

Addressing **Negative** Press in Social Media Marketing

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Table of Contents

- Introduction
- The Right to Free Speech & the Digital Revolution
- To Engage or Not to Engage
- Negative Buzz & How to Deal With it
- Urban Outfitters Case Study

Introduction

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, blogs and wikis enable interaction between users, brands, and organizations through the creation of user-generated content. This interaction can have either positive or negative sentiment and addressing negative press is a major concern for brands active in social media marketing. Before a company launches a social media marketing campaign, they must analyze what type of resources will be needed to address negative comments, feedback and sentiment. Certain industries, often in the public's eye, consistently receive heightened negative press. For these companies in particular, internal discussion, evaluation and planning are necessary before deciding on a tactical methodology for launching into the social media space. Below are four questions that the Chief Marketing Officer, Brand Manager and Social Media Strategist should answer when trying to make the decision about using social media as a marketing channel or not.

- Will having a hub for interaction in the social media space lead to increased negative comments and feedback about our company?
- By putting our brand in the social media space, can we sway any negative sentiment, therefore having an overall positive affect on people's perception?
- Is it worth our time and effort to be in the space if all we do is reputation management?
- Is it best to just fly below the radar, and not be in the social media space?

This paper addresses these questions, with specific focus on reputation management as a high priority for companies. We will examine these challenges, provide proactive tactical solutions, and consider a crisis situation that arose within the retail clothing industry with Urban Outfitters.



The Right to Free Speech & The Digital Revolution

During the birth of advertising, company owners depended on personal referrals from friends or family, which were word-of-mouth endorsements from trusted sources regarding their services or product. With the advent of the print press, radio and television, evolved “traditional” mass advertising. Through both the digital revolution and technological advancements with the Internet, word-of-



mouth marketing and one-to-one communications are now again possible through inbound marketing tactics using digital media. Unlike traditional mass advertising, the digital age allows the consumer to have a voice. Furthermore, audiences can now choose to opt-out or turn off, making the job of the marketer evermore challenging. With two-way dialogue now possible through social media channels, consumers can state their opinions about your brand and their experiences with it. These opinions and content can

easily be shared and spread, creating the opportunity for widespread negative press. User-generated reviews have the ability to make or break your brand and they can change the future of your company’s lifecycle.

Online discussion of your brand or company will happen regardless of your online presence or social media marketing activity. Tools such as socialmention (socialmention.com) can help you assess what is currently being said about your brand online. Most discussions will be tagged as neutral. However, consumers often speak badly about your brand when they’ve experienced an extreme situation or interaction that they have deemed as negative. It’s the negative attention that creates the most impact externally and internally. If your brand is actively monitoring social media, chances are you will have the opportunity to respond to the negative press in a way that can turn an opponent into an advocate and even a loyal customer. If the buzz is positive, your brand can promote that user-generated content further and increase positive brand perception amongst other customers. Social media has created the ability for companies to be more transparent in their business customer relations, resulting in both the downfall and the rise of companies.

It should also be noted that listening software that automatically calculates the sentiment of discussions can often be inaccurate. The human language and our words take on various meanings and is best interpreted on a case-by-case basis by the community manager handling the social media marketing campaign.

To Engage or Not To Engage

Some companies feel it is best to stay out of the social media space for reasons such as limited resources, lack of knowledge of how to proactively proceed, or they are timid to respond to content with negative sentiment. Many companies believe that if they can control the message and the buzz around their brand, they will ultimately be able to control their brand perception and therefore their fate. As previously discussed, control within social media has shifted to consumers; companies can listen and engage in conversations, but they cannot enforce control. Also, large corporations have numerous levels of management and offices; the larger the corporation, the harder it is to control consistent branding through social media. A major concern also arises in the fact that once something is said about a brand it can't be erased. Decision makers have to decide if it is more beneficial for them to enter into these conversations with a listening ear and offer appropriate rectification, or if it is better to let these conversations occur without input. Either way, these conversations will continue and there's only one way to influence the direction they take (socialmediatoday.com).



