

Domino's "Special" Delivery: Going Viral Through Social Media (B)

An e-mail from Kristi Hammond sent to Tim McIntyre at 1:38 a.m., Tuesday, April 14, 2009:

I am sorry about all of this! It was all a prank and me nor Michael expected to have this much attention from the videos that were uploaded! No food was ever sent out to any customer. We would never put something like that on you tube if it were real!! It was fake and I wish that everyone knew that!!!! Michael never would do that to any customer, EVER!! I AM SOO SORRY! You see all the time of the pranks that people upload and the pranks need to seem real in order to get a laugh out of people but this prank was very very immature and I am sorry for the embarrassment that I have caused your company!¹

McIntyre woke up Tuesday morning to the comforting news that the vulgar videos of Domino's employees tainting food were indeed a prank—at least no customers had been served contaminated food. But this piece of good fortune would be the last he would receive for a while to come.

The Initial Response

After reading the e-mail from Kristi Hammond early on Tuesday morning, Tim McIntyre reflected on the crisis that had transpired to this point. He thought about what his initial reactions had been and how he and his team should continue to respond. The crisis started at 4:30 p.m. the previous day, when he received an e-mail warning from the webmaster of Good As You alerting him to the existence of the damaging videos posted on YouTube.² Within about 15 minutes of the warning from Good As You, McIntyre's corporate social media team at Domino's had picked up on the existence of the videos, and shortly after that, Consumerist.com had posted the videos on its website.³ McIntyre knew that these videos could have a dramatic impact on the trust of customers and ultimately the Domino's brand. To preserve their trust, McIntyre began immediate actions to find the culprits, identify the store, and ensure no contaminated food reached customers.

On Monday evening, stills from the videos were pulled and sent out nationwide saying that Domino's was looking for Kristi and Michael with a request for anyone who had seen them to call the Chief of Security at Domino's.⁴ McIntyre also sent a note on Monday evening to the CEO, the President of the company, employees in operations, his supervisor, and corporate counsel to say that the videos were out there, they were disgusting, and that efforts were being made to track down Kristi and Michael and take care of the situation.⁵

The first major break came around 11:00 p.m. Monday night when McIntyre received word that the store and employees had been identified. Two readers of The Consumerist, Amy

Wilson and *whyerhead*, managed to track the location of the store using an innovative geo-mapping technique based on the YouTube handle of the person who upload the videos and images of the surrounding area shown in a clip outside the drive through window. After identifying the store, they called the store to alert the manager, and then they sent the address of the store to Domino's corporate headquarters.⁶ The store was an independently owned franchise in Conover, North Carolina.⁷ Once notified of the location of the store, McIntyre alerted the security team, so they could concentrate their efforts.⁸

On Tuesday, McIntyre sent e-mail updates to Good As You and The Consumerist. Many of his e-mails are included in the articles posted on each website. At 6:50 a.m., McIntyre sent a note to The Consumerist to publicly thank them for finding the store location. McIntyre also shared Kristi's e-mail with them and said that Domino's would be following up on Kristi's claim that no contaminated food was served to customers. By 9:20 a.m. on Tuesday, McIntyre shared an update with The Consumerist saying that the Chief of Security at Domino's spoke with the franchise owner and that the owner would be terminating the employment of Kristi and Michael later in the day. Response comments by The Consumerist readers on the article reflected positively on McIntyre's decision to share the updates.⁹

A similar e-mail was sent by McIntyre to Good As You on Tuesday. The message in this e-mail stated that the owner of the franchise would be terminating Kristi and Michael effective immediately. It went on to say that Domino's also suggested that the owner get written statements from Kristi and Michael explaining their actions. Finally, it further stated that Domino's would be seeking legal counsel to see if action could be taken against the employees due to damage to the brand.¹⁰ (See Appendix A for full e-mail.)

McIntyre and the communication team also took steps to post a response to the crisis on the Domino's corporate website. The message is addressed to "our Valued Customers" and includes the steps taken so far and an apology for the inappropriate behavior of the individuals involved. (See Appendix B for the full message.)

