

Are You Fit Enough To Face A Twitter Trial? #LAFitness

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The latest liberal lynch mob to march on Twitter has had its digital flaming torches and pitchforks out for the gym company LA Fitness. It's yet another example of a social media PR disaster but this time with a neat networked journalism twist.

The short story is that at the end of office hours on Tuesday January 24th, the #LAFitness hashtag started to trend with some venomous criticism of its decision to [force a pregnant woman and her newly-redundant partner to continue their two-year gym contract](#).

Instead of backing down over a few hundred quid the LA Fitness PR machine decided to release a twitter statement saying 'we do not comment on individual cases'. This further fuelled the tidal wave of microblogging moral outrage. So they deleted that tweet, thus compounding the sense that this was an evil corporation trying to cover up its crime. It appeared not to understand Twitter! Not only naughty, but soooo analogue, darling.

This is what my Twitter stream looked like towards the end of the process:



Within minutes of this LA Fitness caved in and agreed to waive their claim to the couple's money. A triumph for the power of emotional blackmail or for the

collaborative humanism of social media, depending on your point of view (I opt for the latter personally). Well, not entirely.

As @GabyHinsliff pointed out in the above tweet, the original story was a good old-fashioned bit of [consumer journalism](#) by Lisa Bachelor (@lisabachelor). It was taken up on Twitter by Guardian deputy editor Kath Viner who

explained to me that:

As Saturday editor I read the Money section in advance and thought: what an appalling story, I must remember to tweet that on Fri/Sat. I forgot. Then, at our weekly Saturday meeting on Tuesday at 3.30, Patrick Collinson, who edits Money, was saying that lots of Guardian readers had offered to pay the rest of the family's contract for them, and they were going big on this in this week's section. We discussed how amazing the original story had been, and how we couldn't really believe LA Fitness's response. This conversation reminded me that I had forgotten to tweet the original story, so after the meeting I tweeted it and it took off.

I love the slightly random nature of this process, (God forbid that you should think that this is typical of how the Guardian operates) but the key point is that this was a newspaper using social media brilliantly to push a great bit of reporting by Bachelor.

Whether you think LA Fitness made the right decision is beside the point. Perhaps they should have stuck by their legal rights. I should imagine that all sorts of contract service providers are now worried that they will become victims of a Twitter bleeding-heart hate campaign, as lovely, vulnerable people find they can't pay their bills during the current economic crisis.

What I think is interesting is how this particular campaign took off. I am pretty sure that the fact that a lot of Guardian journos are on Twitter helped, plus a big early push from Twitter mavens Ben Goldacre and Caitlin Moran. Quite a few readers had already tweeted the original story over the weekend. Perhaps there is even some kind of social media emotional metric that means an anti-big business sob story is most effective when put out at the end of the working day when our levels of hatred for corporate power are at their highest?

I suspect it one of those stories that symbolises our times. When the economy is on the up we are strangely tolerant of the brutalities of marketing. But even if we're not hit too hard personally, we are all now aware of people who are genuinely having trouble making ends meet. A gym contract might be a terribly bourgeois burden, but this is a story about the squeezed middle (geddit?) where we can all feel the pain.

The lesson for business PR is to be much more responsive. It's not good enough to be on Twitter, you have to respond to it. (Compare O2's more engaged Twitter reaction to [their little PR crisis](#)) The lesson for journalists is don't just think of social media as a place to show off and chat to your friends. It's also a place where an individual act of journalism can become a networked campaign.

[Some [good analysis of the Tweets on this at the Media Blog](#)]

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