

Influencing Mechanism of Network Public Opinions on Enterprise Public-Relation Management —A Case Study of “Tencent Vs Lao Gan Ma” Event

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary information society, network has become the main source of public opinion information in news events, in which the internet has played a more and more significant role, becoming an independent source of network public opinions. Catalyzed by a civil award of Shenzhen Nanshan District People’s Court in Guangdong Province on June 30, 2020, the advertising contract dispute between Tencent Technology Company (hereinafter abbreviated as Tencent) and Guiyang Nanming Lao Gan Ma Flavor Food Co., Ltd (hereinafter abbreviated as Lao Gan Ma) made a network sensation. Under this background, the influencing mechanism of public opinion storm on the Public-Relation (PR) management of the two enterprises will be explored in this study.

Keywords: Network public opinion, public relations, enterprise

1. INTRODUCTION

Catalyzed by a civil award of Shenzhen Nanshan District People’s Court in Guangdong Province on June 30, 2020, the advertising contract dispute between Tencent Technology Company (hereinafter abbreviated as Tencent) and Guiyang Nanming Lao Gan Ma Flavor Food Co., Ltd (hereinafter abbreviated as Lao Gan Ma) made a network sensation. The confrontation of the internet industry giant with the national chilli sauce company—from the filing of lawsuit by Tencent, response made by Lao Gan Ma, arrest of criminal suspect by Guiyang police until Tencent made an apology and the two parties reached a compromise, was disclosed wantonly on the internet, and those expressing opinions and attitudes were mainly netizens. With MicroBlog hot search being key pattern of manifestation, this contract dispute earned enough internet public opinions.

Behind the trend of network public opinions was the game between the two parties, especially in the aspect of network PR. The trend of network public opinions is the main information source of enterprise network PR and an object that network PR will exert the effect on, and its action mechanism will be explored in this study.

2. INFLUENCING MECHANISM OF NETWORK PUBLIC OPINIONS ON ENTERPRISE PR MANAGEMENT

2.1. Development Trend of Network Public Opinions

2.1.1. A New Class of Views

First, the force of “new class of views” is nonnegligible in network public opinions. In a research on network public opinions, Professor Chen Bing from Communication University of Zhejiang defined “new class of views” as “netizens who concern news events and express their opinions on line” [1]. Due to the high popularity of Tencent and Lao Gan Ma, once the event was disclosed, netizens showed high enthusiasm for expressing their opinions on various social platforms. In emergent events, the “new class of views” has further manifested the enormous power of public opinions.

Any news event concerned by the “new class of views” is of obvious characteristics. What were involved in this event were public security organs—Guangdong local court and Guiyang police, which represented compulsory state machineries. Under the unreasonable social distribution and polarization between the rich and

the poor, that most netizens laughed at Tencent reflected the hatred of the rich. However, it is noteworthy that thanks to the anonymity, honest people who are mannered at ordinary times feel free to talk a lot of nonsense on line, and their nicknames cover them up. Once jumping out of network, they can hardly be the “hardcore” in realistic environment. From this angle, the network public opinion field may not generate too much effect on the reality, but its concrete influence is decided by the social relevancy and nature of the event.

This event was closely related to the economic society. Tencent PR department made a quick move just as expected, and even Lao Gan Ma, which was always reluctant to do PR, launched its WeChat official account to clarify the misunderstanding, and before this, the official account was left void for two years. Afterwards, this event was reduced by the internet to simple three words “Tencent was swindled”, and this event of legal nature was turned into an entertainment that everyone could talk about. The “new class of views” may not certainly represent the progressive force. When the power of netizens at one side grows so stronger that it suppresses the minority voice on the network, the crisis in the darkness is slowly generated.

2.1.2. High-intensity Interaction of Network Public Opinions

In the MicroBlog hot search, there were as many as thousands of, or at least dozens of, replies under top comments, meaning that the voice expressed by one individual aroused the response of numerous individuals. Especially as this event involved the internet giant—Tencent, its exposure to network and interaction of public opinions presented a linear growth trend.

2.1.3. Terminal Communication of Network Public Opinions

The deep internet-mobile phone integration—mobile network—has realized the terminal communication of network public opinions. Mobile internet users have become the main force of voice expressing netizens and the hardcore of “new class of views”. The terminal communication means that the network public opinions are transmitted everywhere possible and that netizens can express their opinions by opening their terminal devices at places covered by signals, which has greatly accelerated the communication of many emergent events.

