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## Target Data Breach: Social Media Analysis

### **Abstract/summary:**

The way in which an organization uses communication and social media during public relations crises has become critical in the survival of their reputation and recovery of the situation. Target suffered a major crisis after having one of the worst security breaches in retail history. About 40 million customers had their credit and debit card information stolen and it was the second largest credit card breach in U.S history. They overcame the crisis with the help of social media. This report will analyze how Target responded using different social media channels, what they could have done differently, and what the most effective ways to respond to a crisis is.

**Research question:** How effective was Target's use of social media to manage the data breach crisis?

### **Goals/objectives:**

The goal of this project is to learn what the most effective way to respond to a crisis is using social media channels. I will see what the most effective way to use social media is in order to avoid an escalation of the situation. Crisis communication is an important topic in Public Relations and will be an important topic to learn more about for a future career. It is something every organization needs to be ready for.

In order to achieve that objective, other goals include:

- Reviewing literature on effective ways of using social media during crises
- Reviewing literature on what Target did right and what they could have done differently
- Completing a data analysis of Target's social media posts by looking at content, likes, shares, audience reaction, and timing.

### **Procedures/methodology:**

1. Review literature related to using effective social media strategies.

I will look at a variety of different literature and publications. This will give me information on what strategies organizations typically use during a crisis, what has been proven most effective, and other research related to social media.

2. Review literature based specifically on Target.

I will also look at specific information on the data breach crisis with Target and find information such as how many people were affected and what the company did about it. There are sources out there that say what Target should have done differently that will help me come to a conclusion on what was effective and what was not.

3. Collecting social media data

During the data analysis, I will be looking at Target's social media posts on both Facebook and Twitter as well as any other social media channel they may have used. Some of that data I will look for includes:

- A. Seeing what Target posted about during the data breach crisis (content)

- B. See how frequent their posts were during that time
- C. How many likes, shares, and comments the posts have
  - a. See if the comments from followers are positive or negative

#### 4. Analyzing the social media data

Next, I will be analyzing the data for strategies and themes in my research. I will compare how Target responded to how research says the way you should respond is. Seeing how the audience was responded will also tell a lot of how they were feeling about the way Target responded.

#### 5. Write a scholarly paper on the findings.

Based on what I both found in my research of different articles and what I saw from the social media analysis, I will write a scholarly paper that chronicles all stages of the study. Conclusion will be made based on the data.

### **Results:**

For the social media analysis, I looked at Target's Facebook and Twitter accounts. Target also has accounts on Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube, and Tumblr, but the Twitter and Facebook accounts were used more during the data breach. I looked at the official "Target" pages on those social networking sites. I didn't look at their separate Target Careers, Target Style, and Target Deals accounts, which were official accounts, but they didn't pertain to the information I was analyzing. For Twitter, I included the @AskTarget account because Target responded to a lot of affected customers through it during the crisis. In order to look at the posts and go back to the time of the breach, I typed in "from:target since:2013-12-18 until:2014-2-23" into the Twitter search bar. For Facebook I was able to just scroll through. I picked the dates December 18, the

day before it was announced on social media, until February 28<sup>th</sup> when the posts started dying off about the breach.

After analyzing Target's Facebook page and looking back in time at their posts, I found that they deleted all posts related to the data breach. It is probably something that Target doesn't want their customers to remember happened, so they deleted the posts. There are some traces on the internet that they were keeping the public updated on what was going on though. The posts they made on Facebook were all similar to the Twitter posts, according to my research. There were some angry customers that expressed their displeasure in comments on the page and some even threatened to stop shopping at the store (D'Innocenzio). For the most part, posts were neutral though.

Twitter had the most activity during the data breach. Their first tweet regarding the crisis appeared on December 19<sup>th</sup> stating, "Target Confirms Unauthorized Access to Payment Card Data in U.S. Stores: Issue identified and resolved" and giving a link to more information at [pressroom.target.com](http://pressroom.target.com). They later tweeted that day that the trust of their guests is top priority and "If you shopped at a U.S. Target store Nov. 27 - Dec. 15, check your credit or debit account for suspicious or unusual activity." The next day they posted a link about a special message from Target's CEO and a special offer to all their guests. On December 21<sup>st</sup> they said they were listening to all of the tweets and gave a link answering six questions. To make sure everyone saw, the next 6 tweets that followed included those answers in one short sentence per tweet.

Target worked hard to make sure their customers were getting the help and answers they needed. In one tweet they said, "We have more than doubled our call center support & will work around the clock to answer your questions until all needs are met" and "We continue to listen,

especially to tweets about call center wait times. We will not be satisfied until all guest needs are met.” They gave customers tips on monitoring their card, as well as having the call center open on Christmas. Later on the call centers tripled their support in order to improve wait times. Target also gave tips on how to protect your identity in the future and how to avoid scams.

Target continued posting regular updates on Twitter, offered 1 year of free credit monitoring to all customers and 10% off for a couple of days, posted a letter from the CEO, and started a 5 million dollar investment in order to educate the public on these scams. There were several links from social media to Target’s corporate websites with links to official statements and updates (Target Corporate).

