

Brands! Manage your social media platforms effectively during crises

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While the importance of having an online social media presence is becoming an increasingly critical form of consumer engagement and brand sustainability, businesses need to understand the potential repercussions of failing to manage their social media channels properly, especially during a crisis.

Brands often overlook the crucial aspect of effective management of a social media presence in a blind attempt to simply have a social media following.

While having a presence on social media platforms is a great additional tool for brands to handle crisis communications, it can have detrimental effects to the brand's reputation when not handled in the correct manner.

Typically, one finds there is an influx of comments by social media users following a brand crisis. It is vital that these comments are continuously monitored, not only as a feedback mechanism, but also to avoid the possible risk of liability for the comments made.

A recent court ruling in Australia held international liquor brand, Diageo, responsible for the comments made on its Facebook page. The ruling by the Advertising Standards Bureau in Australia declared Facebook as an advertising medium and therefore ruled that brands need to vet all comments on the social network platform or face the legal repercussions of any abusive language or false product or service claims that could lead to a company being sued.

Feedback - for free

Now, should a similar law be instituted in South Africa by the Advertising Standards Authority, brands should not be deterred from having a social media presence. Existing brands that are already engaging on social media platforms have an advantage over other competitor brands and should not be scared by this ruling, but should continue with their efforts and implement the necessary measures to effectively monitor all comments made on all platforms.

Previously, companies had to fork out a fortune to solicit feedback from their customers through customer satisfaction surveys or focus groups, whereas now through simple engagement on social media platforms customers provide the same important feedback about their likes, dislikes and preferences, for free.

However, brands need to be wary of commenting 'trolls', often originating from competing brands, that are active on these platforms that could cause legal trouble for the brand should the brand not effectively vet the comments made on its page.

The response to negative comments is critical, even brand detractors can be turned into brand advocates when a proper response is given.

Beware of the 'trolls'

Recently a few local brands have already fallen prey to 'trolls' or ineffective management of derogatory remarks made on social media platforms during a brand crisis. Internationally, a similar experience was witnessed by pen manufacturer, BiC, which saw a stream of critical and sexist comments made on its social media platforms after launching a pen designed specifically for women.

Another international case involved UK-based Waitrose, an upmarket retailer, which prompted consumers to provide reasons why they shop at the retailer on its social media platforms. While comments were mostly witty, some comments could be perceived as derogatory insults about the brand because of its high net worth individual target market, turning a potentially innocent question into an opportunity for consumers to post potentially harmful opinions.

When engaging online, even during a brand crisis, brands need to make sure they follow a simple two-step process. The first step is to listen and engage, and the second is to take the feedback to the rest of the business for implementation.

Points to bear in mind

In order to benefit optimally when engaging with consumers on social media platforms in the event of a crisis, brands need to keep the following points in mind:

- Use more than one channel, if Facebook is overrun by activists, leverage other channels to help the brand's voice rise above the activists;
- Stop the usual conversation and focus just on the problem people want to talk about;
- Be part of the conversation - always;
- Be human - this is the most important aspect of social media responses - corporate statements won't subdue the masses and most likely won't be seen by their social connections, whereas emotive statements are also more likely to get shared;
- In social media, everyone's opinion matters equally, therefore do not discount anyone;
- Celebrate those who take the time to engage, people who receive praise for their engagements are more likely to comment more frequently and can become a brand advocates;
- Solicit the community's involvement to help stamp out trolls and general brand detractors; and
- A spark can turn into a flame very quickly, therefore do not leave the management of social presence to one person or one team, but rather involve the whole company.

The importance of active social media engagement with consumers, especially in the event of a crisis, should not be discounted or ignored by brands. Ignoring the discussions online won't stop the discussion, it will just likely mean that customers will take it elsewhere, which could result in unintended negative consequences.

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