MARKETS

Communications in the Digital World

Tactics in Issues and Reputation-Based Scenarios

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In the past, many businesses could largely control perception of their brands. Advertising agencies could craft brand narratives in the form of campaigns and media releases. Those in the audience who had objections to the campaign, the brand, or the business had few opportunities to share their views or mobilize like-minded consumers, and if they wanted to do so, they faced daunting expenditures of time, effort, and cost.

Today, with the rise of digital media and an abundance of social platforms, companies are no longer the only custodians of their brands. All people with internet access now have the ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings quickly, cheaply and globally. User generated content and the rise of digital influence means that a growing number of consumers form an opinion of a business or brand by conversations initiated by other individuals on digital platforms. More importantly, conversation-starters are often led by influencers whose opinions are trusted and valued by those that follow them.

One needs only to look to the recent past for examples of just how powerful social media can be in shaping perception around a movement, and in some cases seriously damaging a brand.

President Obama's 2008 election campaign used social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter to engage in conversation with the target audience of young voters. The conversation became a means for millions of Americans to vent their frustration with current policies. President Obama's

campaign team correctly identified influencers who could carry their message to a broader populace with dramatic results.

Social media also played a defining role in the ousting of both Tunisian President, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak, during the Arab Spring. Networks formed online were crucial in organizing a core group of activists, specifically in Egypt. Civil society leaders across the Arab World emphasized the primary role of "the internet, mobile phones, and social media" in the protests. Additionally, digital media was used by Arab youth to exercise freedom of speech and as a space for civic engagement. Throughout the uprising, Twitter emerged as a primary source of news for protesters, who used hashtags to help others with similar interests focus on news specific to them.

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Examples of particularly detrimental run-ins with social media include:
- In 2005, a Dell customer and influential blogger named Jeff Jarvis posted his frustration about Dell's customer service and warranty policy to his blog; the post was later dubbed the "Dell Hell" article. Dell chose to ignore Jarvis 'complaint and did not reach out to Jarvis or any of his readers. His widely circulated criticism of the company led hundreds of readers to leave comments about their own experiences with Dell. Because of the large number of readers, the article gained notoriety and the boost in readership promoted Jarvis' "Dell Hell" article to a top position in Google search results. Dell finally reworked its social media monitoring process in 2007, but the stories stayed with the brand for many years after the incident.
- In 2009, the oil company, Trafigura, tried, through legal injunction, to stop a number of UK media outlets from reporting on the results of a parliamentary inquiry into the dumping of toxic materials in Africa. A Guardian reporter,

Alan Rusbridger, tweeted out a cryptic message to his followers, who in turn followed online clues to dissect the story and post relevant links out to others. The links were subsequently picked up by a number of prominent Twitter influencers including actor, Stephen Fry, and his 830,000 fans. The resulting backlash forced Trafigura to stop legal proceedings and admit culpability.

- In 2015, SeaWorld created their #AskSeaWorld hashtag campaign in an attempt to rehabilitate their image after the release of "Blackfish," a 2013 documentary that put a focus on captive killer whales. The brand encouraged users to ask questions about whale care, but like many other instances where a brand opens its platform up for its audience with lack of the right knowledge and plan, the campaign didn't go as expected, and Sea World was hit with a storm of tweets about the controversy. To make matters worse, SeaWorld brought even more negative attention to itself by mishandling its responses to tweets, subsequently insulting the users who posted.

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These examples are not isolated cases. The realization that social media has the power to change perception entirely is now a top concern for a large number of CEOs and their company's brand managers.

One person can now have the power to mobilize an entire online community. Established brands, who at one time had control over the conversation, can now face existential crises because of conversations occurring on digital platforms and the rise of influencers who are actively working to undermine the work businesses put into carefully curating their brands.

In response, many large brands have initiated social media strategies in an effort to engage and manage online conversations, but even though many have large social followings (not all of whom are fans with positive percep-

tions of the company) the numbers are dwarfed by the sheer volume of individuals that have a potential to be detractors in social media in the event of a crisis. For example, Facebook has 684 million active users; Twitter has 500 million tweets daily; Pinterest has 70 million pins daily; and Instagram counts 75 million daily active users.