Over the first 24 hours, McIntyre and the communication team responded to the crisis by identifying the store and employees, working with the store owner to terminate the employees, and sharing updates and messages about the crisis with The Consumerist, Good As You, and on the Domino's corporate website. By Tuesday evening, McIntyre knew that the crisis was far from over and that he and his team would need to reevaluate their response strategy.

Fighting Fire with Fire

As the representative of a fun, indulgent, youth-oriented brand, Domino's communications team makes it a goal to "reach customers where they are." This philosophy played a central role in deciding how to initially respond to the video pranks: respond to the most relevant audiences, but not with a national media statement or press release.¹¹

But, McIntyre knew his strategy had not yet been tested by the viral capabilities of online social media when his team told him at 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday that "There's starting to be some

chatter on Twitter.”¹² And, notably, the posts were not only gross reactions to the videos; they were from people wanting to know what Domino’s was doing about the problem. McIntyre said, “Executives decided not to respond aggressively, hoping the controversy would quiet down. What we missed was the perpetual mushroom effect of viral sensations.”¹³

By Wednesday afternoon, the effects were looming larger: the main video had been viewed almost a million times on YouTube, references to it dominated five of twelve Google search results on “Dominos,”¹⁴ and for the first time in company history, Domino’s surpassed Paris Hilton in number of search engine hits.¹⁵ (See Appendix C for tracking statistics of YouTube views and Twitter mentions.)

In just a few days’ time, Domino’s reputation had gone from positive to negative according to an online research firm, YouGov, which surveys 1,000 consumers every day regarding hundreds of brands.¹⁶ The situation was quickly spiraling out of Domino’s control, and McIntyre knew by then that he needed to expand his target and bring heavier artillery to the battle if he were going to win this fight. In an interview with *The Strategist*, McIntyre said, “Somebody equated Domino’s in the first 24 hours to a grocery store that had 30 aisles—and there was a spill in aisle five . . . as we were cleaning up the spill in aisle five, it was leaking to aisles six and seven and four and three.”¹⁷

The YouTube Apology

It was at this point that the Domino’s team made a rather unconventional and spontaneous decision. Armed with a personal camcorder (sans tri-pod) and a few scribbled cue cards, the team sat down with Patrick Doyle, the President of Domino’s USA, and filmed an unrehearsed apology video in one take.¹⁸ The team posted the video on YouTube using the same badly worded title and tags the employee pranksters had used in order to most effectively target the people who were talking to them. The key message: We didn’t do this. We’re sorry. And we want to earn your trust back.

The screenshot shows a YouTube video player for a video titled "Disgusting Dominos People - Domino's Responds". The video features Patrick Doyle, President of Domino's USA, speaking in front of a Domino's sign. The video has 4,183 ratings and 787,079 views. The interface includes the YouTube logo, search bar, and navigation links. The right sidebar shows channel information for "dominosvids" and a list of related videos.

Domino's USA President, Patrick Doyle in YouTube video: *"There is nothing more important or sacred to us than our customers' trust. . . . It sickens me that the actions of two individuals could impact our great system where 125,000 men and women work for local business owners around the US and more than 60 countries around the world."* <<http://www.youtube.com/v/716AJ49xNSQ>>.

McIntyre told the National Press Club that, "We did this in the same forum these people used to do this to us. The credit we're getting and the comments we're seeing is that we didn't hide and we haven't been 'corporate' but responding like real people."¹⁹

The afternoon before the apology video posted on YouTube, Domino's social media team created a Twitter account for the company, @dpzinfo, in order to begin an honest and open dialogue with a wider audience. These multi-faceted efforts seem to have done the trick as reports came in that online buzz and chatter about the brand were decreasing dramatically by Wednesday evening. The numbers had quadrupled during the first day of the crisis and peaked on the day of the Doyle's response. (See Appendix D for actual online buzz tracking chart.)

Still McIntyre was worried about new reports that other local franchises in the Charlotte, North Carolina, area were experiencing a drop in sales of 50% and an inability to pay their workers.²⁰ One franchise owner had even taken out a full-page ad in his local newspaper with a letter aimed at getting loyal customers back into his stores. McIntyre knew that consumers usually have a short attention span, and he was hoping that the apology video his team recorded would quell the crisis and prevent the closure of local stores feeling its harsh effects.

