

HOW TO DEAL WITH A

SOCIAL MEDIA CRISIS



INTRODUCTION

Oh no. Something just got posted to your company's social media account that shouldn't be there. Now, commenters are jumping in posting criticism, adding insult to injury. Your stomach is in your throat and your brain is kicking into panic mode. What should you do? How should you respond? Should you ask for help? Is this your fault?

It's in these moments that knowing how to deal with a social media crisis is so critical. That way, you can quickly put out the fire without inciting further damage.

Sometimes, social media mistakes are inconsequential. Other times, they can be more serious and have a huge effect on your business's bottom line. Of course you always want to use good judgement in your day-to-day activities, but companies are run by humans - and humans sometimes make mistakes. When a mistake happens, you can expect people to take to social networks to talk about your company.

In this eBook, we look at what you should account for if you face a social media crisis, including:

- ◆ Knowing the difference between a social media problem and a social media crisis
- ◆ How to deal with a social media crisis
- ◆ Dealing with more aggressive social media users
- ◆ A quick checklist of additional factors to consider

SOCIAL MEDIA CRISIS vs SOCIAL MEDIA PROBLEM

When it comes to dealing with a social media crisis, the first important step you must take is to assess whether or not the situation you're currently dealing with is actually a crisis or whether it's just a (currently) small social media problem.

It's important to make this distinction as a social media problem can often be resolved in a very simple manner and, if done so, is unlikely to cause many issues for your brand down the line. A crisis, on the other hand, refers to a situation involving your brand on social media that could severely impact on your brand's image and reputation, its financial well being, and its future prospects. So knowing which is which is the first thing you should be accounting for.



A SOCIAL MEDIA PROBLEM

First, let's look at a social media problem. A social media problem could eventuate when an employee accidentally posts what was meant to be a tweet on their personal Twitter account on your brand's Twitter account instead. Whether the content of their tweet is relatively benign or possesses the potential to offend, this still classifies as a social media problem. If their comment is harmless, you can delete the tweet, apologise for the mix up and take a light-hearted approach to the situation (e.g. "back to regular programming").

If their comment had the potential to offend (or did clearly offend) followers, then the apology you issue after removing the tweet should be grounded and respectful of the situation. State that you're discussing the issue with the employee in question and that all appropriate measures will be taken in accordance to their inappropriate behaviour. In both scenarios, these social media gaffes are problems, not crises. Provided you respond to the misstep quickly (within 60 minutes is ideal), apologise and get everything back in order, chances are you will have put out the flames of any future issues pertaining to the problem.



A SOCIAL MEDIA CRISIS

A social media crisis differs from a problem in the fact that, in one fell swoop, a social post or even an incident related to your brand outside of social media starts spreading across multiple social platforms. A crisis has more virality and will almost immediately start damaging your brand's reputation. If you do not react to the fallout quickly, it could get out of control and lead to far worse consequences than any social media problem.

Many social media crises end up being the product of a brand's own ill-informed social media behaviour, such as fashion designer Kenneth Cole's insensitive tweet regarding the protests in Egypt back in 2011. He leveraged the uproar in Cairo to insinuate the situation was due to them hearing about his brand's spring collection.



Another example is from last year, when US Airways' Twitter account began curiously and expletively responding to tweets addressed to them with a pornographic image. Even when censored, the image leaves little to the imagination, so we won't be including it here. But you can [read about the incident here](#).

The reason these qualify as crises and not just problems is because a) Kenneth Cole's tweet was not some random immature comment by a random employee, it was consciously posted by Kenneth Cole himself; b) US Airways tweeted that pornographic image several times, not just once; and c) in the event of Kenneth Cole, he was hesitant and essentially had to be forced to apologise for his profoundly insensitive comments.

As noted, social media crises can also be the product of incidents outside of the social media realm. For example, [Applebee's became the target of substantial outrage back in 2013](#) when they fired an employee for posting a photo of a note left by an arrogant customer who refused to leave a tip. While Applebee's argued it breached their social media policy, the company was seen as being hypocritical as they had posted photos of positive customer notes/reviews (including their names) in the past. Due to their lack of apologising and appearing stubborn in endlessly defending their decision, it led to more and more calling for boycotts of the restaurant chain. This, in turn, only served to hurt individual employees and managers. So this incident certainly qualified as a social media crisis.