2.1.4. Group Polarization Effect

Group polarization effect is also called “risky shift”, meaning that a polarization trend is manifested in the group decision-making, namely, either shifting to the risky pole or conservative pole [2]. After “Tencent was swindled” was corroborated, netizens held a highly

consistent attitude—mocking—towards Tencent, which was a plot approximate to group polarization, but it was relatively mild. To be more specific, netizens mainly aimed at amusement and entertainment, so the probability to trigger a dangerous collective self-determination event was extremely low. However, any one-sided network public opinion should arouse attention and be controlled timely, or otherwise, the crisis behind it will burst out without any early warning.

2.2. Nature of Event

According to Article IVXVIII and Article IVXIX of Contract Law of the People’s Republic of China, a contract is signed under two forms: apparent agency and unauthorized agency [3].

Under the apparent agency, the three people criminally detained by the police cooperated with Tencent in name of Lao Gan Ma without its authorization, but had certain actual or legal relationships with it, e.g., once being its employee, once holding its official seal or faking its authorization. Under this circumstance, Tencent, the ignorant protected relative person of bona fide, could require Lao Gan Ma to make a compensation, and Lao Gan Ma could claim the compensation from the three people counterfeiting the official seal.

When it came to unauthorized agency, Lao Gan Ma had no relationship with the three liars, and Tencent was swindled because of unstrict examination. If unauthorized agency was constituted, Lao Gan Ma did not need to undertake any responsibility, and Tencent had to let the liars repay.

The focus of dispute between the two parties lied in whether to take the judicial proceedings of apparent agency or those of unauthorized agency. If Tencent chose the apparent agency, Lao Gan Ma shall make the payment, and thus the civil action process would be carried out. If Lao Gan Ma chose to call police and hoped to directly determine this event as a fraud, this belonged to the unauthorized agency, and Lao Gan Ma could be directly exempted from all liabilities. The success or failure of the two parties depended on the handling progress of criminal case at the side of Guizhou police and civil action at Guangzhou people’s court, and the game between the two parties were concealed beyond the reach of the network.

In the end, Guiyang police was one step ahead, arresting three suspects counterfeiting the official seal, and Lao Gan Ma “won”.

However, the “onlookers” on the network mostly focused on the superficial fact— “Tencent was swindled”, and might not be clear about the legal nature of this event at all.

2.3. Influencing Mechanism of Network Public Opinions on Enterprise PR Management

2.3.1. Seize The Commanding Height of Public Opinions

In the cyber world, a battle field without smoke of gunpowder, everyone can become the first one lifting the gun. On June 30, 2020, Tencent took the lead in releasing a civil award of Shenzhen Nanshan District People's Court in Guangdong Province. "Tencent sues Lao Gan Ma, which is suspected of defaulting on advertising fees reaching ten million yuan" rushed to top 1 of hot search, and Tencent PR department shaped Tencent into a victim immediately, trying to win one-sided support from public opinions and display the executive force of the company.

2.3.2. Continuously Arouse The Important Booster of Enterprise PR Vigor

Network public opinions are of three communication characteristics: instantaneity of communication, the importance should be attached to the influence of mobile social communication; diversity of communication modes, network PR of enterprise must form a new pattern and a communication matrix; complexity of public opinion environment: In the communication ecology with the young people being the main audience, the demands become more and more diversified, their sense of participation grows stronger, and their views and values tend to be varied; antagonism in the confrontation of public opinions, theme and negative energy co-exist, so do mainstream voice and noise [4].

During the fermentation of this event, it was pushed to MicroBlog hot search list, making Lao Gan Ma, which was always inactive on social platforms, enabled its WeChat official account, which was left blank for two years, to release announcements to defend itself, like "our company has not cooperated with Tencent in any form".

2.3.3. Crisis Response and Communication Management

British crisis PR expert Regester once put forward the famous crisis management "3T" theory, namely, tell your own tale, tell it fast and tell it all. At the beginning of this event, it was Lao Gan Ma that ran unto crisis first, afterwards, Tencent was stuck in a big reversal, encountering an image crisis [5]. In the PR management, both parties could witness the "3T" principles. After the suspects were arrested, Tencent applied to the court for revoking the property preservation application and lawsuit of this case, deeply communicated with Lao Gan Ma, and finally cleared up the misunderstanding. Most importantly, as a "giant" of the internet industry, Tencent apologized to Lao Gan Ma face to face for all kinds of improper behaviors it did in this event, leaving the

"onlookers" could not help but shake head and sigh "how is it possible that Tencent, such a big company, is reduced to make the apology". After the apologetic statement was pushed to the hot search again, the netizens exclaimed one after another, "Lao Gan Ma made a big fortune out of this event, being advertised by Tencent for free (worthy of ten million yuan), and it was lucky to be on the hot search list for several days", and "Penguin suffered an unnecessary loss this time".