The Videos Go Global

Early Thursday morning, McIntyre woke with a start. Rubbing his eyes, he knew it was way too early for his alarm clock to be ringing. Finally realizing that his phone was the cause of the racket, he answered the call in a drowsy voice. “Hello?”

The caller, with a slight British accent, said, “Hello, may I please speak with Mister Tim McIntyre?” “This is Tim. May I ask what this is regarding?” “Hello, Mr. McIntyre. This is a journalist from the BBC hoping you might be willing to say a few words regarding the recent videos that we observed on the Internet featuring Domino’s employees tainting food.”

As he gave the BBC a few sound bites and reassured the journalist that the videos were just a prank, McIntyre began to worry about how this scandal would affect Domino’s 3,700 international locations. This problem had spread far faster and wider than he had ever imagined possible. He soon learned that news outlets from all over the world were now running the story: Peru, China, Greece, the United Kingdom. In Australia and in other North American markets, the media were even implying that the featured store in the video was in a local neighborhood. As Phil Lempert of *The Lempert Report* would later say on April 23, “This event underscores just how fragile a food or retail brand can be at the expense of a video camera held in the wrong hands.”²¹

What could McIntyre and his team possibly do now to prevent even more damage to the Domino’s brand name on a global scale?

Appendix A

Posting on GoodAsYou.org from April 14, 2009:

****UPDATE, 4/14:** More from corporate:

Hi, Jeremy.

We just got off the phone with the franchise owner, who was absolutely dumbfounded by this. He has told us that he will be terminating their employment effective immediately. We suggested that he call them and get a written statement from them, asking them to "explain" (to the extent anyone can, really) their actions. We are also seeking legal counsel to see what kind of action we can take against them for damage to the brand.

You are welcome to use anything I've sent to you in the past 24 hours. I do want to thank you for bringing this to our attention...I just wish it hadn't been posted so prominently on your web site... while it was certainly fair game, it does hurt the company and the thousands of people we employ in this country whether it's intended or not.

Regards,

Tim

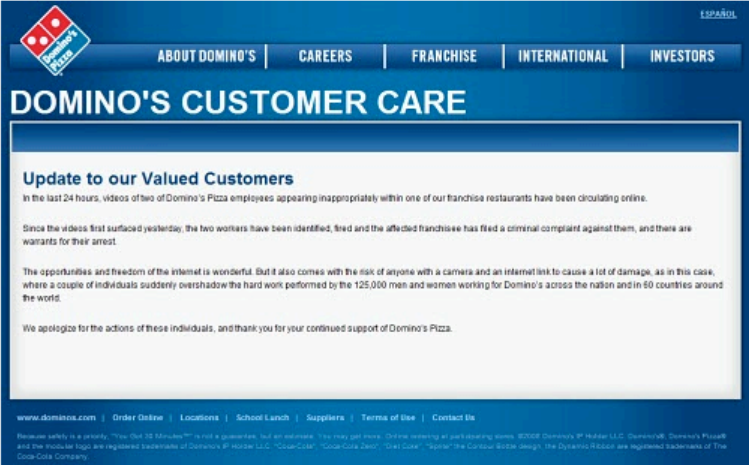
Tim McIntyre
Vice President, Communications
Domino's Pizza, LLC

We respond:

Hey Tim: Don't shoot the messenger, buddy!

Appendix B

Domino's Corporate Website official statement as of April 14, 2009.



Update to our Valued Customers

In the last 24 hours, videos of two of Domino's Pizza employees appearing inappropriately within one of our franchise restaurants have been circulating online.

Since the videos first surfaced yesterday, the two workers have been identified, fired and the affected franchisee has filed a criminal complaint against them, and there are warrants for their arrest.

The opportunities and freedom of the internet is wonderful. But it also comes with the risk of anyone with a camera and an internet link to cause a lot of damage, as in this case, where a couple of individuals suddenly overshadow the hard work performed by the 125,000 men and women working for Domino's across the nation and in 60 countries around the world.

