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Gripe sites are all the rage now Local KEYT TV news reporter John Palminteri has fallen victim to the latest trend in the art of revenge.

Robert Eringer

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Gripe sites are all the rage now Local KEYT TV news reporter John Palminteri has fallen victim to the latest trend in the art of revenge. Adversarial Web sites, a.k.a. gripe sites, are usually created in the name of the intended victim, or some derivation (such as anynamesucks.com), to ensnare Web surfers in search of information about that person or entity and provide negative or embarrassing data.

The goal of gripe site operators is to be among the top hits in search engines such as Google, Yahoo and MSN.

Someone -- in this case, anonymous -- has created a Web site with the domain name www.johnpalminteri.com for the sole purpose of trying to publicly embarrass Mr. Palminteri with various allegations.

If one searches the newsman's name, this Web site is currently No. 5 on Google's hit list, hurdling the first measure of success for any gripe site creator: high visibility.

Another local gripe site -- www.thedarksideofucsb.com -- takes aim at UCSB. (It is ninth on Google if one searches "UCSB.")

Alfred and John Donovan, a father and son in Colchester, England, several years ago established the world's most effective adversarial Web site. Feeling aggrieved by treatment from the oil giant Shell, they created their site under the company's name, www.royaldutchshellplc.com. It strives, on a daily basis, to expose Shell's underside through research, investigation and leaks from inside Shell, which earned \$35 billion in 2008.

"It is a way of taking on Goliath," John Donovan told The Investigator. "The Internet provides a low cost public platform for anyone to reach a global audience, giving ordinary individuals the opportunity to take on the powerful. Our David has already given Goliath -- with its 100,000 employees and business in 140 countries -- the PR equivalent of two black eyes."

Continued Mr. Donovan: "Our anti-Shell Web site receives several million hits every month and has become an interactive hub of dissent attracting whistleblowers who, through our Web site, have leaked many Shell secrets to the news media, resulting in huge embarrassment to Shell senior management -- and also to the resignation of a Shell senior executive."

The Donovans do not earn money from their Web site (they do not sell advertising or solicit donations), but strive purely to sway public opinion against Shell and damage its business prospects.

There are a number of reasons why those with a gripe may turn to the World Wide Web over more traditional routes for finding remedy to a perceived injustice.

- You can do it yourself, with little training necessary;
- You can do it for the minuscule cost of a domain name and whatever time you're prepared to expend filling it with material;
- It is an alternative to the judicial system for lodging a complaint. These days, no matter how merited your complaint, you are looking at paying a \$10,000 retainer just to engage the services of a lawyer. This can quickly escalate to six figures without resolution;
- It may lead to a pay-off of your complaint from the target of your site in exchange for terminating the gripe site;
- It is good therapy; it relieves stress suffered from an oppressor;


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- It is more stimulating than solving crossword puzzles.

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US Airways Redux:

US Airways is lauded for landing one of its aircraft in the Hudson River and safely evacuating its passengers. Had we been aboard, we would have preferred to disembark in Charlotte, N.C., as scheduled. Indeed, Delta, United, and American all landed safely in Charlotte that day.

We say this not to undermine the heroic professionalism of the pilots. It is, however, worth noting that only two days before US Airways flight 1549 ditched into the Hudson an engine on the same aircraft suffered a compression stall.

In a past column we questioned the disagreeable disposition of US Airways' flight attendants and ground staff. Perhaps we should also be looking at their maintenance schedules and crews. And perhaps we will.

But for now we revert to service.

A reader tells of a "nightmare" experience he suffered at the hands of US Airways ground staff, along with this airline's clear violation of Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Homeland Security regulations, potentially placing passengers in harms way. "They are a disgrace," he told The Investigator. "They have the worst customer service in the industry."

This Santa Barbara man and his family had the misfortune of flying US Airways from Orlando to Santa Barbara via the airline's hub in Phoenix. The first flight landed a little late after the pilot, preparing to land, had to perform an emergency ascent to avoid hitting another aircraft.

Upon circling and finally landing, this passenger asked the flight attendant if she would mind calling the gate of the next flight to Santa Barbara to advise them that a family of four, including two young children, were on the ground and on their way.

The flight attendant minded. Nor would this flight attendant even summon a cart to wheel this family to their gate, probably a mile away due to Sky Harbor Airport's terminal configuration.

So the passenger ran ahead to the gate while his family walked.

"I was not expecting to be greeted with such a defiant airline representative when I arrived at the gate," this passenger later wrote to the chairman of US Airways. "Not only did we miss our connecting flight, but the gate representative was belligerent and at times confrontational, and lacked any concern for me and my family."

So this family did not board flight 2725 from Phoenix to Santa Barbara.

But their checked baggage did. It flew home without them.

This is a serious no-no. It is a breach of security that violates FAA and Department of Homeland Security code.

If a passenger decides not to take a flight at the last minute, or does not appear for a flight, or is too late for a flight, his/her luggage, by law, must be removed from the hold. Only luggage that connects to passengers present in the cabin is lawfully permitted to fly.

"How can our luggage get loaded onto a flight without us?," this passenger wrote to the U.S. Department of Transportation. "The way my family and I were treated was unacceptable. My wife and I will no longer choose US Airways as our flight carrier."

A local reader wrote us the following after our earlier column on US Airways:

"I want to congratulate and thank you for writing such a wonderful and true piece. I fly 100,000-plus miles each year. My flights usually start in Santa Barbara Airport, which employs the rudest personnel. Some of these people put on a uniform for the first time and suddenly think they have any and all authority. Half of them wouldn't qualify for a Marborg (garbage collection) uniform."

Oh, and the young lady with the pet Chihuahua who was mercilessly harassed and harangued by US Airways staff in November? She enjoyed a serene cruise eastward aboard a spotless new Virgin America Airbus, whose smiling flight attendants could not do enough for her and other passengers. She paid half the price of a US Airways ticket, ate a decent meal, and on her personal in-flight TV screen watched Beverly Hills Chihuahua -- with her Chihuahua sleeping peacefully on her lap.

The opinions in this column are Robert Eringer's and not necessarily those of the newspaper. If you have a story idea for The Investigator, contact him at eringer33@aol.com. State if your query is confidential.

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