

Reputational risk of social media

By  Bradley Elliott

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In the sometimes-fraught relationship between major corporations and ordinary citizens (consumers), the explosion of social media has shifted the power into the hands of the masses. Events that routinely slipped through the cracks of public scrutiny prior to the age of Twitter and Facebook now hardly go undetected and are often shared around the world before the next newspaper print run.

Reputation, a key business challenge

While this has served consumer activism by, facilitating the dissemination of vital information, it has also presented brands a major challenge in preserving their images against relentless, and sometimes baseless, accusations of wrongdoing. By the time the truth has been established, a “fake news” story might be already halfway around the world, causing severe damage to a brand or individual’s reputation.



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According to World Economics data, listed companies attribute an average of 25% of their market value to reputation. It comes as no surprise then, that the Deloitte Reputation@Risk survey found 88% of more than 300 senior executives and board directors polled were focusing more of their time and efforts on reputation as a key business challenge.

As well-known companies mature, they often box themselves into their brand character, which may lead to content that is insensitive to an ever-evolving post-modern audience.

To proactively deal with the potential minefield of social media reputational crises, brand managers need to take a few important steps.

Beware of common risk

The most common outcries are either related to socially sensitive subjects such as race, religion and politics. A significant portion is around basic customer complaints with products – hair in food, bad service etc. Social media has also forced companies and brands to be more accountable and responsible as they are often found to be in the wrong.



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Redefine your societal role

Over-sensitive online audiences have the potential to limit creativity, but brands need to understand their key role in society and treat social media the same way they would any other medium. If a piece of communication wouldn't pass muster on TV or on a billboard then it shouldn't be on social media. In fact, the audience on social is larger, more engaged and has a platform to do some serious damage to the brand.

Use common sense

Some brands can get away with more than others based on their history and brand character (e.g. Nando's, Kulula), but this requires a very nuanced touch. While it's riskier to portray an eccentric message, the potential rewards are also higher. In my own work, I've run into some issues as our content, strategy and creative teams work very collaboratively and this can lead to differences in tone, but this can also offer more eyes to catch potential blind spots.



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Report abuse

The problem with social media is that it has given a voice to a lot of people who don't deserve a voice in the first place. There are always those consumers who find something offensive in even the most trivial content. The best way to handle this is to engage with the user and take the conversation offline or to a private medium. If the user is clearly trying to "troll" the brand, report them to the relevant social media network for moderation.

Tool up

There are a range of sentiment tracking tools and platforms that brands can use to manage their reputations. These tools can trawl thousands of sites and platforms to flag anything that might have a negative impact on the brand, and they are improving continuously with the help of artificial intelligence. However, the challenge with most of these systems is they are often used as reactive measure.

First and foremost, brands need to carefully consider and analyse their content strategies, and the content itself, not only in the context of the brand, but in terms of socio-economic factors worldwide and locally.

If a brand can successfully overcome the various risks of social media, emerging digital channels can offer a powerful platform for engaging with existing and potential customers.

Ultimately, the key is to ensure that every message is well-considered and while mistakes happen from time to time, any response should bring the brand closer to its audience rather than creating opposition.

ABOUT BRADLEY ELLIOTT

- Bradley Elliott is the managing director at digital customer experience specialists, PlatinumSeed.
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