Practitioner Article

Social media etiquette: A guide and checklist to the benefits and perils of social marketing

Received (in revised form): 11th October 2010

Matt Ramsay

has over 16 years experience in ATL, BTL and digital marketing, working with leading brands including Nestlé, Orange, Guinness, Adidas, Procter & Gamble, COI, United Biscuits, BlackBerry and Peugeot. Geographical experience covers the United Kingdom and Western Europe. Experience includes direct marketing, TV, press, radio, outdoor and over 10 years in all areas of digital marketing.

ABSTRACT Business involvement in social networking, in all its forms, is on the rise. This increase has been typified by a number of noisy and much-publicised failures, as well as less publicised successes: as always, it is embarrassment that makes the news, rather than business processes going well. 20:20 has been building its experience of the key factors that help to distinguish success from failure in these areas over the past few years, and this article is a summary of the core lessons it has learnt, summarised as a checklist of dos and don'ts in the social networking sphere.

Journal of Database Marketing & Customer Strategy Management (2010) 17, 257–261. doi:10.1057/dbm.2010.24

Keywords: social networking etiquette; social networking; online

With the advent of consumer websites, watchdog organisations and the ongoing proliferation of new social media using more and more mobile and connected technology, customers are beginning to recognise that they wield more power over brands and organisations than ever before. They increasingly have the power to make their voice heard; they can make waves and, most importantly, they can play their part in making or breaking a brand through word of mouth.

With their reputations at stake, businesses need to raise their game in terms of how they interact with consumers. If companies don't take control or engage with their audiences to discuss how their brand is perceived and talked about, the conversations will continue to go on without them and they will be powerless to try and change opinion or resolve customer service issues.

Entering the dialogue may not let brands control people's feelings (nor should it), but it does mean they can respond quickly and with credibility to any issues or queries.

Businesses that succeed in social media are those who maximise their customer service levels through listening and responding to what people are saying about their brand. However, it's vital that businesses get it right in terms of how they engage with their audiences. Tone, content and language should all be tailored according to whether the recipient is a customer, a prospect, a fan or a detractor – using a universal approach will only alienate people further. The key is to listen to what is being said, and by whom, and then ensure that the response acknowledges their position and their view, even if the response contradicts this position. Brands should think of such exchanges as mini

Correspondence:
Matt Ramsay
Augustine Hall, Yorkton
Street, London E2 8NH, UK

business meetings – they would never go into a meeting with a ‘one fits all’ solution or without preparing your material to suit their audience, therefore why should the approach to social media conversations be any different?

The backlash from failing to follow social media etiquette can be disastrous; the list of brands that have got it wrong (Dell, Habitat, Dr Pepper) is both long and familiar. To see the extent of this backlash we need to look no further than Toyota and their headline-grabbing recalls in February 2010.

As early as March 2009, Prius owners had started reporting problems with the brakes on their vehicles through the network of forums and message boards set up by the owners and biggest fans of the car and the brand. It soon became apparent that there was a potentially major issue, but it was equally apparent that Toyota were neither listening nor responding to the conversation through these channels and didn’t act on this critical and freely available information about one of their flagship models.

Later in 2009, a serious problem with sticking accelerator pedals also came to light with a range of their cars, but again the company’s response was corporate and detached – there remained a lack of clarity about the exact problem its customers were encountering. This strategy, to respond through traditional channels rather than engage with the social media conversation, allowed the situation to escalate rapidly and move beyond Toyota’s ability to influence or control.

Earlier this year, the stories were picked up by global media channels and as a result Toyota not only faced the cost of the recall, but were subject to a wave of negative sentiment that precipitated a run on their shares that wiped US\$34billion from the company’s value. Worse still was the loss of their hard earned reputation for reliability.

As the issues Toyota faced demonstrate, the difference between a customer service

problem off-line and one that occurs in a social media environment is the sheer scale; there is nowhere to hide online and the viral nature of the channels mean that bad news not only spreads like wildfire but also lasts forever. There is no use in trying to cover up negativity either; any attempts to quash, hide or delete unflattering comments will be spotted by eagle-eyed users and will only add insult to injury.

The only way that brands can recover from such a disaster is by their response; Dell and Dominos Pizzas are good examples of how a bad reputation can be turned around through investing heavily in a focused social media strategy. Toyota have also learnt from their experience and are currently driving a number of social media initiatives aimed at bridging the communications gap that had grown between the brand and its most loyal customers. While an issue such as a design defect cannot be fixed through social media, failing to listen or adequately respond to customer complaints in these channels can make the negative impact of such a crisis significantly worse.

It’s not just bad reactions to complaints that get companies in trouble either – brands can also get it badly wrong when proactively promoting their products and services. Approaching bloggers and those who are very active in the social media space can be very damaging; if the contact is unsolicited it must be relevant and properly targeted, otherwise it will be perceived as spam, a view that can quickly be spread throughout their online network.

Similarly, even if the audience for a promotion is right, it can still go wrong unless the tone is right. Failure to humanise contact through personalisation and targeting can result in very low or no engagement around a campaign – or worse, a significant negative impact. Blacklists for PRs and brands still exist amongst bloggers and they are not afraid to name and shame the worst offenders.