There was a lot of social media buzz when the crisis first began. More than 160,000 Twitter users tweeted about Target on December 19<sup>th</sup> alone. Target had 894,000 tweets during a 10 day period starting on the day of the breach. Most of the Tweets were neutral, rather than positive or negative. Most of it was sharing or retweeting articles rather than expressing an original opinion (Webb).

Followers were sending both of the Target Twitter accounts many questions and comments throughout the data breach, which Target worked hard to answer. The first tweet received a lot of questions from followers wondering what the breach meant for them, how to know if they have been affected, and wanting to know more details. Throughout the rest of the time, Target continued to be asked more questions from the public. They were very good at responding to people and did their best to show their concern and that they were doing everything they could.

After reviewing literature, I have come to a conclusion that the way Target handled their social media was effective, but they could have done better. Some of the actions they took on social media that were positive include responding to customers who had questions, showing concern, and keeping everyone updated. The negative was being slow at getting information out to the public when the breach was first known.

Target was slow at getting information out, which affected them in the long-run. Since they were slow, someone else ended up announcing the news for them. Even after the news broke from a blog, it took Target more than 24 hours to respond. In Today's world, 24 hours is an eternity. It is understandable that they waited because they didn't know all the facts yet, but on the negative side, someone else ended up releasing the story, which put them in a harder situation. It is likely Target was getting a lot of different advice from experts as well (Temin). It is important to not wait to go public. "Announce what you do and do not know as soon as possible, make clear your intentions to come up with solutions as rapidly as possible, and promise continuous updates. Then keep to that promise" (Temin). The important thing is that you keep your credibility and trust with customers. Target also made assurances when they were not certain that the assurances were correct yet. They should have admitted what they did not know yet. (Temin).

Another journal says that "accepting uncertainty and ambiguity encourages the release of small, cautiously stated, and truthful statements. It is encouraged to be careful as to not speak overconfidently about the situation. "Organizations need to provide information as it becomes available." Frequent updates are also crucial (Veil). So it is important even if you don't know all the information yet, to at least say something.

A study published in *Computers in Human Behavior*, says, “An organizations survival depends greatly on its speed of response” (Ki, Nekmat). They explain how journalists need to have information or they may refer to other sources that may spread false information. Target was not fast at putting out information so other sources could have spread false information. They were lucky worse things didn’t happen (Ki, Nekmat).

The same study explains how “as the degree of crisis responsibility increases, so does the level of acquired accommodation.” Target was at a high level of responsibility and they responded correctly with a full apology and compensation (Ki, Nekmat). They fully apologized many times on social media through both tweets, Facebook posts, and a YouTube video of the CEO speaking. Target announced the compensation they were giving on social media which was offering 10% off to customers for a couple days, as well as free credit-monitoring services to those affected (D’Innocenzio). In a study done in the *Public Relations Review*, called “Reputations at risk: engagement during social media crises,” it explains how to who and when you respond has a major impact on how the crisis evolves. It also says how it is effective to communicate with customers who need help rather than who are angry, which is what Target did. They communicated mainly with the ones who were asking questions. Individual engagement shows concern for the customers, as well as posting regular updates. Target tried their best with engaging individually to customers, although there were millions affected. They posted regular status updates almost every day as well (Ott, Theunissen).

A study in the *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* looked at Target’s social media during the data breach crisis. It found that their number of tweets skyrocketed the day after the announcing of the data breach. The next 200 tweets after they announced the breach were all replies to concerned users who were affected. The study also used

social media application tools like Tweet Psych and found that Target was above average in traits like positivity, work, social, emotions, and future. “By addressing each guest on an individual basis, they [Target] attempted to listen to customer’s feedback, calm heightened emotions, and shed a light for the future.” Analyze Words found that their emotional style was “upbeat” and at 100% which is very high. A linguistics study found that they used a lot of words like we, our, and us, to show responsibility for their actions (Conner). According to my social media analysis, the content of their posts was very good and followed recommended guidelines.

An article from the *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, states the importance of being prepared before a crisis ever happens. It also mentioned the importance of listening to the public, responding to any rumors, and being personable. It is important to be honest and show the company isn’t hiding anything in order to build trust. How a company responds during the crisis will affect long-term impressions. A company needs to communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy. “A caring, conversational voice is key in improving relationships.” “Research has shown, for instance, that using social media in customer support has improved relations with customers because they have direct access to experts with publics during and after a crisis.” All of these are ways a company should be using social media.

### **Evaluation:**

I feel this project went really well. I was able to analyze Target’s social media as well as find lots of good sources in order to back up my reasoning in how a company should respond on social media during a crisis. I wish I would have been able to look at Target’s Facebook posts since they deleted them, but otherwise it went smoothly. That was something I couldn’t control. Twitter gave me lots of insight on how they responded to people and I feel I came to good, interesting results.



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