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SENSEX 19,584.31 ▼ 17.92

NIFTY 5,874.50 ▼ 10.20

DOLLAR ₹44.48 ▲ ₹0.12

EURO ₹64.86 ▲ ₹0.18

GOLD ₹21,995 ▼ ₹35

OIL \$123.03 ▼ \$0.

## Disgruntled consumers turn to social media

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ple touch points to its customers to interact with it," a spokesperson said in an email. "While we continue to handle millions of interactions through its various touch points, including toll-free numbers, website and IVR (interactive voice response), social media as a tool has the added advantage of no waiting, no queuing and a seamless service—empowering our customers with another way of interacting with Airtel."

Experts such as Robert Holdheim, managing director of Edelman India Pvt. Ltd, a communications consulting firm, maintain that the digital medium is perhaps one of the best early warning system for an impending crisis. "It's an opportunity (for the brand) to act quickly," he says.

For instance, the Indian Premier League's (IPL) Kochi franchise got flamed for initially calling the team Indi Commandos. Facebook saw an explosion of "ihateindicommandos" groups and pages.

As is customary, attacks against the proposed name provided an opportunity for all manner of vituperation—against team selection, the logo and the rumoured shifting of the venue to Ahmedabad.

All this seemed of a piece with the troubles that had plagued the team's formation. But, in what now seems like an inspired move, the team management asked the crowd for advice, launching a contest



**Customer satisfaction:** A screen grab of the Vodafone Essar Twitter page. The firm monitors any mention of the brand online through a team of personnel from social media, customer service and other teams.

### Experts say digital medium is perhaps one of the best early warning systems for an impending crisis

that allowed fans to log onto the team's website and pick a name. Which is how the team came to be known as Kochi Tuskers Kerala.

Meanwhile, the team's unexpected good performance has also served to tone down criticism.

"We value our fans, and to us, it is of utmost importance to consider their valuable suggestions," Mukesh Patel, director of the Kochi IPL team, said in a release at the time.

The Internet can magnify

the intensity of public ire. Ask BP Plc, which had to face heavy and prolonged criticism over its poor response to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Marketing and brand experts constantly warn companies about getting on the wrong side of public opinion, especially when even a single complaint has the potential to explode overnight on the back of social networks, blogs, websites and other platforms.

As a preventive measure, Yahoo Inc. even decided to go out and buy the ihateyahoo.com URL (uniform resource locator) in 2006.

But that's not enough. The strategy involves responding to and engaging with disgruntled consumers.

"If you don't tell your side of the story, someone else will create a story," says Holdheim of Edelman India. "It's much harder to change perception

than create it from scratch."

He points to the public relations disaster that United Air Lines Inc. suffered after baggage handlers damaged passenger Dave Carroll's guitar. Carroll, unable to get compensation, wrote a protest song and video that went viral on YouTube.

It's much easier for consumers nowadays to air their opinions to a wide audience, says Faisal Farooqui, chief executive of MouthShut.com, a platform that hosts reviews, often scathing, by over four million registered users. More than 100,000 people visit the site daily.

"When we launched in 2000, the only other platform like that was the letters to the editor column in newspapers," he says. "Today, consumers have a variety of platforms to put out their views."

The site has only had to pull a review once, when a UK court "requested" it to do so, Farooqui says. "The Indian constitution protects free speech," he adds.

His advice to brands that complain about negative reviews has always remained the same: "Do not confront the user. Try and engage with them and use the feedback. Acknowledge your mistake, sometimes, it helps to just say sorry!"

Eighty per cent of companies take the advice, while the remaining send letters and legal notices. Some even complain to the cyber crime cell.

While it is imperative for brands to manage brands online, a fair amount of them still suffer from what he calls the ostrich syndrome, says Prasanth Mohanachandran, co-founder of Mumbai-based AgencyDigi Communications Pvt. Ltd, a Mumbai-based digital agency. "So, if they can't see it, it doesn't exist," he adds.

