

Take Caution When Connecting: 8 Risks You Are Taking With Social Media Marketing

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Summary: Social media marketing can act as an effective tool to promote a brand's product, service or reputation. However, it also contains its share of threats. Risk communication and social media blogger Rusty Cawley, APR, discusses some of the most pressing vulnerabilities of marketing through social media.

Full Text: When Nestlé executives launched the candy conglomerate's Facebook page in January 2009, they didn't anticipate that environmental activists would use the site to attack the company over its use of palm oil in Kit-Kat bars.

When Gap executives debuted the clothing company's revamped logo via social media last October, they weren't ready for the torrent of online criticism that they would receive, which the media quickly noticed and amplified.

If you listen to the marketers who sell social media programs to clients, then you will hear a siren song. They tout Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and similar channels as low-cost, high-potential wellsprings for producing customers and revenues. However, they often fail to mention social media's significant risks.

That's because marketers are geared to recognize opportunity and seldom appreciate any risks outside those that could deter a return on investment. But as PR professionals, we understand that the CEO's first duty is to manage risk. This gap between the promise of social media marketing and its harsh realities creates an opportunity for PR professionals to take an active role in forming a social media strategy.

Let the marketing team gush about blogs, vlogs, microblogs, podcasts and social networks. As PR practitioners, we point out the threats and the vulnerabilities that social media can create. Think of it as the bulls vs. the bears: When it comes to social media, we should sell short. We should insist on caution and prudence.

In that spirit, here are eight reasons to warn our clients to use caution when considering social media marketing.

1. Activists may hijack your channel — Social media are public platforms designed to create conversations. That means your audience can and will talk back. If that audience has an agenda — especially an activist agenda — then it can easily dominate your social media channels with messages that harm your brand, your products and your share price.

2. Blogging may imperil your trademarks — Social media are generally considered cultural commons. The blogosphere shows little respect for a quaint idea like intellectual property. Ask your lawyer how repeated and unfettered abuse of your trademarks can affect your company's ownership. (Hint: It's a bad thing.)

3. Spammers may abuse your comments section — Comments sections are designed to encourage give-and-take communication with your audiences. Unfortunately, many online squatters use them as billboards for their products. Weeding them out takes time, energy and resources that could be spent more productively.

4. Your company is probably ill-prepared to respond in real time — When customers post questions or complaints to your social sites, they expect an immediate response. When they don't get one, they often get frustrated, angry or abusive in a public way. Can you commit to monitoring your social channels and responding to messages? Are you prepared for front-line workers to speak for your company with little oversight and minimal restraint?

5. Generating content for your social media channels may drain badly needed resources — Social media channels are inexpensive to launch, but demand a great deal of sweat equity to maintain. Viewing a social channel as a campaign is a mistake — it is an open maw that requires 24/7 attention. Are you willing to devote the staff time and creative energy required to generate content (text, photos, audio or video) that consistently engages an online audience? If not, then what's the point of starting?

6. Your corporate messages may become convoluted — It's difficult enough to stay on message for a single campaign. What happens when your campaign becomes a never-ending conversation between your social media team and your audiences? If you're not careful, then your well-honed messages can become total muck.

7. Claims about the power of social media may be overblown — Social media gurus like to focus on the potential of social media, but success stories are anecdotal at best. The metrics are murky, the platforms change quickly and often, the ROI can't be measured and no one has conducted a serious risk analysis of social media.

8. Social media may expose your company to self-inflicted wounds — The best way to avoid saying something stupid is to say little or nothing at all. Unfortunately, social media platforms require you to talk way more often than you should, creating more opportunities to make somebody angry.

Can any large company afford to ignore social media? Probably not. But that doesn't mean that your clients should go running through the minefield with their fingers crossed.

For now, the best strategy for most companies is "listen and respond." The strategy has two parts:

- Monitor the social media systematically for any potentially damaging complaints, rumors or outbursts.
- Respond swiftly at the source of the problem before the anger gets out of control and spreads online.

There are plenty of free tools online that you can combine to set up a "listening post" for social media. Assigning someone to monitor this post and training them how to respond is the expensive part. But this is something that a sizable company cannot afford to disregard.

The rules of response are straightforward: When you discover customers online with complaints or problems, help them out. Introduce yourself. Let them know that you saw their messages and you are ready to assist them. Speak like a human, not like a corporation. Fix the problem if you can, apologize profusely if you can't. Find some way to make it right. Most customers just want to know that someone at your company cares.

Rusty Cawley, APR, blogs about the relationships between community outrage, risk communication and social media at RustyCawley.com.

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