The ethical dilemma in social media

By Jenny Reid   30 Jun 2014

Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are becoming a popular communication trend in business. Unfortunately, the trend sometimes comes with unforeseen ethical problems for the business. One bad tweet could end up hurting your sales, your image and your staff.

As a way to market and communicate with clients, social media has many benefits for your company. However, there are three potentially thorny ethical issues to watch out for when using social media.

Dodgy marketing

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Social media is a savvy, quick and powerful way to reach a massive market with your sales message. It's a great way to get attention-it's also a great way to get a bad reputation. Technology brings with it its own snake oil and charlatans.

Today it is easy to curry celebrity favour for endorsements, but fake profiles and followers on Twitter and Instagram to create some PR spin, is highly unprincipled and irresponsible marketing, especially if it exploits or misleads the consumer.

Just as a magazine has an obligation to distinguish between editorial and advertorial in a clear way, so do social media managers and marketers need to declare that certain posts or tweets are made by representatives or ambassadors of the company.

Rude, crude, bad attitude

Just like wisecracking, bad-mannered or indifferent frontline staff can turn a client away from your brand, so can an ill-informed or unethical employee's use of internal social media content at your company. Recently, the respected Red Cross US organisation had to issue an apology when one of its internal tweeters created a tasteless tweet about getting drunk.

These are known as 'rogue tweets' and while some swift PR can minimise the damage, these incidents can still deliver a significant blow to your reputation. Your online voice should be consistent with your core business principles of integrity. What we often see is a disconnect between a company's values and their online profiles.

Cyber Bullying-no, it's not just for 13-year-olds

Another issue is when employees use email or social media to start conflict with other employees, or to vent anonymously at the company they work for. In international research carried out by AVG Technologies in 2013, 90% of respondents claimed that colleagues had posted negative comments about them on a social media site; 80% claimed this bullying continued via email, Instant Messaging (IM) or SMS and WhatsApp.

Another worrying insight from the report is that almost one-in-ten employees said a manager had used information from a social media site against them at one time or another. This highlights the need for managers and HR practitioners to start behaving responsibly and ethically in social media channels to promote fair and responsible use of these applications.

Get people behind policy

At the moment, iFacts believes, there is not always clarity on social media in terms of the Consumer Protection Act or even

in the Basic Conditions of Employment Act.

The first measure a company can take is to formalise internal social media in a policy document. A workshop to debate the issue must devolve into structured training and guidance for employees, because both their and your reputations are at stake.

ABOUT JENNY REID

Jenny Reid is Managing Director of iFacts.
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