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Strict rules can prevent a social media disaster

Posted on August 12th, 2013 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



How closely are you protecting your brand image through your social media initiatives? Who has the authority to “speak” for your organization on these channels? And who’s watching or monitoring what is being said about you on this untamed frontier, where anyone can become a self-proclaimed expert with the ability to post and promote his or her own “news” and views?

Although I was raised in the age of the IBM Selectric with Wite-Out (remember?), I have enthusiastically embraced the era of global online communication and the fast-changing social media evolution. The advantages of the digital age are many, but there also are pitfalls to avoid. Without a game plan and a strategy to manage your new-age marketing and social media activity, your company opens itself up to real potential threats and loss.

Here are a few tips for navigating social media, designed to keep you out of dangerous waters.

Do you have a written social media policy and guideline? Are there protocols and procedures in place that clearly define who is approved to handle your social media activity and speak on your organization’s behalf? Are there guidelines as to what type of content is appropriate?

I advocate developing and publishing such a guideline. Investing the time to create a simple document will minimize risks while maximizing your potential for success. Remember, with each online communication, no matter the platform — Facebook, LinkedIn, blogs, Twitter, YouTube — you are creating and reinforcing your brand image to the world.

Doesn’t it make sense to have a plan to safeguard your brand and your company? Remember, Internet archives are there for the searching, so one thoughtless, unintentional bungle can be replayed and shared with a single keystroke into perpetuity.

Your social media policy and guidelines should clearly establish rules.

First, you should identify who within your organization (and/or an outside contractor) is authorized to write, record or post content on your company’s behalf. Just as you wouldn’t allow just anyone from your company to speak to a television reporter about your company, you need to establish who is qualified and authorized to serve as your brand’s social media voice and spokesperson to the world.

Let's assume you've identified your social media spokesperson or team. Do they understand what content is appropriate and what is not? When conducting media training for executives I've always emphasized what is approved messaging and what is not. Surely this same approach should be considered for digital communication.

Although positive commentary about your brand, its products, services, customers and employees may be the norm, what are the other specific content areas approved for communications? I suggest having a social media strategy that defines the specific type and areas of content your company endorses so those charged with development can plan accordingly. One of the social media clients I manage has a detailed list of approved content categories and a fluid schedule that allows the team to update and add content at will.

Equally important: What is off limits? What are the rules and protocols regarding the posting of negative statements about competitors? What about handling complaints or criticisms on any number of topics? Could your posts be construed as malicious, threatening or intimidating? Could images you post be considered obscene, offensive or derogatory — to anyone?

Tread very, very carefully. Consider every post or content upload cautiously. The online culture moves incredibly fast. I have seen multiple instances of content providers posting on a whim, without considering the ramifications of the content. Just consider the former Food Network queen Paula Deen and the cost to her career of one stupid ethnic comment made years ago.

One misguided cartoon or borderline sexual image or just a dumb statement or attempt at humor has the potential to explode, causing you to lose customers by the boatload and wreaking havoc on the brand you've worked so hard to project and protect. Avoid any commentary or image whatsoever that might be perceived as hostile or derogatory involving race, gender, religion, sexual orientation and disability, among other things.

You also need to ensure that your content provider understands the confidentiality of your organization. No internal reports, memos, statements, policies, procedures, systems, new product data or photos, financials, etc., should ever reach social media channels without approval from the top. In fact, I seriously question ever posting proprietary information of any type on this platform. It's just not the place.

Your policy guideline also should address how to handle mistakes. If you have posted inaccurate news or faltered in judgment, correct it immediately. Openly address any miscommunications and admit and apologize for the error. Our online friends, followers and customers expect us to share accurate information and news, so don't jeopardize that hard-fought trust by attempting to cover up or ignoring a mistake.

This next area of focus can't be over-emphasized. Do you have a social media policy that is clearly communicated to your employees? Have they read and signed a document that clearly explains your social media policy and confirms their agreement to abide by these directives?

Here are a few examples to help underscore this concern.

Imagine good ol' Joe Smith posting a negative, even slanderous comment on a competitor's or industry Facebook group page or consumer forum, speaking as if he were representing your company.

Or how about disgruntled former employee Jane Doe, who was just fired and is now posting your trade secrets, announcing new product plans and discussing her perception of product flaws, along with broadcasting her list of grievances?

Don't be naive and think this couldn't happen to you. In fact, it happens every day and negatively affects businesses throughout the world. Your social media policy should include a section for your employees that clearly identifies company rules and protocols.

For example, can employees create a link from their own Facebook page or blog or Twitter account to your company's website? Can they use your company logos, trademarks, creative work or intellectual property in their own marketing or social media activities?

Are they allowed to express their opinions about your company in internal or external social media platforms without identifying themselves as an employee who does not represent the company? Are there required written disclaimers in place for such communications?

Can they participate in online arguments or debates in an attempt to defend the company and can they take a position to oppose? If they leave the company for any reason, are there written legal protections and social policy sign-offs in place in which they have agreed that they will not disclose or address any business issues or company information in any public or private forum? Are there clear-cut repercussions, spelled out in writing, for those who disregard these policies?

Your best employees and your worst employees, past and present, can directly impact your business via the social community. It is to your advantage to prepare, communicate and enforce a social media policy and guideline that everyone understands.

Lastly, are you regularly monitoring your online brand reputation so you know what is being said and posted about your company? Who is charged with this responsibility? What resources and mechanisms are in place to track this activity? How is it reported? To whom is it reported?

Does your social media policy and guideline address how to handle unhappy customers or competitors who are posting on your platforms or on others? A word of friendly advice: Don't wait until you're facing a similar situation to figure out your response strategy. The time you lose in scrambling and trying to formulate a response can cost you dearly.

I once had a client who failed miserably to respond to a highly charged online forum post, hoping that by ignoring it it would go away. Despite my recommendation for an immediate response and a plan of action, the company's failure to recognize and respond led to a costly PR crisis and nightmare, along with an eventual class-action lawsuit.

No doubt social media is the bomb these days in the marketing world, but don't let it backfire and blow up on your business by failing to be prepared. A social media policy and guideline will best focus your efforts and help you achieve your goals while simultaneously serving to protect the home front.

Wanda Kenton Smith is a 33-year marine industry marketing veteran and former magazine and newspaper editor. She currently serves as president of Marine Marketers of America. To connect: wanda@kentonsmithmarketing.com, linkedin.com/in/wandakentonsmith, http://twitter.com/wkentonsmith, or visit www.kentonsmithmarketing.com.

This article originally appeared in the August 2013 issue.