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Penny Sparrow: the bird that pooped on Jawitz Properties

By Tiffany Markman

4 Jan 2016

So there's a middle-aged white lady, #PennySparrow. She'd probably tell you she's not a racist and that 'some of my friends are black' (although domestic staff members don't count as friends, Penny). She'd also probably tell you that the country's gone to hell, the economy's in the toilet, Jacob Zuma is a monster and - perhaps most horrifyingly - coastal beaches are filthy.

But what she won't be telling you, at least from some time later today when the sh*tstorm properly descends, is that she works for Jawitz Properties.

In light of Penny's disgusting #monkeys diatribe, which you can explore in more detail here, I'm thinking about poor Herschel Jawitz and a brand that has come into disrepute over the last few hours, through no fault of its own.

Shem. Can you imagine the guy's dawning horror on a sunny weekend afternoon, three days into the New Year? He's probably never even met Penny Sparrow, a contractor for Jawitz. And yet, there's this:



And this:



Granted, Jawitz Properties employed a racist. But thousands of companies employ racists every day. And wife beaters. And paedophiles. And they probably don't know it, because this sort of stuff tends not to come up in the initial interview or (we hope) in day-to-day office interactions.

It's only when morons who don't understand how social media works put offensive things on the Internet (because they think

Facebook is private) and get publicly shamed, that the employer brand thinks, 'Yikes. How do I distance my company, quickly, from this catastrophe?'

It helps very little if the person no longer works for you, Herschel. It helps very little if you're "outraged" and your company has been "proudly South African" since the 1960s. Because what you should be doing is ensuring, ahead of time, when someone leaves, that they sever all ties to your brand on their social media accounts. That there's been a thorough clean-up, so to speak.

You can't discipline Penny Sparrow *now*, as she's no longer a member of your staff, warns social media lawyer Emma Sadleir.

But you may not know this, Herschel, because no one's handling this stuff for you, and now there's been a whopping cock-up. You can issue as many statements as you like but the tens of thousands of people who saw Penny Sparrow's filth - 34,000 as of 9am today - might not be listening to Cape Talk.

And yes, it'll all die down later on when someone comes up with something else to talk about - like the fantastic #theyearwemispronounceback - but for now, Jawitz Properties is in the poo to the tune of massive brand damage.

The moral of the story? [Companies, read this next bit carefully:]

1. It's not enough to 'be on social'. It's not enough to force un-savvy employees to use social (many local property companies are guilty of this). You have to train them on how social works in the real world and on the many, many reputational and other - even legal - risks involved.
2. A social media audit *must* be part of the exit process when someone leaves your employ. Twitter. Facebook. LinkedIn. Third-party portals. Whatever else there is. All reference to current employment by your company must be removed, in the presence of someone official. Find out whether (and indeed how) this is covered by labour law and if it isn't, get a consultant to guide you.

3. Have a solid generic statement ready in case of disaster, so that you can tweak it in line with the specifics and start to manage the crisis early and fast. Even when it hits you upside the head on a Sunday evening.

4. Try - to the best of your ability - not to hire racists, wife beaters, paedophiles and other horrible people. They're inherently evil, for one thing, and for another: it's always going to be bad for the brand down the line.

Best of luck.

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

I spend 10 hours a day writing - and teaching others to write. I was South Africa's Freelance Copywriter of the Year in 2020 and one of the world's 'Top 50 Female Content Marketers' in 2021.
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