We apologize for the actions of these individuals, and thank you for your continued support of Domino's Pizza.

The wording says:

Update to our Valued Customers

In the last 24 hours, videos of two of Domino's Pizza employees appearing inappropriately within one of our franchise restaurants have been circulating online.

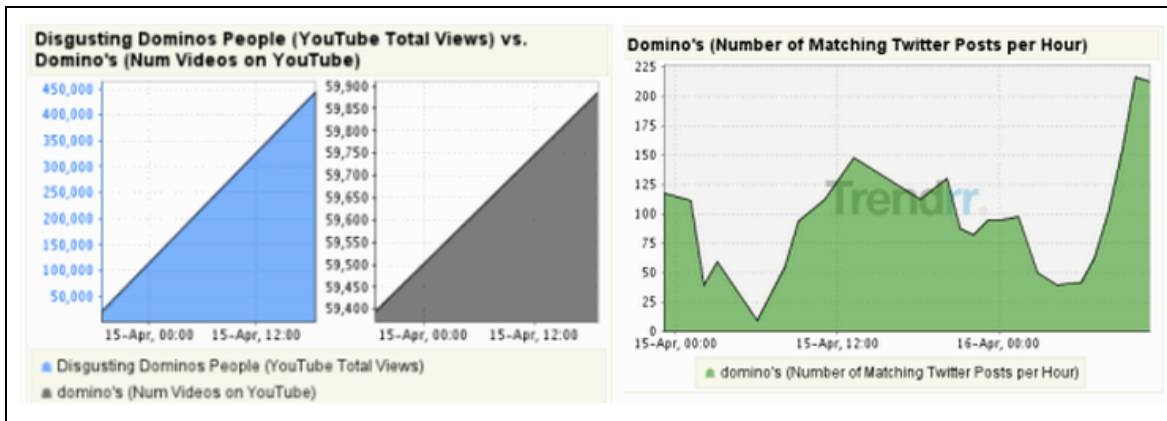
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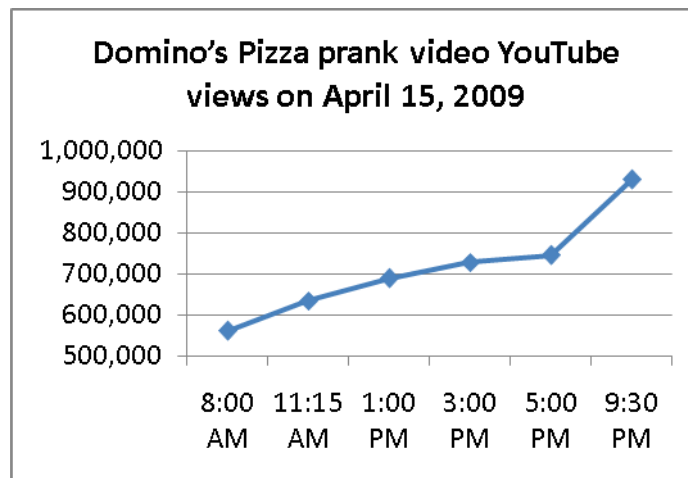
We apologize for the actions of these individuals, and thank you for your continued support of Domino's Pizza.