HANDLING A SOCIAL MEDIA CRISIS

When it comes to a social media crisis, the worst thing you can do is pretend that it's not happening. The longer your brand goes being the centre of some crisis without you officially commenting, the worse it can become. Users will have no qualms in commenting on your wall, mentioning you in tweets or sharing stories about the current crisis you're tied up in. Even if you have insight that the public doesn't and you don't consider it that big of a deal, the point is the public does. You need to look at the situation from their perspective and understand why they're upset or outraged.

Furthermore, by actively responding to the issue, answering enquiries from angered social media users and showing that you do take the situation seriously, it proves that you're a brand that's willing to own up to its missteps and take responsibility. A company that admits to its mistakes is a mature company. One that pretends they don't exist is the equivalent of the stubborn person who plugs their ears and goes "la la la" when they're being criticised.

When we say you should respond to social media comments, we mean you need to respond to all of them. This can be a time consuming task, especially in the midst of a crisis, but it's important to respond to everyone - not just a portion of your users. Because even if you respond to 99% of complaints, that 1% you miss can still escalate and make things worse for you. It's by no means a fun experience, but responding to complaints on social media is the same as responding to complaints sent to you via email, over-the-phone, or in person. You wouldn't ignore someone who approaches you in your store, would you?



TAKE THE CONVERSATION OFFLINE

The important point of difference with social media is the fact that if someone complains, chances are their complaint is public. Anyone who visits your Facebook page, Twitter timeline, Instagram profile, etc. will be able to see the negative comments someone has made against your brand, which in turn increases the life and exposure triggered by some brand-related crisis.

For any public social media complaint you receive, your initial reply should acknowledge their complaint, state your intention to resolve the issue, and then encourage them to discuss the issue further with you away from the public eye. When we say “take the conversation offline”, we don’t literally mean they have to visit your physical location or call you; but rather they should send you a private message on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or wherever the complaint originated from. This keeps public exposure to a minimum and betters your chances of being able to resolve the crisis without it becoming a verbal fisticuffs on a public platform.

Finally, while you’re responding to complaints and keeping things together, be sure to update people as soon as you’ve reached a resolution/decision on dealing with the crisis at hand.



A WORD OF CAUTION WHEN DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS

While you should certainly respond to every complaint and strive to reach a resolution, be aware that some people who make a complaint may escalate the situation as it goes on. For example, after replying to an initial complaint and encouraging the user to discuss it with you further via private message, they may respond to your comment publicly and refuse to do so in an aggressive manner. What should you do in this situation? It may be worth responding one last time publicly to see if you can calm them down and get them to talk to you privately, but if they then respond again with aggression in a public manner, your best approach may be to leave them alone.

The reason for this is because if someone is particularly aggressive and they seem intent on dragging it out in public, then this will only lead to the verbal fisticuffs we mentioned before - even if you're not actually exchanging punches with them.

Someone who continuously bashes your company and spits out unending abusive rhetoric is not worth your time. You should only focus on those who want to have a proper discussion with you.

Another important point is that sometimes trolls will take advantage of a brand crisis and use it as an opportunity to try and make things worse for you. They'll often use similar tactics, complaining publicly and then only getting more aggressive/unreasonable when you try to resolve the situation.

Simply put, respond to every complaint; but only follow up on those that are legitimate.



A QUICK CHECKLIST


Here's a quick checklist of things to consider when a social media crisis emerges.

- ☐ Pause scheduled social media posts
- ☐ Pause paid ads on social media channels
- ☐ Pause marketing emails
- ☐ Assess planned blogging and campaign schedule for appropriateness
- ☐ Create blog entry addressing situation as needed
- ☐ Provide talking points for executives as needed
- ☐ Check all content for relevant references that could be perceived as offensive or rude in light of the event
- ☐ Cancel any planned product updates or changes
- ☐ Create plan for employee communications as needed
- ☐ Communicate office impact / updates via social media
- ☐ Communicate issues with customer support via social media
- ☐ Notify those speaking that day on need to address (or not) and relevant talking points



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