Companies that have already adopted social media marketing understand the benefits of joining the conversation. For example, when responding to a negative comment, companies have the opportunity to solve, surprise and exceed consumer's expectations, showing current and potential customers that their organization is helpful and responsive. Furthermore, engaging with negative sentiment increases the ability to discover issues that would not otherwise be reported. Social media has created a place where many people feel more comfortable voicing their opinions. In fact, there could be larger corporate or product issues that social media



conversations expose if appropriate attention is dedicated to listening. Kodak, for example, has dedicated a Chief Listening Officer to discern product development issues and market research from customer conversations (monsterthinking.com).

Companies also have the ability to build strong, personal connections through proactive community management. When entering these conversations remember to be respectful, accurate and patient. Take the opportunity to acknowledge milestones and current events. Also, never underestimate the power of your brand advocates. Companies can gain free endorsements, word-of-mouth marketing and new spokespersons through this engagement. Moreover, one-on-one interaction through social media can greatly increase their perception of your brand and the likelihood of promoting your company to their friends and community. True brand advocates will actually support your brand when they come across a negative comment, and their response and reaction often holds more clout and merit. Furthermore, credibility is gained when brands confront negative press in a thoughtful and responsible manner; it portrays a brand that is trusting and accountable.

Negative buzz & how to deal with it

There are many types of negative buzz that consumers can spread within social media and on the Web. The three categories of negative buzz that filter out are constructive criticism, simple criticism and profanity (chamindrah.wordpress.com). Below are best practices when dealing with each of these types of negative buzz.

Handling Constructive Criticism: Make sure to thank the author, apologize as necessary and explain the brand's perspective, framing the situation in a more positive light.

Handling simple criticism: Ask them to clarify why they are upset, apologize as necessary and provide a solution.

Handling profanity: Do not hesitate to delete or ignore the post, as it is important at this point to protect both your brand and its advocates. It is probably best not to engage with someone that has acted irrationally.



Take a deep breath: Make sure you don't respond when you are charged with an emotional reaction. Cool down, and respond in an objective and respectful manner. Think bigger picture and remember the comment is not directed at you, personally.

Go offline: Address the situation publicly so that your company is seen as responsive and accountable, but quickly take any negative and extensive interactions offline.

Be timely: Social media presents conversations in real-time. Make sure to respond within an appropriate amount of time, to be set internally.

Pick your battles carefully: Before responding, consider the consumer's intentions. Are they really upset or are they looking for a kickback? Sometimes the comments are spam-like, and it would be a waste of your time to engage any further.

Act as a team: Divide and conquer as many negative sentiment posts as possible. Every message missed could mean a lost customer.

Weigh your losses: Larger corporations can't respond to all types of negative buzz. Some comments hold more weight than others.

Be proactive: Positive feedback increases significantly when you make it easy for users to rate and review products/services. In the past, most companies have made it hard to provide feedback, so the only feedback that arose was negative.

Encourage feedback: With the adoption of devices allowing for immediate feedback, the probability of instant, positive feedback has increased.

Have an escalation plan: Before you enter the space, discuss what situations could arise, and have an accessible, thought-through plan of action and guidelines for responding in a timely manner. Identify decision makers and work with a community manager that knows the plan.



Case Study

The retail clothing industry offers great examples of how to implement a social media strategy with a strong customer service component. A recent study from Auros, "Are you serious about social?", shows that 80% of the largest clothing retail brands in the United Kingdom are active within the social media space, yet only a very small percentage have truly grasped how to appropriately use this real-time media channel (econsultancy.com). For example, Twitter is a great platform to give



and receive information in a fast manner; it can be especially effective in store when a customer is at the point of purchase. However, when tested, only 25% of clothing retailers responded to a question directed towards them on Twitter, and the average response time was over an hour and a half; the customer has already left the point of purchase at this time. The survey also reports that depending on the social platform retailers

respond differently to negative and positive comments, though their response rate is always under 20%. These brands are running the risk of obtaining negative feedback when they don't respond to a customer asking for help or assistance. No matter if negative or positive, there is a lot of missed opportunity to further engage with customers, develop stronger brand loyalty therefore further extending their messaging, and to even make a sale.

