

▶ How to Manage A Social Media Crisis

BY KIM LONGETEIG, FRBMA

Social media and online communications play an important role in reaching target audiences in today's digitally driven world. While I would tend to believe that radiology groups participating in social media are more likely to have users engage in meaningful dialogue and less likely to be vulnerable to an online crisis than say, Target with its recent data breach or major airlines with flight delays and lost baggage, it's bound to happen sometime.

A social media crisis can be defined many ways. For some, it could mean an employee or page admin that accidentally posts an insensitive comment, a string of negative commentary by patients that threaten your reputation, or the release of confidential or private patient information. You know the saying "Bad news travels fast?" Well, social media has the ability to amplify speed times reach for a widespread effect. In the event you end up with a social media crisis on your hands, it's best to know how to prepare and how to respond.

Here are five tactics to help you prepare to protect your business' online reputation:

1. Be Attentive.

Social media conversations move quickly and, if left unattended, a wayward comment can quickly spiral out of control. "Social media is an incredibly powerful tool with many advantages, but when things go bad, they go bad, big!" says Ken Davis, partner at Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP. Ensure that someone on your team is responsible for monitoring your social media accounts so that you aren't caught off-guard by a post or comment that needs attention.

Facebook settings will allow you to control who can post on your page, what will be seen on your wall, and keep vulgarity off your page by having the profanity filter set to "strong." Notifications should be sent to an email address that is checked frequently so you are less likely to miss anything happening on your page.

2. Respond Immediately.

People who utilize social media to vent their frustrations or communicate a service issue expect a speedy response. Assuming the page comment doesn't sneak through the profanity

filter or err on the side of being completely tasteless, then acknowledge the writer. "Social media is intended to be a dialogue, not a monologue," says Davis. Offer an appropriate response and invite the writer to speak with someone at your company offline by providing a name and phone number to help resolve their concern. Even if they don't take the opportunity to contact you offline, chances are your speedy response will quickly diffuse the situation.

Sometimes, the only appropriate response to an online user is to hide the comment and ban the user. Radiology groups should exercise their right to keep inappropriate content off their page.

3. Be Human.

Social media gaffes happen. Some very important brands have been the victim of unintended tweets when employees have used their corporate account to post personal information. While never welcomed, an online blunder does present an opportunity to overcome the mistake and show the human side of a company.

In 2011, an American Red Cross employee accidentally tweeted her weekend plans on the company page. With appropriate charm, the Red Cross responded: "We've deleted the rogue tweet but rest assured the Red Cross is sober and we've confiscated the keys."

If humor doesn't work, then being human will. Respond authentically to users and avoid using a copy/paste type of response that will look like your page is run by a machine. In late 2013, Home Depot did many things right at the time of their Twitter crisis by deleting the offending tweet, issuing an apology and tweeting influential accounts with their response: "We have zero tolerance for anything so stupid and offensive. Deeply sorry. We terminated agency and individual who posted it." But then, they overlooked an opportunity to be human. They tweeted the same response to every user that contacted them making their page look like it was being auto-filled by a robot.

4. Encourage Communication and Follow Through.

If you opt to take a conversation offline or pull a post from your page, consider that other users may have similar questions and

you could be creating a disservice by keeping commentary to a closed audience. If not part of the original post, consider turning the content or question into a FAQ or 'Did you know?' type of post. While social media has many marketing benefits, it's also an invaluable tool for listening and providing customer service.

5. Reevaluate.

Once a social media storm has passed, take advantage of the situation to evaluate and update your crisis response plan—assuming you have one! Ask yourself “How did we handle the situation and what could we have done differently?” Did you respond quickly enough? Did you have enough information readily available to respond appropriately? If mistakes were made, make it your goal to learn from them.

Davis stresses that every group needs to have a policy in place for social media use and it would be wise to consult with your attorney to ensure the policy covers your general areas of exposure. Independently, groups can decide if they want their policy to be looser or stricter. “A social media policy won’t eliminate problems, but it will reduce problems of your own making,” states Davis.

One key to remember in all of this is that as quickly as a social media crisis can flare up, it can flame out just as fast. While companies who are busy building and protecting their brand never invite negativity, it's also impossible to avoid it. No matter the medium, negative comments are an opportunity to engage and connect with your target audiences. Not using social media? You should know that a conversation about your company is happening in the social-sphere with or without you. Wouldn't you rather control the conversation than let it control the company? ■



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