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Sichuan Garden in Brookline.

By Billy Baker and Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 10, 2014

BROOKLINE — This is the story of what happens when you bring four Harvard degrees into a fight over four dollars.

Spoiler alert: If the Internet gets involved, you're not going to win this one.

A 34-year-old lawyer and Harvard Business School professor named Benjamin Edelman — who has been called the “Sheriff of the Internet” for his militant policing of companies who commit online consumer fraud — quickly became an online punching bag after e-mail leaked Tuesday revealing that his latest target was a mom-and-pop Chinese restaurant in Brookline.

The restaurant's alleged offense: overcharging him \$4 for a takeout order.

By Wednesday evening, Edelman had issued a mea culpa on his personal website.



The professor behind the dispute

The globe-trotting Harvard Business School associate professor is familiar to those in the world of online consumer protection.

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"Having reflected on my interaction . . . including what I said and how I said it, it's clear that I was very much out of line. I aspire to act with great respect and humility in dealing with others, no matter what the situation. Clearly I failed to do so. I am sorry, and I intend to do better in the future," he wrote, adding that he plans to personally apologize.

By then, Edelman, who says his research focus is to "fix the Internet," had watched it explode on him, inviting levels of attention that bordered on Kardashian.

The feud came to light on Tuesday after boston.com published the lengthy e-mail exchange between the litigious professor and the apologetic restaurant, Sichuan Garden, which admitted the menu on their website hadn't been updated in a while and their prices had changed.

In the e-mail back-and-forth, Ran Duan, whose family runs Sichuan Garden, apologized repeatedly and offered to refund the money, but Edelman wrote that was "an exceptionally light sanction for the violation that has occurred." He invoked Massachusetts consumer protection statutes, and insisted that the restaurant refund him triple the overcharge — \$12 — for damages related to this "intentional violation." He also contacted Brookline authorities — Edelman says they were no help — and ultimately insisted the restaurant refund everyone that they had, in his opinion, overcharged.

Prior to his apology, Edelman spent a good bit of time defending his actions to several media outlets — in an e-mail to The Boston Globe on Tuesday, he credited himself for having "flagged the issue and pressed the restaurant to remove the false statements on its website."

Edelman, whose aunt is children's advocate Marian Wright Edelman, has a long history of huge academic and professional accomplishments — he's been on the faculty at Harvard Business School since his mid-20s and has taken on Google and Facebook over privacy issues — and a willingness to take on small fights on principle.

Edelman discovered in 2010 that Facebook users could inadvertently disclose to advertisers their phone numbers, addresses, and other information when they clicked on advertisements. It led to an outcry from users and a major overhaul of the social network's privacy policies, the Globe previously reported.

In 2000, before he became a lawyer, he went to small claims court in Cambridge and demanded cash from two companies who sent him unsolicited faxes.

On his bar application, he disclosed that he lost one case and won the other, a \$1,519 judgment against

Homeloan.com. (He was unable to collect before the company went bankrupt.)

Alvin Roth, a Nobel-prize winning economics professor at Stanford University, who had Edelman as a student and later a colleague at Harvard, said that in Edelman's exchange with Sichuan Garden, he was probably motivated by principle and the common good, believing he was looking out for the little guy.

"Ben is someone who has spent a lot of time thinking about the misbehavior that class action lawsuits are supposed to protect against — when a business is charging a little extra on a lot of transactions," Roth said. "His motivation was not \$12."

And it is clear that Edelman does not need the \$4 (or even the \$12). A story in Bloomberg Businessweek earlier this year said he charges as much as \$800 an hour to research companies for investors. According to Brookline town records, Edelman co-owns a condo that is assessed at \$1.3 million dollars. The house has seven bedrooms and five fireplaces, according to records.

Edelman did not respond to several inquiries from the Globe seeking comment Wednesday. At Harvard Business School on Wednesday, many students were avoiding reporters or moving to distance themselves from Edelman's actions.

"I hope people don't think of HBS in that way," said Yohei Sugimoto, a first-year student. "That's atypical."

But the accompanying Harvard bashing had already reached epic levels. In an effort to help shield the school, some students have launched a campaign to get people to donate to the Greater Boston Food Bank. The suggested donation is \$4.

Jon Staff, one of the students behind the effort, said it was an attempt to counter the view that the business school students "only care about money, only care about their careers, and are less concerned about other people."

But the Internet was already having its way with the story. "Whatever you do, don't go over the word limits he sets," one prankster wrote on the site ratemyprofesssor.com. "I once went over by 4 words and he wanted to make me write an extra 12 pages or turn me in for academic dishonesty."

Meanwhile, at Sichuan Garden, Ran Duan issued a statement on Wednesday, published on boston.com, saying the restaurant had received support from around the world, including offers for everything from legal advice to website services. He said he declined all offers, and even apologized to Harvard students for all the "negative association" they have been linked with in this ordeal.

On Wednesday afternoon, as lunch was getting going at the Brookline Village restaurant, a group of employees from a company called Promoboxx were picking up a takeout order. They said they had never been to the restaurant before, but after hearing about the commotion they came and picked up \$500 worth of food.

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Read the full exchange on Boston.com

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