Appendix C

YouTube view tracking and Twitter post matches from April 15, 2009

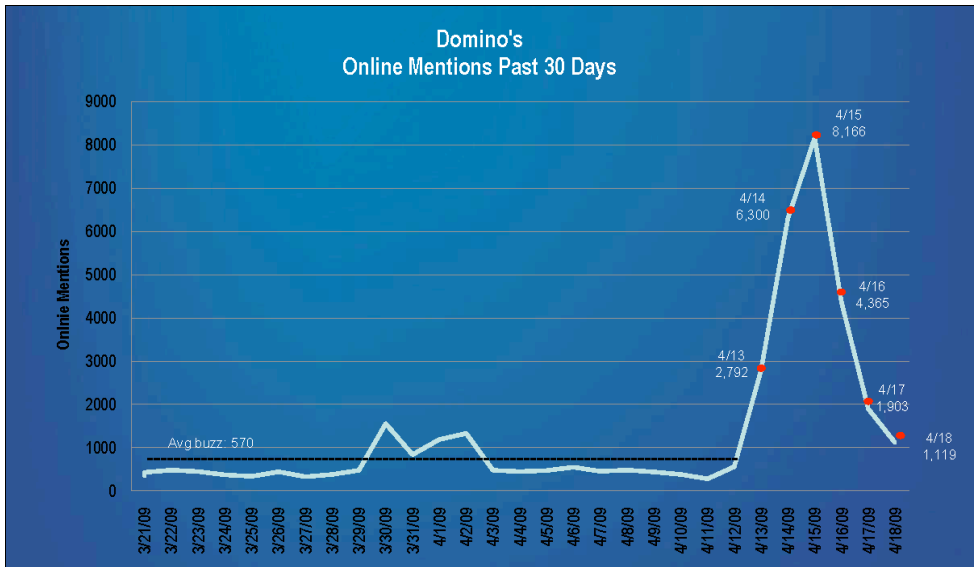


Source: Graphs from Tendrr, accessed from ReadWriteWeb.²²



Source: Graphs from Tendrr, accessed from ReadWriteWeb.²³

Appendix C



Source: Radian6 Tracking, 3/21/09-4/19/09. Mentions include all Blogs, Microblogs (Twitter), News, Forums, and Replies, Comments, Videos and Images. The more recent the data the less stable it is as the spiders continue to search the web.²⁴

Appendix D



Source: Yahoo Finance, Domino's Pizza, YUM Brands, and S&P 500 Index stock volumes from 3/25/2009 to 5/15/2009.

¹ Personal email from Tim McIntyre, September 25, 2009. Text is from actual email sent by Kristi Hammond; all spelling and grammatical errors are hers.

² Personal interview with Tim McIntyre, September 25, 2009.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Walters, Chris. "Consumerist Sleuths Track Down Offending Domino's Store."

<http://consumerist.com/2009/04/consumerist-sleuths-track-down-offending-dominos-store.html#comments-content>

⁷ Personal interview with Tim McIntyre, September 25, 2009.

⁸ Walters, Chris. "Consumerist Sleuths Track Down Offending Domino's Store."

<http://consumerist.com/2009/04/consumerist-sleuths-track-down-offending-dominos-store.html#comments-content>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Video: Let the Domino's appall as they may." Goodasyou.com.

http://www.goodasyou.org/good_as_you/2009/04/video-let-the-dominoes-appall.html

¹¹ Personal interview with Tim McIntyre, September 25, 2009.

¹² Jacques, Amy. *The Strategist*, "Domino's Delivers During Crisis," Summer 2009.

¹³ "A Video Prank at Domino's Damages Its Brand," by Stephanie Clifford, *The New York Times*, April 16, 2009.

¹⁴ "A Video Prank at Domino's Damages Its Brand," by Stephanie Clifford, *The New York Times*, April 16, 2009.

¹⁵ Personal interview with Tim McIntyre.

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- ¹⁶ “A Video Prank at Domino’s Damages Its Brand,” by Stephanie Clifford, *The New York Times*, April 16, 2009.
- ¹⁷ Jacques, Amy. *The Strategist*, “Domino’s Delivers During Crisis,” Summer 2009.
- ¹⁸ Personal interview with Tim McIntyre, September 25, 2009.
- ¹⁹ “Domino’s ramps up online strategy following prank,” by Nicole Zerillo, *The National Press Club*, April 16, 2009.
- ²⁰ WCNC News Report, <http://www.wcnc.com/news/local/68685227.html>
- ²¹ The Lempert Report. April 23, 2009. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8DB7LTYEN8>
- ²² “Domino’s: How One YouTube Video Can Ruin a Brand (Updated),” Lardinois, Frank. April 16, 2009. http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/dominos_youtube_video.php
- ²³ “Domino’s Pizza Deals With YouTube Nightmare,” WebProNews blog, posted April 16, 2009 by Neville Hobson: <http://www.webpronews.com/blogtalk/2009/04/16/dominos-pizza-deals-with-youtube-nightmare>
- ²⁴ Received from Tim McIntyre on September 25, 2009.