Urban Outfitters

The Urban Outfitters (UO) brand has recently been at war with artists and designers, and the battlegrounds are social media platforms. Who won? The individual community members won because UO was largely unresponsive. This case study raises two issues. First, any major company issue will be reflected within social media conversation. It's no longer a matter of if, but instead, when. Flaws in products or services are even harder to overcome now because social media channels give every customer their own megaphone. Second, brands have become transparent. So, when bad press arrives, a brand should be responsive in an honest, timely and extremely strategic manner. There is no anonymity in this situation.



Urban Outfitters was recently called out on May 30, 2011 by the crafting community for stealing their ideas without due credit. The latest claim was by a jeweler that claims that UO stole her necklace idea; before this accusation, it was a stolen photograph that UO used on a t-shirt. After the jeweler tweeted about UO stealing her idea the message spread throughout the crafting community, Miley Cyrus commented on it, and finally the Huffington Post picked up the story.



Photo from imediaconnection.com



Photos from themarysue.com

This conversation became so popular that #urbanoutfitters and #thieves became trending topics (themarysue.com). The blog article that was used to document the process had over 250,000 bit.ly clicks (sheposts.com). Facebook posts started popping up on UO Fan page and the necklace was immediately pulled from the shelves, as well as from their website. However UO response to this brand crisis was merely the following: “Hey guys, we see your tweets regarding the I Heart Destination necklace. Please know that our accessories buying team is looking into this.” Afterward UO issued a very defensive and un-apologetic statement. In this process UO lost 17,000 twitter followers in just three hours (imediaconnection.com).



In this case, social media forced an international clothing retailer to address a questionable business practice. Even if UO did nothing legally wrong, the publicity that arose from this situation and how they responded to it, caused irreputable



Photo from imediaconnection.com

damage to the brand. UO stock decreased and sales have been down. This example shows how every minute a response to a negative comment is delayed, could result in a problem that escalates to the point of no return. Brands turning their back on these conversations are not going to solve anything, just make matters worse.

It's important to also point out, that with real-time conversation capabilities, escalation of a crisis can occur in a matter of minutes. The entire UO escalation took place within one day, starting with an angry tweet directed toward UO, and ended with them pulling the alleged inventory with no admittance of doing so (uspolitics.newswire.com). UO CEO, Glen Senk, realizes how important social media is to UO bottom line. At an industry conference "Senk mentioned that on some days 20% of Urban Outfitters' business comes in from social media" (effortlessanthropologieblogspot.com). That's a large revenue channel for their response to have been so lacking, weak and apathetic. And this happened to an established company who seemed to have all their ducks in a row according to an article published in April 2010 titled: "Urban Outfitters 12 Rules of Social Marketing" (socialcommercetoday.com).

Bad press through social media can happen to any brand. It's best to be aware and prepared, by having accessible escalation plans in order to offset negative press. Having a community manager listen to conversations about your brand around the clock greatly helps offset potential reputation damaging conversations. Avoiding the social media space does not decrease negative sentiment about your brand, it only means your brand has no voice to turn the negative sentiment around.

About Social Distillery

Social Distillery announced its launch, June 1, 2011, as a social media marketing agency. Formed by two recent University of Texas Masters of Advertising graduates, with expertise in digital advertising and public relations, the agency provides social media services including consulting and strategy development, as well as account management and execution. Kristen Sussman and Leigh Pankonien, who while at UT managed the social media marketing and strategy for The University of Texas Advertising and Public Relations Department, lead the agency. The department was recently ranked by the Fall 2010 edition of the Journal of Advertising Education as the top advertising program in the country.

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