

of Kmart shoppers unhappy with the store experience, characterized themselves as "at risk," meaning they were likely to buy from a competitor. What's more, nearly 71% of all comments were "viral," with consumers posting their comments online, or sending them to others.

Of course, other types of feedback require a less-dramatic response, such as clarification. "We might encourage an information release if the feedback showed there was significant confusion about how to make one product work with another," says Dunne. As a hypothetical example, he cites a new digital camera technology that involves a joint solution from client Fuji Photo Film and Microsoft. "We haven't sent out an [explanatory] press release yet, but people are engaging the [feedback] information very carefully," he says.

Roger Roeser, president of PR firm Eisen Management Group in Cleveland, has experience with articulating a campaign based on web feedback. In his firm's case, the problem arose when Cincinnati-based client Cadence Network, a provider of expense-management software for municipal water, sewer, and other city facilities, started receiving online feedback that questioned the accuracy of its billing software.

Eisen worked with Cadence to craft a reply, which took the form of several bylined articles by marketing VP Tony Collins in three industry publications: *Healthcare Executive*, *Business Facilities*, and *Retail Operations*. Additionally, Eisen launched a campaign to position Cadence CEO MaJesine Ludlow as an industry expert available for comment to trade and general-interest publications.

With this experience under his belt, Roeser is a true

anything in common," he says. In other words, set up a system that tracks common complaints and suggestions — and then respond to the feedback with an appropriate PR strategy.

Roeser suggests regarding the monitoring of web-based feedback as market research rather than complaint management.

Dunne says another failure to harness such information comes about because some companies eschew feedback forms in favor of "info@" or "contact us" e-mail links. Unless you are running a sophisticated program that finds certain "key trigger words" in e-mail, and then exports statistics about the incidents of each word to a relational database, you're left with several e-mails that may well be answered, but won't serve a greater purpose.

That's why Dunne suggests a feedback form that does not consist of only a large, blank white box, but directed questions that can walk respondents through their complaints or suggestions. Dunne notes that such feedback data is far less subjective, and can be evaluated more easily than the occasionally obtuse ramblings of aggrieved customers typing unclear messages.

"That feedback must then go into a database that compares the ratio of online complaints to call-center issues," Dunne adds. "With that information, brand managers can make decisions about how to better communicate with customers."

And that better communication strategy can be most effective if it also involves an educational PR campaign.

"This is a way for you to gather information," adds Roeser. "And if that information conflicts with your marketing objectives, use that feedback to develop press releases that clarify the issue."

Technique tips

- 1 Do have a plan in place to track the number and nature of web-based feedback responses.
- 2 Do have a strategy in place to address the most common suggestions for change and to use feedback data to craft your company image. Addressing a press release is fine for clarification.
- 3 Do address feedback directly related to the products or services and the specific needs of your client's business. Post a feedback form on your main section of the site.

- 1 Don't respond to web-based feedback on a case-by-case basis without cataloging that data.
- 2 Don't ignore the expertise or recommendations of client brand managers about how web feedback should be answered.
- 3 Don't post a blank feedback form without any questions for site visitors. Many people have trouble being concise, so this opens up your site's feedback area to long, rambling rants that may be hard to moderate, read, and react to.