GENERAL DOS AND DON'TS FOR THOSE USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Do put a communications strategy in place.

Having an engagement framework in place will make it much easier to keep control of the 'who, where, what and why' of the conversations that an organisation is prepared to have with consumers.

Do develop a style. Tone of voice will need to be different for each audience and situation, but make sure that brand personality comes through in every action and every communication. If relevant, brand values should be incorporated and where appropriate, first person language used to humanise the conversation.

Don't use social media for corporate communications. Updates on business development and financial status belong on a company's official website and 'information for investors' page. Even where an organisation is operating in a B2B environment, sending this information out via social channels will only make it seem detached from its customers.

Do strike the right balance between conversation and sales. Nobody wants to receive an overt sales pitch via social media: therefore, it is important for organisations to be honest about why they are talking to consumers. They are commercial players and therefore ignoring the fact that they have something to offer will make them seem disingenuous and untrustworthy.

Do set limits for what is and is not to be tolerated in any channel. Just because an organisation wishes to seem approachable and conversational doesn't mean it must put up with abusive comments from consumers. Consider the following:

- Foul abusive defamatory and so on should get deleted

- Difficult questions should get escalated/ answered
- Limits should align with Ts and Cs for each channel

Don't be afraid to vary strategy per channel.

It is wrong to assume that all social media channels work in the same way. Different networks have different user profiles; therefore the tone and content used for one will not necessarily work for another.

However, consistency is still important: the same URL naming convention should be used across all channels, to avoid confusion. For example: facebook.com/brandname_uk, twitter.com/brandname_uk and so on.

Don't forget to update content. There is nothing worse than an organisation starting a twitter feed, which is active and updated for the first three weeks but then goes silent. Equally off-putting is a Facebook page that still carries a reference to an event that occurred three months ago on a landing page tab. Social media needs to be a constant consistent investment and can be a full time job: therefore, it is essential to ensure sufficient resources to keep channels manned and information up to date.

FACEBOOK SPECIFIC ETIQUETTE

- Abide by terms of service and follow overall brand engagement framework
- Brand the product or organisational profile – but don't cover it in sales messages
- Take sensitive customer queries into a private sphere – on or off-line
- Remember all wall posts are public – don't write anything there that is not for wider consumption
- All updates should be frequent and relevant
- Users should not be swamped. Too many updates will impact 'People who like' numbers. Sometimes too

much information can be as bad as no information at all

- Use language relevant to the channel and the target demographic
- Show appreciation. Positive comments should be acknowledged: the interaction should be based around a conversation with consumers rather than talking at them
- Do ask questions on wall posts – but follow up and respond to any feedback received

TWITTER SPECIFIC ETIQUETTE

- Abide by terms of service and follow overall brand engagement framework
- If used for outreach or active engagement, it is important to begin with an introduction
- Develop a tone of voice and personality – tweets are effectively short blogs, which demand creativity
- Keep requests for re-tweets to a minimum. These should be earned through quality of content and tone of voice
- Brevity – keep it as short and sweet as possible (far less than 140 characters if possible)
- Use link shorteners – like bit.ly – for links
- Updates ought not to be automated – RSS feeds do not make good Twitter content
- Individuals who complain about an organisation or service should not automatically be followed: it could be seen as stalking and make things worse
- Pure self promotion should be avoided: successful business profiles don't sell directly on Twitter – it's a knowledge sharing and conversation channel, and conversation-based customer service will ultimately sell a business/brand much better than sales pitches will
- All questions directed at the organisation should be answered (using @username or Direct message). This should be done in

a speedy and relevant fashion: Twitter is fast moving and it's easy to be left behind

- Follow back wherever relevant; everyone from customers to competitors is potentially an interesting source of information
- Spammers should always be reported: this helps to maintain the health of the network
- Spamming or selling company own products through Direct Message is a bad idea and likely to lead to the company very quickly being 'un-followed'

YOUTUBE SPECIFIC ETIQUETTE

- Abide by terms of service and follow overall brand engagement framework
- Organisations need to develop a thick skin. YouTube commentators can be notoriously vicious, and many comments are not constructive: the correct response is neither to take these to heart, nor argue, as this will only fan the flames
- Use video replies; YouTube is more than a broadcast platform. As with the hugely successful Old Spice campaign, video replies to feedback can be powerful and are a good way of spreading a message. British Airways also showed during the recent strike period that such replies can do a lot to reassure and inform customers in times of crisis
- Comments should be acknowledged, and thanks given to those who are being positive about a brand

LINKEDIN SPECIFIC ETIQUETTE

- Abide by terms of service and follow overall brand engagement framework
- Organisations should join groups and contribute relevant experience

- They should answer questions and contribute to shared pages and communities
- Contacts should not be harvested for external use; rather, they should be built within the network
- Organisations should not ask for references unless they already know the person or have genuinely delivered great service
- Unsolicited contacts should always be supported by a full explanation of who is contacting – and why. It is unwise to assume that contacts will look at the underlying profile
- There are benefits to developing a corporate presence. It can be costly but value can be gained through sponsoring events and so on, which will raise an organisation's profile to the LinkedIn community
- Direct sell should not be attempted unless the organisation already knows the target well
- Self promotion is usually weaker than allowing reputation and profile to speak for itself