

Teaching old (executive) dogs new (social media) tricks

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Two students' take on Red & Yellow's Exec Ed Workshop on Social Media for Leadership

"We don't have a choice whether we do social media, the question is how well we do it". This is the intimidating reality for many executives in big companies, and one which they handle very tentatively.

Once upon a time, being "social" was considered risky business, as executives were fraught with fear over saying anything that could result in a social media sh*t storm of disappointed customers, antagonistic employees and brand haters who could threaten the brand's reputation.

Fast forward a couple years later, and it is now imperative for brands to join relevant conversations, transparently tell the brand's story, and use an integrated digital strategy across multiple channels to sidestep criticism. Social media is so much more than consistently posting content to your Facebook or Twitter pages. So why are big corporations still getting it so wrong?

We were fortunate enough to attend a Red & Yellow Executive Education workshop on Social Media for Leadership, presented by Mike Stopforth. This workshop was designed to equip executives with the skills needed to navigate the artificially sentient world. So, for those executives missing from the workshop, these are our key take outs for you:

So obvious, right?

Social media provides the opportunity to acknowledge the individuality of people, as it allows brands to customise their messages to reach specific people in a meaningful way. It allows brands to break through traditional communication barriers and speak using a unique, but consistent, voice. It is through this authenticity that brands are able to build and monetise trust with customers.

That's all very well, but...

Companies weren't solely designed to interact with customers. They were built for broadcast, not response, and as a result got so good at talking at people and not to people. Their intention was to push a specific message onto a group of people assumed to have the exact same interests and behaviour traits. Businesses need to reorganise themselves around this new paradigm.

Being a snail in a world of road-runners

Many companies are struggling to keep up with this fast and ever-changing environment. As millennials who have grown up in this super-charged period of change and technology adoption, being adaptable and embracing these changes has been part and parcel of our lives. So for us, seeing businesses still struggling to acclimatise to these changes and getting social media so wrong, when it can be so simple, is baffling.

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Social media is turning advertising on its head and changing it at the most fundamental level. We disrupted advertising with social media, but then used advertising to make social media a reality. We basically took billboards and glorified them on social media. No wonder people like us just don't interact! Too often, it's just the same of the same, packaged in a new medium. Social media provides an opportunity to manage the individuality of your customer audience. This opens up some

exciting opportunities for dialogue. So stop broadcasting and start engaging.

Running through quicksand

Social media posting for business is so much more than just coming up with a clever status update; it requires extensive content planning and often lengthy authorisation processes that set the execution in stone weeks beforehand. Brands need to break down these processes to be quick and reactive and not squash out their human voice with generic responses. Audiences of today want to be surprised and spoken back to in the same manner in which they engaged with the brand.

Under a microscope

Social media will amplify an inherent truth on your brand. It is the best way to communicate the values of your brand (which you need to have developed and be clear on). Twitter, in particular, will amplify the truth of people's experiences with your brand. Your brand is no longer what you tell your customers, but what your customers tell their friends. In this way, brands are like toddlers, they are difficult to control. But when your brand runs into a mini crisis, Mike reminds us that there's nothing more disarming than an honest apology.

For us, growing up in a world slowly being immersed by social media, interacting with and using social media has become only natural. So going into a workshop such as this and seeing first-hand how big companies are still struggling so much to grasp social media and use it to its full potential is frustrating. So stop struggling along and start hiring millennials. They may be hard to please, but they sure as hell know social media.

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Kirsten Gray and Rebecca Richardson are students at Red and Yellow.

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