

Bad Review

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Every PR manager has suffered through a bad product review at one time or another, and it was Brian Clarke's turn. The company's new 5x8-inch computer tablet had received a poor review. A scathing critique was more like it. The reviewer complained of a "fat-finger" problem on the digital keyboard, of the tablet being hard to read and too heavy and of technical problems, namely that WiFi didn't work well.

The tablet was the key entry of the Nile Company into the portable market. If it failed, the company would be shut out of the fast-growing arena. That is why Nile had rushed development, and the CEO had taken personal charge of the project. Clarke felt pressure because the tablet was the CEO's "baby", and the CEO was not used to failure. The CEO had been flogging the tablet months before its introduction and shown dozens of reporters pre-production models, but none had a chance for "hands-on" experience with it. Anticipation for what the tablet could do was at fever pitch when it reached consumers. That made the come-down of a bad review hard, and since the reviewer was influential, his put-down was dangerous.

The CEO might shrug off one or two bad reviews but if the media turned negative, it could hurt sales, forecasted for four million. Clarke knew the CEO would ask him what he was going to do to counter bad press. Clarke needed a response and fast.

Clarke first talked to marketing and engineering to determine if the reviewer's criticisms were accurate. They were. The keyboard was too small on the tablet's screen causing mis-keying. It was an issue engineering was addressing for the first update of firmware. Clarke wondered why engineering hadn't caught the problem in the first place. He determined that Nile would acknowledge the problem and announce a forthcoming fix.

As for reading problems, engineers informed him that third-party developers had yet to program for the tablet and were repurposing formatting from other computer tablets, namely the 7x9.5-inch Apple iPad. Because of screen size differences, text and visual placement were often out of kilter. Nile's engineers assured Clarke that once developers paid attention to the new tablet, problems would be fixed. They called it a "teething." This didn't help Clarke much. Potentially millions of tablet owners would be frustrated by their Nile's tablets before the problem was resolved. He wasn't sure what to say except to tell the truth. Nile was waiting on the developer community. Clarke wondered why this hadn't been addressed before the release, but marketing assured him it was a "chicken-egg" problem. Developers wouldn't code for a tablet that hadn't been

released even though the company offered to provide them with development data and source code.

Nile's engineers told Clarke that the weight issue was a matter of opinion. The tablet was only 200 grams, or seven ounces, heavier, than competing tablets. The engineers did not see that as an issue. Clarke wasn't so sure. He couldn't call the tablet light-weight and get away with it among media who knew the difference. He felt he would have to accept this criticism. There was no chance of cutting weight in the current model and the engineers told him there was no effort underway to lighten future models.

The WiFi criticism was serious and potentially fatal. The tablet depended on robust WiFi to download books, music, video and text. Nile's engineers insisted it worked well and had been tested under a range of conditions. They could not explain difficulties reported by some users. Marketing assured him that customer service had put the highest priority on resolving WiFi issues and so far, had handled complaints from three percent of buyers. There wasn't one issue that stood out. Only one percent of calls were the result of product defects, and Nile was replacing those units as they surfaced. Two percent involved everything from interference to weak signals and user inability to access WiFi. Clarke determined that WiFi issues would need to be addressed immediately, but there was no simple statement that could be made about it other than Nile was working to resolve problems. This was weak.

Based on his review with engineering and marketing, Clarke wrote a memo to the CEO on next steps in communications. He urged fast action to counter complaints before they snowballed, and he suggested that Nile merchandise positive user experience as quickly as possible. The CEO agreed, and the program was launched.

Clarke issued a release alerting journalists to an imminent firmware update that would download automatically via WiFi into owners' tablets. He started a series of media alerts when developers began working with the tablet. He issued individual releases until the number hit 25 then periodic reports after that. He was careful to highlight fixes in formatting and to trumpet progress in presentation of text and visuals. As for WiFi, he developed a statistical report of problems and provided it to the media with assurances that Nile was taking all reports seriously and working "around the clock" to resolve them. Technology reporters tracking the issue concluded that problems were being fixed and WiFi failures wouldn't be an issue much longer. Using Nile's Facebook page, Clarke solicited user experience with the tablet and collected hundreds of positive replies along with a few dozen negative ones. He was careful to e-mail representative samples of both to the media and to encourage stories about the tablet's acceptance in the marketplace.

After six months, Clarke felt he had the problems under control, but there was lurking danger. If the tablet failed to meet sales goals, the issues would return but this time with more force. Nile did not report sales volumes but the industry buzzed with estimates. Some of these were negative and claimed that Nile had sold three million tablets at most, far short of the bruted four million. In fact, Nile had sold 3.5 million, a significant miss on the four million, a fact that wasn't known by reporters or industry analysts. Some financial analysts were getting close, however, by doing surveys of electronics stores and online sales venues. These were reported in the media and were showing a possible 3.8 million to 4.01 million in tablet sales during the first six months.

The CEO remained mum but asked marketing to report on the shortfall. Marketing concluded that the launch of the tablet had been too ambitious and that negative reviews hurt sales. The CEO convened a meeting in his office of marketing, engineering and Clarke. His question to the group was how to prevent the shortfall from happening again with the introduction of the new model of the tablet.

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Questions to discuss:

1. Was the introduction of the tablet wrong to begin with?
2. Should Nile have pre-tested pre-production models of the tablet with reporters to get their feedback.
3. Should Nile's engineers have conducted better concept testing of the tablet in the first place?
4. Should the new model be pre-marketed as an improved version?
5. What would you do in Clarke's place?