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Engaging critics online 'works better', say public relations experts

By Cheryl Ong

RWS restores Facebook page after temporarily blocking some users

When animal rights activists inundated Resorts World Sentosa's Facebook page with hundreds of messages calling on it to release its captive dolphins, their tactics were not new.

Other organisations have come under fire from detractors using the social networking website, although usually on a much smaller scale. They include World Vision Singapore, an organisation set up to fight poverty and help needy children.

Nasty comments have been posted on its Facebook page criticising its work overseas. But spokesman Lynette Lim said the organisation has not had to take any action, because supporters usually come to its rescue when negative comments are posted.

'In fact, this adds credibility to our identity rather than having us justify ourselves in these instances,' she added.

The page, which features multimedia content and updates on the organisation's charity work overseas, currently has more than 6,000 'likes' from supporters.

Resorts World Sentosa was forced to block certain users from its page and temporarily disable its comment function last weekend after what it described as "premeditated cyber harassment" by supporters of the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres).

The pressure group is upset that the hotel is keeping 25 dolphins in captivity in the Philippines, animals it plans to feature in its upcoming Marine Life Park.

The page has been back to normal since Monday.

Acres' executive director, Mr Louis Ng, told The Straits Times yesterday: "Resorts World Sentosa, as of today, has not responded to the people who have been posting on their Facebook page.

"The people will not stop if the hotel continues to ignore us."

He urged supporters to be "civil and polite" if they post any further comments.

Lawyer Michael Low said the hotel cannot take any action against the spammers unless their comments are defamatory.

Public relations experts told The Straits Times they usually advise their clients to avoid any aggressive behaviour online, and to resolve disputes as amicably as possible. Ms Christina Cheang, Golin Harris' regional managing director (Southeast Asia), said: "What Resorts World Sentosa did is acceptable if the other party is not cooperative, despite attempts to reach an agreement or resolution."

Ms Audrey McGagh, the director of McGagh Communications, said organisations under attack might do better by engaging the critics on the same platform.

"It's like a conversation. If someone is trying to give an opinion and you cut them off, it's quite rude," she said.

"If you set up a page on Facebook, you have to recognise that it's an interactive platform and give your supporters a chance to argue for you."