Going online: do's and don'ts

Rex Features

The use of social media in business is growing in frequency and importance, but there are many potential pitfalls for the unwary. Reputation management is a key priority

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There is now so much crossover between online and offline corporate reputation management that it can be hard to separate the two. There is no doubt that social media can be a powerful reputation management tool, from company branding to surveying your audience and engaging them on issues such as Responsible Care, to portraying a positive company image. However, it is also a risk-laden tool.

Laura Stocker of Tin Cans Unlimited says: "We recommend that you develop your online and offline reputation so that if something happens, you are prepared for it. You should already have a great working relationship with the media so that you have your good reputation to rely on and they will believe the best of you."

Mic Adam, general manager at social media policy creator Vanguard Leadership, points out that there are two points to consider around online reputation management – what other people are saying about you and what your own employees are doing to wreck your reputation. "Your ambassadors also need to be monitored and tracked – it's also about what people on the inside are saying," Adam adds.

Companies need a social media policy in place to provide employees with a set of guidelines. It should be clear who can post on behalf of a company and what topics they should stay away from. Employees should also be educated so they

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know how to work the online tools to avoid any human error.

Natalia McDonagh, marketing manager at European chemical distributor Cornelius, says that if something bad happens on line you should acknowledge it, decide how to ensure it will not happen again and then move on.

However, she adds that ignorance cannot be a defence. "Employees need to be educated and companies need to make sure they are keeping abreast of all European law. Also, everything needs to be spelt out clearly in the terms of an employee's contract. And keep talking about those terms so that employees are truly aware," says McDonagh.

She adds that what chemical distributors have put in place so far appears to be minimal, but the Fecc is actively working on this to offer support (see box page 20).

Incidences of companies taking ex-employees to court due to the misuse of social media are growing. An employee letting off steam on Facebook can go viral, McDonagh points out. "There is damage to corporate reputation and a threat to the business. Companies need to look at all this seriously – nobody wants to go through a lawsuit and people are losing their jobs. The damage to the brand can be truly devastating."

Personal misconduct could occur through

the disclosure of confidential information, for example mentioning a customer on your LinkedIn page. Companies, meanwhile, could lay themselves open to harassment and bullying charges through an employee's actions on social media and therefore need to build online bullying and harassment clauses into contracts.

Some companies choose to say that it is an act of misconduct if something is posted on a personal social media account during working hours or they ban employees from using the company name on their private Facebook page. Private social media is, of course, difficult to police and there may be questions around the legality of it.

Indeed, issues relating to the rights of privacy and expression versus business ethics, and the personal versus the professional, can be a grey area. While comments made in private should be protected, that is not how the law has judged on some cases. The "rights to privacy" in social media cases are likely to fail in the eyes of the law, says McDonagh.

There can also be dangers relating to multiculturalism which companies need to be aware of. Stocker says: "You can Google a

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General manager, Vanguard Leadership

word if you are not sure of its usage globally to see if it might be offensive and just because you think something is funny it doesn't mean everybody else does. If there is a question in your mind about a Tweet – don't post it."

The transition from inside the company to outside also now needs to be carefully managed. Adam says: "The exit interview no longer involves simply handing over a few files, but also taking away any rights to access and comment on online platforms and transferring responsibility for any online duties." Adam adds that non-disclosure agreements need to be in place within contracts, including clauses about slander.

Offline reputation management is of course still essential. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes that focus on the positive, long-lasting strong economic results and good employment conditions, for example becoming an employee of the year, will all help to bolster a company's reputation.

Sponsorships and events still have a role to play, although people are now generally more

sceptical about them. Local volunteering is one way to get noticed in a positive light, but it has got to be sincere, says Stocker. "People are quick enough to figure out if you just want to get your picture in the paper. But if you find a non-profit organisation that you are passionate about then roll up your sleeves and get involved."

Companies still need to monitor what is being said about them in the traditional media. Adam points out that whether people like it or not, what happens in print still dominates – the damage is done in real life and word of mouth is more difficult to close down in the real world, although it may originally be an online post that sparks a story.

Companies within the industry as a whole have a responsibility to one another both on and off line. McDonagh points out that if a member of the Fecc was to be seen as doing something negative then it could tarnish the reputation of the whole industry. Vice versa, a principal's actions could affect a distributor's brand.

"Distributors need to be clear that the major has a crisis reputation management plan and they need to know what they should be doing to follow it. Distributors need to know ASAP if something has happened that could damage the major's and possibly their own reputation."

Adam says that in terms of reputation management, on line and off line, there are two trends; when people talk to you and when people talk about you. "What is being put on a company's own online profile through its own social media is being handled by most companies; they know how to react to both positive and negative messages. The danger lies more when people are talking about you on other sites such as blogs, forums and wikis."

Adam points out, however, that dealing with this issue is not easy and many companies do not actively manage what is being said about them on the internet as a whole, although it is more likely to become a trend in the future. He points out that there is an increasing tendency for a company's PR or marketing wing not just to search for the press clippings about the company, but also to

handle the online monitoring as well.

Personal reputation management for the CEOs of large corporations is also a growing trend. Stocker says: "You should be monitoring what is said about you, your company and your people – the top and front-line employees. This could be done by something as simple as training someone on your staff to Google names or you could employ a company to do it or you could have a software package." Stocker adds that key words related to the industry should also be Googled.

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McDonagh recommends that companies do not ignore negative posts, but keep calm and respond factually. Companies might receive negative comments from green activists for example, but it is important to keep talking to the public to engage them.

There are services that will help eliminate or reduce the damage caused by negative internet postings that rank highly on searches related to a company, but Stocker and McDonagh do not recommend this. "You need to make sure you maintain your company's reputation and let Google optimise your life on line", says Stocker.

The uptake of social media within the industry is resulting in what can seem like a series of never-ending reputation management challenges. However, an online following that is passionate about a company and engages with it will help to create an audience which is on that company's side in times of trouble, both on and off line. ∎

FECC GROUP ELAINE BURRIDGE LONDON
NETWORK TO OFFER COMMUNICATION IDEAS

Fecc has launched a Communications Network to bring together communication and marketing specialists from across the industry. The aim is to share best-practice advice and discuss communications issues as well as offer networking opportunities with other distributors.

"After last year's conference,

it was clear that there is a whole mix of needs out there," says McDonagh.

"We are working hard to highlight the benefits of the Fecc so that the members are aware of the activities that they can take part in. We have been discussing common ground and how we can take the industry forward, for example should we be

working more face to face with the public."

Corporate reputation management is also on the agenda, as well as social media. ∎

For tips from the Communications Network on how your company should be using social media, go to: http://bit.ly/1gnJ0iQ