

Restoring consumer trust: Why M&S's viral dessert sandwich highlights the value of crisis communications in business

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With the viral M&S strawberries and cream sandwich dominating social media and news headlines, leading crisis communications expert, [Richard Merrin](#), CEO at [Spreckley Partners](#), reflects on the importance of a clear crisis strategy to restore customer trust.

UK retail has been under fire this year, with numerous major cyberattacks disrupting operations and exposing customer data across many high-profile brands. Marks & Spencer was no exception, struck by a significant ransomware attack over the Easter weekend that caused two months of fallout, disruption to online and payment lines and a [£300m loss in market value](#) – described as the most financially damaging cyberattack ever suffered by a UK retailer.

However, where M&S has grappled with the fallout in losing customer trust, the viral success of a limited-edition Red Diamond Strawberry & Creme Sandwich may just have turned the tide of customer opinion around. Pushing through a breach that has cost millions and shaken consumer confidence, the Wimbledon-inspired treat has captured public imagination, sparked a surprising VAT tax debate, and offered M&S a fresh burst of positive publicity amid ongoing challenges.

“When it comes to customer expectations, trust is hard won and easily lost, especially in the retail sector,” says Richard. “For a brand in crisis management mode for a long time, a breakthrough in changing the narrative has done wonders in shifting focus and restoring trust.”

“No business is immune to a cyberattack, and recent activity has highlighted that everyone is a target,”

adds Merrin. “For retailers, the operational disruption outweighs the damage from data loss. The attacks caused weeks of downtime, placing significant strain on customer loyalty. Understanding that reputation is a strategic asset to be managed and providing a proactive front with customer support and executive visibility has been key to mitigating the damages long-term.

“Lessons can be learnt from the level of communication and acknowledgement. M&S’s strong, visible leadership response was initially reassuring to affected customers, but an initial delay in acknowledgement meant shoppers were already suffering over the initial weekend of the attack. Communicating quickly in the event of a cyberattack is important when it comes to customer data.”

“Quirky food combinations have historically had PR success,” says Merrin. “For consumer retail, an unusual product can quickly pique interest, either being an exotic treat, a play on the expected or just a unique tasting experience – and this ticks all three. Any sense of controversy works in line with the premise of the product itself, and we can see extensive national coverage pushing down more negative stories in search results as the conversation moves on through the summer.

“The success of this PR campaign has helped shift the narrative surrounding the retailer. Most importantly, organic hype behind a quirky product has helped catapult it across social media lines for a quirky taste test. This lightning-in-a-bottle food craze cannot be expected for everything, but the rollout displays the value of a smart, targeted rollout to quickly get your customer base talking.

“For more luxury retail brands facing a customer fallout, the buyer base in itself is likely to be more forgiving if you’re able to quickly provide an exclusive product to appease them. Love or hate it, people are going to talk about it, and if they’re talking about this they’ve already moved on from your past mistakes.”

“Cybersecurity and brand resilience are now inseparable,” Merrin concludes. “If your cyber isn’t in place, your brand is sure to suffer in the event of an attack. However, creative approaches to consumer trends such as that demonstrated by M&S can mean the difference between bouncing back from a bad situation or letting it crumple your business completely. Keeping a thumb on the pulse of what your end buyer is going to remember is important to re-establishing and retaining trust. After all, the customer is always right.”