

Winning the media game

ANDY WALPOLE looks at the tactics of art collective @TMark, who expose the greed and aggression of large corporations.

Just before the 2000 US presidential elections, an argument flared up over a false George Bush website.

Called GWBush.com, it was almost identical in appearance to the official site at georgewbush.com, but a read of the text would reveal a different side.

Pointing out the hypocrisy of his hard-line anti-drugs stance, the GWBush.com site talked of his "rambunctious youth" in which he doesn't deny there was use of cocaine and other drugs.

"As President, GW Bush wants to create an America in which everyone gets as much forgiveness and as many chances to grow up, as he had."

It went on to announce the Amnesty 2000 initiative, which would wipe away all previous drug convictions held by US citizens.

The Bush campaign team, livid, sent their legal team to work and the anti-Bush website was then visited by hundreds of thousands of people who had become notified by the media coverage.

In response, George Bush himself stated at a press conference: "I think that there should be limits to freedom."

The agent provocateur behind the stunt was Zack Exley in association with @TMark - pronounced "artmark" - a loose group of mutual associates who first came together in the early 1990s.

In a mock corporate guise, @TMark acted through their website as a means whereby political art projects could link up with potential financial backers.

Using such corporate speak as "the high-yield fund" and "the safety fund," they adopted the cover of a PLC and explained their purpose as "essentially a matchmaker and bank, helping groups or individuals fund sabotage projects."

They also provided ideas and organisational assistance.

In late 1999, the etoy versus eToys clash started.

Online US company eToys, which specialised in children's toys, wanted to buy the domain name of etoy.com, which was held by a Swiss art collective.

The reason, according to the company, was to avoid confusion with its own domain name etoys.com

Despite a lavish financial offer, etoy.com was not for sale. So, on November 29, eToys blocked the domain name to prevent it being used.

This was despite the fact that etoy.com, the domain name of the art collective, had been registered before eToys the company had ever existed.

The implications of such a move were massive - any company with financial clout could, on the world wide web, force others out of existence.

Etoy linked up with ®TMark and other internet-based protest groups such as the Electronic Disturbance Theatre. Their response was quick and decisive.

It was imperative that eToys was targeted at the only spot it understood - slashing its share value by a campaign of maximum harassment and embarrassing publicity.

In a statement, spokesman Ernest Lucha announced: "The etoy fund projects are a game the whole world can play. Many of the projects - boycotts, pickets, e-mail campaigns - can be played by anyone, while other projects - countersuing eToys, disturbing the eToys servers - require specialised work.

"There's something for everyone and we know that we can easily count on 10,000 players to start with."

After this initial declaration of war, there began something akin to an e-riot as assorted hackers, web guerillas and activists electronically assaulted the eToys website.

In the Christmas rush, the website buckled and investors fled.

One of the largest e-businesses lost share value as a tree shreds leaves in the autumn.

Starting at \$67 per share before battle commenced, it dropped to \$46 on December 10 and plummeted to \$26 by December 27.

EToy's key shareholders were also targeted.

Fellow agitator Professor Reinhold Grether commented at the time: "Looking back on the campaign development since November 29, we see an astonishingly big grass-roots movement.

"Each newspaper article generated a swarm of debates and brought a new bunch of people together.

"We are all sick and tired of being pushed around by crazed dot com people and slash and burn casino capitalists and their lawyer dogs.

"The events in Seattle show that there is growing support for a world order that is not solely based on maximising corporate profits."

With its share value below \$20 - equivalent to the loss of \$4billion - eToys capitulated on January 16 2000.

It was on its knees - staring the protesters' stated aim of a zero share value in the face.

It backtracked, giving up its claim to etoy.com as well as reimbursing the art collective their legal fees.

®TMark announced triumphantly that "they wanted to drop their case 'with prejudice,' because they fear further attacks and trademark battles, but now they see they have no choice at all in the matter.

"It is a total victory."

Concluding, they hoped that the etoy vs eToys war would "serve as a reminder to people of what corporations do when left to their own devices and as a reminder to corporations of what they cannot do, at least on the internet."

@TMark used the communications industry cleverly.

Understanding that news outlets and agencies are not isolated towers, but interrelated both vertically and horizontally, @TMark could, with the right approach, create an information tidal wave.

At the epicentre, the physical action that ignited the publicity became irrelevant.

It was about using the mainstream media as a Trojan horse for dissent.

An example of this cause and effect is that, immediately after one Washington Post article, eToy's shares slipped a further \$3.

Other projects associated with @TMark have been Project Loft, which aimed to challenge gentrification in San Francisco, Deconstructing Beck, which brought onto the stage arguments around copyright, the Phone In Sick Day, on May 1 and, of course, the Yes Men, who have achieved great success in challenging big business.

It can all be interpreted as just a game or political tokenism and, without doubt, the activists involved took great pleasure from their opponent's discomfort. But there are serious points in @TMark's methods.

Importantly, they provided a means to publicise particular issues.

The yellow media, particularly in the US, flinch from serious political discourse.

Saturated with celebrities, the media likes its news to be sexy.

Understanding this, @TMark imaginatively served up the important issues dressed in humour and with irreverence.

Right-wing hypocrisy and big business greed are subjects that acclaimed journalists such as John Pilger focus on, but @TMark presented them in a completely different way.

Demonstrating a rounded political view, @TMark always empathised the essential role of bodies such as trade unions in the struggle for social change.

The @TMark project has been dormant for a few years now, but will shortly be relaunched.

Aiming for more high-profile projects, @TMark's strategy will be updated for 2005, with an emphasis on information-sharing among activists.

A spokesman said: "It is worth noting that the terrain had changed quite a bit. These days, it's quite different from the Clinton era.

"@TMark came out of a late-1990s mentality, which was more of a question of how we could provide a critique which was engaging, dynamic and fun and which would grab people's attention and get them interested in these issues.

"The question now is not how do we get people to think about them, but how do we change the way that they are thought about and acted upon."

Creating political art has never been so much fun.

ANDY WALPOLE