Deftly Manage User Content on Facebook

More than five million people "like" **Coca-Cola** on **Facebook**, and Skittles isn't far behind with nearly 4.5 million Facebook fans. These brands have acquired and retained millions of fans because they engage with their followers in dynamic two-way conversations rather than pushing out bland, overly commercial content.

But how can brands with this many followers possibly manage the avalanche of user-generated posts coming through on Facebook every day? And even if your brand isn't a juggernaut on Facebook and you're managing user-generated content from, say, 50,000 fans at fictional "XYZ Burger Co.," how can you stay abreast of the conversation and not have nightmares that a Facebook post about health code violations at the local XYZ Burger joint won't spread faster than a California wildfire?

Here are my top five tips for managing user-generated content on Facebook:

1. Map out the "rules of the road." Set guidelines for user-generated posts, and ideally put these rules of the road on both the "wall" and "info" tabs of your Facebook page for maximum visibility. Make it clear that while XYZ Burger Co. can't monitor every posting or conversation, XYZ expects that users will not post content that falls into certain categories and reserves the right to remove postings that are:

- Abusive, defamatory or obscene
- Fraudulent, deceptive or misleading
- In violation of any intellectual property right, law or regulation
- Otherwise offensive
- Promoting a political or other agenda that's unrelated to XYZ Burger Co.

Try to keep these rules concise and simple. If the corporate attorneys can't help themselves and insist on adding tons of legal jargon, create a separate hyperlink for fans who like reading polysyllabic words such as "indemnification," "concomitant" and "infringement."

2. Trying to guess will minimize stress. Try to anticipate what types of comments fans may post. Sort your laundry list of questions/comments into low-, moderate- and high-risk categories. Then develop a recommended approach for posts in each category based on your tolerance level.

Based on the rules of the road, it's clear that a user-generated comment that includes one of George Carlin's seven forbidden words should be removed. But what about a negative, subjective comment (e.g.) "XYZ Burgers taste like cardboard," or a false, defamatory comment (e.g.) "XYZ Burgers are made from cattle that are treated unethically?"

3. Sometimes it's better to turn the other cheek. So how should a PR pro handle the two questions posed above, as well as similar types of questions? Surely the temptation is to remove such posts, but this has the potential to backfire. If the author of those posts becomes irritated about being censored, he/she may attempt to spread negative comments through other social media channels. Furthermore, in the case of the subjective "cardboard" comment, it's important for the brand team to listen to such feedback. If other users add similar comments in response to the initial post, XYZ should take a hard look at improving the quality of its burgers.

In many instances, responding to negative or defamatory posts may unwittingly pour gasoline on the fire by adding life to a comment that would otherwise die a quick death. So, oftentimes the best course of action is for the brand to ignore the post and see if it drops off the page through more recent user posts. Fortunately, what often happens is that even before the post can fall off the radar, the community will police the "offender" by rebutting the negative comments.

4. Beware of the not-so-Fab Five. So what happens if XYZ Burger's Facebook community doesn't come to the rescue? Should the brand respond? If so, how? A general rule of thumb is for the brand to join the conversation if and when five fans have commented on or questioned—but not rebutted—the initial negative post. At this point, the issue is beginning to gain traction and may start to spread virally. A short response outlining XYZ's track record on its ethical treatment of cattle, including a hyperlink on XYZ's Web site for more information, is a good response.

5. The importance of early detection. For better or worse, monitoring a brand's Facebook presence is like raising kids or working on a farm—it's a job that never ends. So it's important for the social media team to adhere to a schedule to monitor comments on the brand's Facebook page several times a day, seven days a week. Diligent monitoring will facilitate early detection of problems, thereby helping to nip a potential crisis in the bud. PRN

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