

FEB. 21 2002 11:27AM PR WORLD NO. 323 P. 1

# Using web-based customer feedback



Starbucks... responded to feedback with policy effort

Virtually every company with customers has a facility on its website for sending feedback. Russell Shaw finds out how this information can be used to refine corporate messages

In 2000, Nike issued a series of press releases denouncing web-based (and other) feedback it had received about the alleged exploitation of workers in its Indonesian manufacturing facilities. And last year, also in response to online feedback, Starbucks issued a release saying it would base its coffee purchases on environmental, social, economic, and quality standards. In both cases, advocacy groups used web-based feedback as one element of broad-

based campaigns against corporate policy. In such situations, corporations have little choice but to respond to their critics' allegations with campaigns of their own.

However, direct quid-pro-quo responses like these are more the exception than the rule, according to several PR execs. Indeed, the majority are more evolutionary and benign. Rather than serve as impetus for a rearticulated public persona, website feedback is more likely to result in an explanatory campaign in which PR may only play a part. "Every client we have takes feedback from their websites very seriously," says David Dunne, EVP and manager of

worldwide operations for Edelman's interactive practice. "But," Dunne admits, "the extent to which that influences PR varies greatly. Using web feedback to change an ongoing campaign is probably a bit of a stretch. Our clients are more likely to use it for customer service and tech support."

In Dunne's view, such a strategy would be advisable if, for example, the number of web-based complaints reached a certain level.

Perhaps it could have helped Kmart. According to online consumer feedback service PlanetFeedback, Kmart "could have seen warning signs long before its bankruptcy filing" had it paid more attention to feedback. In 2001, nearly 328,

believer in the value of web-based feedback. He views ignoring such feedback as unpardonable. "The first thing you should do is offer a simple acknowledgment, and thank people for their feedback," he says. "Still, there are people who fail to acknowledge that this feedback is their target audience writing to them."

Roeser is aware that these companies and agencies that ignore web-based feedback may not be doing so out of a haughty sense of superiority, rather they have yet to figure out how to organize and mine the data that's flowing in.

"I recommend setting up a shared spreadsheet to log the responses, and see whether the nature of feedback from