2.3.4. Successful Self-Mockery PR

Did Tencent really throw good money after bad in this event just as superficially thought by the whole network? When the fact of "Tencent was swindled" was confirmed, a message was sent via the official account of Tencent on Bilibili website: "The chilli sauce suddenly has no scent at this noon", accompanied by an illustrating picture of the company's canteen and meal. Since the first top comment, all comments tended to be funnily ironical, like "a new product of Lao Gan Ma: spicy goose sauce", "do not sprinkle Lao Gan Ma on its wound any longer", so a situation of "When a wall is about to collapse, everybody gives it a push" was presented in the comments section.

At the other side, the official account of Alipay issued a message on MicroBlog, "wish there is no faked official under the sun", together with the bulletin screenshot about Guiyang police arresting the fraud gang and the news screenshot about Alipay announcing to solve the "radish seal, false contract" problems of supply chain finance, and the following appeared in the comments section: "so funny, penguin meat" commented by the official account of Zhima Credit, "have a nice meal" by the official account of Ele.me and "because what you used is not Lao Gan Ma" by the official account of Haier Brothers. This microblog was concluded into the plate of "onlookers", and the past "friends" of Tencent also started ironical comments on this event in a senior way. WeChat Payment subordinate to Tencent also published a comment "it was a mistake after all to be a part of it" through its official account, and below this was a review of a netizen, "here comes the sarcasm inside Tencent".

As this event was propagated through the internet, netizens seemed like remembering the money earned by Tencent from them over the years, and now, catching up with such a scarce event "Tencent was swindled", the netizens exerted all their power by knocking keyboard, Tencent suffered from the unprecedented group mockery, and some netizens even jokingly called this event "snow in summer".

The PR of Tencent was never stagnated, but instead, it adopted a self-mockery mode that it never did, it took advantage of this crisis to stir another wave of marketing, enhancing the exposure of its game QQ Speed, and reversing its image. Furthermore, some netizens ridiculed

that this crisis even made “Pizza Hut” more popular (Nanshan District People’s Court was nicknamed “Nanshan Pizza Hut” among the people).

To sum up, due to the instantaneity, high interactivity and environmental complexity, etc. of network public opinions, the main means adopted by the enterprise is network communication PR. From seizing the commanding height of public opinions, mobilizing the PR enthusiasm, crisis communication and management to self-mockery marketing, the PR behaviors of Tencent in this event were especially worthy of our attention, reflecting a comprehensive influencing mechanism of public opinions on PR.

2.4. Post-Event Reflection

2.4.1. Is It A Vicious Marketing or A Contract Dispute?

The event of Tencent suing Lao Gan Ma was fermented for consecutive three days. Tencent seemed like losing over 10 million yuan of advertising fee. During this period, the search volume of Tencent and Lao Gan Ma rose perpendicularly, flooding the screen of major social platforms. On July 2, the data provided by Suning showed that up to 22:00 on July 1, the sales volume of “Lao Gan Ma” chilli sauce on Suning platform was increased by 228%, the search volume by 407%, and the quantity of “timely home delivery” orders by 152%. From July 30 to July 3, Tencent and Lao Gan Ma ranked the top 1 on the MicroBlog hot search list continuously for four days. A netizen made such a comment, “I just think that Tencent generated an advertising effect worthy of 200 million yuan on QQ Speed with over 10 million of advertisement resources”. After this event was gradually quieted down, the behaviors of the two companies were suspected of a two-man comic show, or manifested their tacit PR management. However, some problems remained to be clearly explained: Who are the three liars? Isn’t this perceived by the legal department of Tencent? Can the court identify the authenticity of the contract? Is the statement made by the defendant listened on the court?

2.4.2. Innovation of Network Public Opinions Supervision Model: From Management to Governance

The internet-related regulation measures of western countries generally follow three principles, namely, protection of freedom of speech, forbiddance of bad information spreading and industry self-discipline, where the last one is especially worthy of mentioning, as this is the base line that each enterprise especially big enterprises must abide by. If this event of Tencent was false dispute and true hype, it was then destructing the industry self-discipline.

3. CONCLUSION

The event between Tencent and Lao Gan Ma not only embodies the considerable influence of modern network public opinions but also reflects their influencing mechanism on enterprise PR management. Following the principles of “tell it fast, tell it continuously, tell it accurately, and tell it repeatedly”, the two parties made fast response in this event, which becomes an important social practice of theories of network public opinions and enterprise PR.

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