Detractors are adept at leveraging the power of social platforms to share messages quickly. They also exploit an enthusiasm gap. Rarely do fans take the time to create engaging content to show their brand appreciation. However, detractors do take the time to craft negative content that can be quickly and easily consumed and shared. That, in turn, gets their message out to the largest audience possible. The speed with which these detractors can move poses serious issues for a company in crisis. While a company can craft a carefully worded statement that's given to traditional media outlets, how does it respond to curious consumers who are interacting with the company on social media? Even with a media response tree in place, responding to detractors poses difficulties. Which detractors, if any, should be engaged? And how can online conversations be controlled? Detractors, unlike regular media, may continue their assault and prompt individuals important to the business to ask more questions, expecting answers, and not silence, from the company. The only way for brands to hope to compete is to adapt digital marketing tactics and add them to their crisis management toolbox. Digital marketing tactics have a lot to offer brands as they work through crises. Tactics that were once considered solely meant for the marketing team are now being leveraged to help communications teams deal with crisis and reputational risk.

The creation of content on digital channels is the backbone of most efforts to fan engagement. A similar process applies to the creation, management and amplification of content in the event of a crisis. Ultimately in both instances, it's about understanding conversations, creating content for the most relevant individuals, and promoting that interaction, all to drive engagement and control perceptions.

The Right Approach to Crisis

Often, it is difficult to break through the sheer volume of coverage and conversation around a crisis. The venerable press release, while still necessary, is only one part of an effective approach that must also now include creating "snackable" content that is shareable.

The term "snackable" refers to the amount of offered information and the ease of its consumption. This means that key facts and themes are presented in a very visual, and easily consumed way. Snackable content can be consumed on its own, or act as a teaser for richer "meals" that a user can consume over time if their interest is peaked.

Take for example, a pharmaceutical or automotive brand that is dealing with a product recall or negative influencer activity. The natural approach would be to point to a study and research to help offset negative publicity and support their products. This approach rarely proves effective; studies, by their nature, tend to provide a lot of very long-form, product-specific information which can be daunting, even for the most engaged reader. They can also be perceived as sponsored by the brand in question, often leading to more controversy. This content is also not designed to be consumed through digital channels which have, by design, limited content capacity.

It is also imperative that brands look beyond owned content to satisfy the needs of their followers. Curated content, or content collected from outside sources and promoted, is equally as important and allows brands to share information via outside sources that boost credibility. There are a number of third party tools that allow social media teams to mine channels for appropriate content and request permission for use. Those tools can give brands a host of content options to share with followers.

To drive a company's message in a crisis, it is important to utilize outlets and individuals that the general public will deem trustworthy. Consumers trust word of mouth communications more than that of established businesses.

Identifying the right influencers requires understanding their reach, relevance and resonance.

Expanding a Company's Reach

In any crisis, there will be positive and negative content being shared. There are a number of tactics that are typically used in digital marketing that can be leveraged to drive engagement with targeted audiences.

SEO

SEO or Search Engine Optimization can be accomplished easily and essentially makes content easier to find through search engines. It's a tactic that is often used by advertisers to drive brand awareness. With SEO, content is optimized for search through proper tagging and through promotion to trusted sites in the search engine network.

An effective SEO program looks at search demand on any particular topic to determine the best keywords with which to associate content. SEO can then be used to replace or suppress offending content by employing the tactic of proactive content sharing, which provides a different point of view. SEO relies on having an abundance of content in multiple places to help drive search rankings – hence the need to engage influencers and partners to create and curate content on behalf of a brand.

Syndication

Content syndication allows brands to take previously published content and promote it to media networks that have similar engagement targets as the brand being promoted. This is extremely effective to drive proactive positive content. Content syndication can also employ demographic targeting to ensure that content is placed in easy view of a very specific audience. Also, unlike SEO, content that is used in syndication can come from sources outside a network and doesn't require notification or attribution.

Paid Display

Finally, content can be promoted through paid media, such as display advertising, advertorials, sponsored content and social media banner ads to targeted audiences. It is important to note that when buying paid media, businesses need to use analytics and insights to help identify target audiences and content, as well as relevant platforms for maximum engagement.

Ultimately, as people continue to engage in different ways digitally, the tactics that organizations employ to manage their brands must adapt. CEOs must acknowledge the inevitable democratization of brand perception and as such, must educate themselves on the changing digital landscape, ensuring that their companies marketing plans incorporate best practices that account for the major role digital media now plays in brand and reputation.

By understanding and adapting the ways that content is created and shared within these new media channels, CEOs and their companies have a chance to influence the way their brands are perceived and respond to negative situations in an informed way that can mitigate complete social media meltdown.