

Social Media Policy Protocols: Who's Telling Your Story?

By Teresa Todd

If nothing else, the past few years will be remembered as a bonanza of social media frenzy. Facebook exploded with a vengeance, Twitter chirped its way into mainstream American business, and blogs became personal megaphones. What's more, YouTube, Hulu and Ustream videos knocked prime time networks on to their collective backsides.

Yes, it has been a heyday for new, hip and edgy but not so good for tried, true and tested.

But even this newfound blitz of marketing in the moment with its plethora of emerging technologies couldn't change one core principle that remains untouched: content is still king.

For any business, content is what differentiates it from competitors. It's the connection that resonates with customers, followers, viewers and users. It is storytelling, brand differentiation and a company's lifeblood all rolled into one. Content is the essence of the experience.

Social media engages users and builds communities giving the old adage "any friend of yours is a friend of mine" new context. Interactions are relationship-based and operate with the same third-party credibility that has long been the hallmark of public relations. It's PR to a higher power with its ability to engage audiences and pull them into a brand's conversation.

As with any great evolution, social media is beginning to move beyond strategy and tactics, listening and monitoring, metrics and RO. Creative content has risen to take its rightful place in the social media marketing mix.

Create relevance.

Not all online buzz is noteworthy nor does it require attention. However, social media has turned everyone even remotely associated with your brand into a potential ambassador, for better or worse. Listening and responding appropriately are key to managing your company's reputation and fostering a relationship with current and potential customers. Understand where users are in the awareness/interest/desire/action continuum and align your strategies to drive users to take a particular action.

Build a following.

The prevalence of relevant links is important to cross-pollinating online content to rank higher in search results, and capture and keep audience attention. Social media is about cultivating relationships and building a loyal fan base of individuals



interested in what you have to say and offer.

Analyze the competition.

Just as a business monitors conversations occurring with their own customers, social media offers a way to examine conversations involving competitors. What are the advantages and disadvantages of competitive product offerings as compared to your own? Where does your company fall within the industry as compared to your competition? What insight can be gleaned as to how customers make decisions regarding products or services?

React quickly.

Taking an industry-wide approach, social media provides the means to identify trends and changes as they occur. Shift happens and being among the first to spot trend changes allows a company to react quickly and maintain a competitive advantage.

Personalize the message.

Marketers have always tried to put the right message in front of the right people, but with mixed outcomes. Social media allows companies to customize their messages to reach specific target audiences through the communication channels users prefer most.

Establish policies.

Beyond the creative and engaging side of content are fundamental determinations that must be made within every organization: Who is telling your story, how is content generated, and what impact does it have on your company?

When establishing social media policy, there's no one-size-fits-all approach. Every business is unique in defining the role social media plays

within their organization. Example, social media policy within a law firm where client confidentiality is paramount will be vastly different than that of a technology company that encourages employees to post and tweet about their work.

With the commercialization of social media sites, it can be a powerful force in driving new business, increasing brand awareness and building relationships. But it's also a forum that employees use for purposes outside of business.

In establishing policies and protocols, where should the line drawn between personal and professional online behaviors? What about First Amendment rights to free speech? How do businesses protect themselves when the employee's personal and professional lives are inextricably linked? Is it possible to separate the employee as an individual from the employee as a representative of the company?

Bottom line, engaging content and monitoring social media conversations is paramount to an online strategy. It not only enables companies to combat negative setbacks, but also identifies and develops opportunities, and solidifies relationships. Interactions become a function of the experience the audience has with a brand. Make it a good one.

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