Good Measures: Reassessing Your Social Media Response

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Frustrated flyer? Take to social media and dispute it with the airline, looping in one of the top executives with an @ sign. Have a small apartment mailbox clogged with fliers, special offers and unwanted catalogues? Want to stop receiving the print media? Don't email customer service. Speak directly to the company's Director of Marketing on LinkedIn.

We're not endorsing these moves, but research bears out the results. Customers who attract attention on social media can get preferable treatment. More people have realized that skipping the phone to Tweet is often more rewarding than going through customer service departments. For their part, companies are responding in kind, by quietly putting more customer service resources into monitoring and answering their social media feeds. It's more cost effective than being caught off guard.

Potential and Pitfalls

There are any number of pitfalls to your social media feeds—we're sure you can come up with a handful without breaking a sweat. From a risk manager's perspective an open and insecure channel of communication between an organization and the public will be at the top of the list. Whether your organization is ready or not, people are turning to Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook Messenger to contact you, compliment your organization, gripe, or air grievances.

Social media channels provide open and instant two-way communication with your base. Use of these channels increases engagement, and the perception of transparency and forthrightness with the public at large. Sharing and re-sharing builds community, updates stakeholders, humanizes the organization, and keeps the public's interest in your mission. Social media is one of the most cost-effective ways that an organization can put forth a passionate public voice, cementing a genuine connection with an audience.

But the drive for attention on social media can mean blurred lines between personal and business conduct. Clients and followers may also blur the lines, assuming any Tweet they see comes from the top of the organization, or at least someone who is authorized. All this heightens the need for a nonprofit's rules regarding social media use, with particular attention paid to client privacy and reputation risk. Without good measures in place, social media will not improve relations with your base; in fact, it could have the opposite effect, by amplifying deficiencies.

Social media risks include:

- Loss of productivity (ineffective campaigns and excessive use)
- Ability to effectively monitor use and productivity
- Reputation damage or enhancement
- Disclosure of confidential information
- Litigation based on claims such as invasion of privacy, defamation, improper termination

Customize and Curate

Everything follows from a solid self-assessment. Ensure that your social media policy is consistent with other risk management policies and practices within your organization. Ask questions about what your nonprofit hopes to accomplish through your feeds. For example:

- Are we raising money, and awareness for our mission?
- Building community engagement and client relationships?
- Publishing news and information about our activities?
- When does humanizing and bolstering our feeds with memes, #hashtags, and personal opinion cross the boundary of professionalism?
- How much do we want to interact with stakeholders over social media? Do you we a choice?

Media Literacy: The First Test

Educate everyone in your organization on fundamental principles of verification and disciplined fact checking to prevent misinformation.

- Don’t outsource fact checking to the public
- Disclose your sources of information
- Disclosure, your audience has the right to know your bias
- Improve civil discourse

Hire, train, or tap an experienced and *diversified* (especially of opinion) social media team. Decide who has the authority to respond publicly. Obtain permission before using photographs or other information about clients. Exercise extreme caution when using photos of children and other vulnerable groups for any purpose. Protect personal information.

Monitor and Mediate

Every nonprofit that uses social networking tools should develop policies and procedures that address the risks and opportunities described above. Your social media strategy shouldn’t be left to interns (who may, nonetheless, be excellent consultants on strategy), any more than your volunteers should run your press relations. Keep in mind, everyone in your organization who uses social media adds to your digital footprint.

The fact is, even with the many social networking tools available, you have less control than ever about how your nonprofit is perceived online. Check your feeds. Set up alerts for when your organization is mentioned, and stay on top of the conversation. Be prepared for feedback. You may not like everything you read, but welcome engagement. Users expect a quick response time; it’s pure dopamine, and the (unreasonable) expectation of instant gratification. Take the time you need to review policies, be measured in response, and learn from your community.

Your nonprofit is using the visibility of social media to engage your base, but they don’t necessarily follow your playbook. Your followers and the public are shaping the conversation, as much as your own messaging. Participate and show you are listening. The single best thing you can be known for bears repeating: *improve civil discourse*. Take the high road and avoid the trolls. Many people now take to social media *first* when they have a grievance against an organization. It’s important to have clear policies and response plans in place when managing these communications. Stay agile and tell your own story.

Related Resources

- Hitting the Tweet Spot: Managing Social Media Risk
- 5 Steps to Effectively Managing Social Media Risk
- Social Engineering: Why People with Passwords are the Biggest Threat to Your Mission