internet-driven society.”