Danger Ahead

The Growth of Social Media Risk

BY JAMES DONNELLY

At this point, PR professionals shouldn't be surprised to hear that more businesses in most sectors are going social, with a presence on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, LinkedIn and the like. Even industries with strict regulations on social media — financial services, pharmaceutical and health care, insurance — have agencies that are engaging more online.

Indeed, social media *risks* are also growing exponentially. Almost every week, there's at least one new case study featuring social media's role as an accelerant — or, in some instances, the root

catalyst — of a reputation-depleting crisis.

Are these risks growing because more companies online means there are more targets for digitally networked tomato-throwers? Or are more businesses deciding to engage online, at least in part, to better address the "empowered dissatisfied" who congregate in social networks? It's a worthy chicken-or-egg debate.

It's likely that a little bit of both is contributing to the growth of social media risk.

The Altimeter Group, a research and advisory firm, recently provided

some analysis of these risks and also offered some remedies. The report, titled "Guarding the Social Gates: The Imperative for Social Media Risk Management," outlines four main areas of risk. Topping this list was "damage to brand reputation." Only 10 percent of companies surveyed said that social media represented either slight or no risk to the organization.

Planning tips

In almost all discussions on the topic of social media risk, we hear the same question: *What does the social media risk-management plan look like?*

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Specialize your strategy

Examples of social media response tactics for two different companies

Typical OCM Tactics	A Leading Consumer Soft-Drink Brand	A Leading Insurance Company
Delete it if…	Someone posts a profane diatribe about your brand's latest ad, clearly in violation of the company's "pool rules" for its Facebook page.	In responding to a customer via Twitter, the company inadvertently "replies" instead of "DMs" and releases information that could be perceived as sensitive, and against regulations.
Ignore it if…	Someone tweets that the brand's newly launched flavor tastes like liverwurst.	Someone posts a YouTube video with commentary that compares your prices with those of other insurance providers.
Monitor it if…	Someone writes a blog post about your latest advertisement's "insensitivity toward women." It has six supportive comments.	In anger, someone issues a threat against your insurance adjusters in Iowa.
Redirect it if…	A hashtag campaign — #dirtycola — has begun, questioning your brand's sustainability program, which is addressed fully on your website.	A customer is asking specific questions about her policy on Facebook and needs to speak to customer care.
Respond to it if…	You need to correct a rumor swirling online about liverwurst being an actual ingredient in the newly launched flavor.	The public misunderstands a promotional "join us" rate as a bait-and-switch scheme.
Engage with it if…	You voluntarily recall one of your brand's products.	Recent legislation prompts changes to insurance premiums and is creating confusion among customers.

Our team at Ketchum has helped to produce dozens of online crisis management (OCM) plan supplements during the past few years, so we can share a few tips to help address this question:

• **Integrate.** We do not recommend building a standalone social media crisis plan. Even if a separate social media team exists and requires its own set of tools to help manage online threats, the tools should extend from an organization's broader reputation management crisis plan. This helps to ensure that there is strategic alignment among various communications channels.

For example, you don't want your social media team dispelling rumors about a product discontinuation when the executive team is simultaneously in negotiations to shutter the same product line.

• **Guide, don't prescribe.** Bad things happen when you apply too much science to what is essentially an art. Thus, social media crisis management tools become highly inefficient when they attempt to provide one "golden solution" for each aspect of social media risk. (A telltale sign of a cumbersome tool is one that calculates a "score" based on different criteria — and that score then prescribes a rote set of actions.)

It's much better for these tools to provide escalating levels of consideration and guidance, from which people can make a judgment call on an effective response. The social media space is evolving too quickly to rely on rigid and precise prescriptions — for example, responding to a crisis via Pinterest might be the right thing to do right now, but people may view that platform differently next month.

• **Use the same tactics and custom considerations.** Most of the diagnostic tools that we build ultimately lead to six tactical solutions when facing a social media threat: Delete it, ignore it, monitor it, redirect it, respond to it or engage deeply on it.

However, be wary of any one-size-fits-all piece of software or off-the-shelf template that leads to these solutions.

Every company has different reasons for having an online presence. Each has a distinct voice. Each is engaging with its audience in various ways through social media. This context dictates the considerations that you must make when adopting a new tool.

• **Update often.** All crisis plans are snapshots in time. They help mitigate the risks that were present at the time of the assessment process and production of the plan. Therefore, you should update all crisis plans regularly.

If you consider the pace and depth of change occurring in the social media space, then it would also stand to reason that these risk-management tools require aggressive and constant revision. ■

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