Death by 280 Characters: How to Avoid Viral Social Media Blunders

The McDonald's Twitter account hit a major bump in the road as it closed out 2017. On Black Friday, the fast food giant presumably wanted to tweet out a promo deal to shoppers but instead tweeted this: "Black Friday ****Need copy and link****."

How does this sort of social media blunder happen at such a large and successful organization? Even with sophisticated software and multiple departments involved, companies still manage to miss obvious mistakes because of the rapid pace of social channels. The desire to be the first and funniest overtakes reasonable caution, leading to well-meaning missteps such as this one from New Zealand in which police unintentionally made light of car crash fatalities.

Now that social media has become the face of the company to many consumers, brands must rethink how they handle their social accounts. The problem doesn't boil down to personnel alone, though. A combination of better training, processes and personnel can prevent unwanted social media attention.

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Building a better social strategy.

Social accounts play an outsized role in establishing the public identities of brands. Companies must be cautious when selecting people to represent them online, but they also must tread carefully when training personnel and building the processes that guide social media communications.

By focusing on these three areas, smart companies can create a social media response culture that presents the best face of the brand:

1. Establish a clear social media process.

Follow the chain of creation, approval, distribution and analysis on every social media account to identify potential problem areas. Investigate your reactive content (including customer care), as well as your proactive content (marketing posts). How does a potential tweet or post make its way from internal team to agency to approval to published? This is particularly important for staged social – "set and forget" software makes it easy to assume everything is fine, but problems can still occur.

Develop concrete policies to interrupt regular social media schedules when necessary. If tragedy strikes – the death of a public figure, for instance – treat the event with respect, and don't attempt to latch on inappropriately. Cinnabon learned this lesson the hard way. Following the death of Carrie Fisher, the company encountered fan backlash after posting a picture of Princess Leia with cinnamon rolls in place of her iconic hairstyle.

Design processes that also include PR disaster responses. If your company wakes up to a massive blunder, know who will be responsible for approving response content. Southwest Airlines got it right earlier this year, using Facebook Live to keep customers updated during a major service blackout. Southwest even involved its COO, adding weight to the response and making customers feel like their problems were heard.

According to Hootsuite, American social media spending is expected to reach more than $17 billion by 2019. Use that budget to design easy-to-follow processes that will mitigate

disasters.

2. Hire personnel who won’t burn you.

Social media skills are easier to learn than the subtleties of company culture. Instead of hunting for social media experts at prices up to $74,000 per year, according to PayScale, identify people who understand your brand best. Then, teach that group to use Twitter.

These individuals should have strong judgment, people skills and empathy. When brands pull together a team of young and trendy people to run their social media accounts, they fail to remember that those people will do more than craft humorous tweets – they’ll also field all customer questions. If team members lack the appropriate answers, they’ll bog down production by asking other employees. And responding without checking is even worse, as it can lead to costly mistakes.

Esteban Kolsky, social media expert and founder of thinkJar, spoke with me when I conducted research for my book “Hug Your Haters.” He believes skilled customer relations specialists make better social representatives than people who have a background in social media. Put people who have been on the front lines of customer support in your social media room to keep responses timely and on message.

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3. Provide employees with extensive training.

Use practice exercises to train social media employees for every social media scenario. You might have workers

participate in desktop walkthroughs to go through the motions when things are good, which will help them be prepared should the tides shift.

Per eMarketer, nearly 89 percent of American companies with 100 or more employees rely on social media for marketing. Don’t leave the teams responsible for these channels unprepared to handle adversity. Talk through real-world examples of other companies that have responded to social media missteps in the right way as well as the wrong way.

McDonald’s, for example, handled its Black Friday blunder perfectly. The company left the tweet up, adding a response that showed it wasn’t afraid to poke fun at the gaffe: “When you tweet before your first cup of McCafé… Nothing comes before coffee.” Combined with an image from its recent McCafé television commercial, the response felt genuine and funny, transforming a misstep into a self-aware bit of humor.

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It takes minimal time for an ill-conceived post to go viral, so don’t leave your company’s social media strategy to chance. Follow these tips to implement better processes, conduct smarter training and hire the right people. Your customers will appreciate your dedication to smart social, and your investors will appreciate the absence of social media firestorms.

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