The Game of Trolls - three lessons from my experience

By Thamsanqa Malinga

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The one thing I appreciate, as a marketer, with the advent of Web 2.0 is that it has given rise to a countless number of platforms that have enabled us to engage with customers beyond the counter, the boardroom and the telephone.

Social media platforms, a by-product of Web 2.0, have allowed us to create online forums and other communities where we interact with our customers, potential customers and other users of our services and offerings.

The downside to this virtual world is the fact that it provides anonymity and a lack of face to face interaction. This in turn has given life to trolls. Originally referring to a Scandinavian folklore creature that lived far from human habitation, trolls in today's Web 2.0 world refer to a person who thrives on the anonymity provided by the internet in order to break rules, provoke, annoy and be rude to other users in an online community, simply because you can't see him/her.

These online communities are a great platform to engage customers and generate ambassadors as well as more business. However, if trolls who prowl your online community platforms are not properly managed your brand stands a risk of being tainted, painted and dented.

So what to do when your forum is infested with trolls? Here are three lessons I learned (the hard way):



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1. Don't react - respond

By reacting you are only feeding the monster. If you feel hot under the collar and are tempted to respond, don't. Rather walk away, literally walk away, and come back to the issue having calmed down. Start off by giving the benefit of doubt, it doesn't help jumping for your gun and shouting "TROLL!!" and start shooting, it could be a stressed out customer and once you fire that gun there is no turning back.

So always analyse the situation thoroughly and track the issue being debated to see where everything starts. You can start off your response by throwing in a light-hearted comment and then address the situation in a clam manner (still thread carefully as some jokes might be misinterpreted).

I was once had the urge to 'deal' with a troll in an online forum I was administering and guess what? It became worse. It went on ad infinitum. I got inbox messages daily, provocative posts that I would edit and that would result in more inbox messages, all of this because I reacted.

2. Try converting the troll

Work on converting the chief troll by throwing an occasional curveball, like complementing to the troll or inviting him to the forum when he is having a quiet day. I understand, now you are thinking I clearly don't know what I am talking about. Think about it. In my experience I have seen that trolls are often bored users who also love attention.

I once had a troll who was so grumpy, rude and all sorts. Once a comment was made and I responded by asking where he is so that he can start venting, that right there threw him off balance. The only thing he could manage was to post a ROTFL emoticon. Going forward I then started off slowly by chatting to the user outside of the forum and since we were now communicating via email I got to find out his name.

I eventually got to a risk and decided to take this 'relationship' a notch up and asked him to post something for me. It was a

bad move, but I call it a calculated risk, giving a known troll information to post on my behalf. It worked - sigh! It worked. Now the chief troll was my brand ambassador, but I still kept a sharp eye on him, since old habits die hard. Whenever his troll tendencies crept in I could send him a personal email and ask him to tone it down and he would.

3. Don't ban trolls

Just manage them, period. Just think how easy it is to set up an email account nowadays. So completely banning a troll by blacklisting his email address for example simply means he comes back under a different one with a different username and worse attitude. Like an Alsatian Wolf dog it would be best to just lie still, keep some distance, manage the situation and move in when things are getting out of hand.

Give warnings. I used to do a three strike count, at first it was seen as a toothless dog until after one striked three, I applied auto-moderation. Posts couldn't be seen until I approved and yes I did approve, but like P.W. Botha's Bureau of Information. For some it worked and for others it made the troll worse, then, soft bans were enforced and the level of how serious these measures were was taken serious. Back to strike one to three we went and if you were new to the forum and you got your first strike the rest of the Forumites will advise you not to get to your third strike.

Yes it sounds easier said than done. Whatever you do though just be careful of taking on the trolls in their game as you will not win, take it from me.

Well....when all else fails you can just click on the 'delete user' button (and bear the brunt).

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