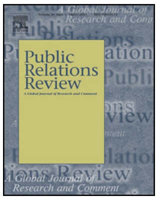
Public Relations Review 41 (2015) 97–102

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review



Reputations at risk: Engagement during social media crises[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 21 May 2014
Received in revised form 5 September 2014
Accepted 30 October 2014

Keywords:
Social media
Crisis communication
Engagement
Emotion
Authenticity

ABSTRACT

Research into social media and social networking sites has focused on its advantages for organization–public relationships. Potential risks to corporate reputation have been largely glossed over, but inappropriate strategies can create or fuel social media crises. This article is based on an in-depth analysis of three multinational profit-making organizations experiencing social media crises after 2010. It was found that each organization employed different engagement strategies with varied outcomes. Authenticity of voice and transparency were crucial factors for success, whereas engaging indiscriminately with emotional individuals could potentially escalate an issue. The article offers strategies for engagement during social media crises.

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1. Introduction

As people spend more time on the Internet, managing reputation on social media becomes increasingly important for public relations. The latest figures show that Internet users spend most of their time on social networks, and half of all social media users said that at least once a month they had expressed complaints or concerns about brands or services on social media (Nielsen, 2012).

Reputations are however notoriously difficult to manage because they comprise “soft” variables like perceptions of credibility, reliability, accountability, trustworthiness and competence (Helm, Liehr-Gobbers, & Storck, 2011). Online, these factors experience a new level of scrutiny: not only do users expect organizations to communicate honestly and openly, but they have the means to search and uncover facts that organizations would prefer to hide (Greyser, 2009). It is also becoming increasingly hard to recover from crises of reputation (Gaines-Ross, 2008; Griffin, 2008; Phillips & Young, 2009). A seemingly innocuous event can unleash a storm of negativity (Wüst & Kreutzer, 2012), and such negativity spreads directly on corporate accounts that were established for promotional purposes.

When confronted with social media risks, organizations generally follow one of four strategies: absence, presence, attendance and omnipresence (Aula, 2010). While the first three span from complete absence on social media to awareness and non-participative listening, the last strategy, omnipresence, comprises dialogic interaction. This is the strategy recommended for successful online reputation management (Aula, 2010), building on the idea that social media have necessitated

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[☆] *Note*: All material for the case studies can be publicly accessed on http://storify.com/LarissaOtt1/when-ngos-take-the-lead-facebook-unfriends-coal, http://storify.com/LarissaOtt1/throwing-stones-in-a-glass-house-the-case-of-apple and http://storify.com/LarissaOtt1/jetstar.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.10.015
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a shift from monologue to dialogue (Mersham, Theunissen, & Peart, 2009). The shift has heralded in an era of public relations characterized by participation and transparency (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009).

Social media have also altered the parameters of crises through increased pace, scope and impact (Bridgeman, 2008), enabling them to quickly become viral. The most viral emotion on the Internet is anger (Berger & Milkman, 2009; Fan, Zhao, Chen, & Xu, 2013) which is less likely to subside because of the "long tail" effect (*cf*. Phillips & Young, 2009).

To illustrate the impact of negative emotion, practitioners Graf and Schwede (2012) developed what they colloquially called a "shitstorm" social media scale using the Beaufort storm scale. The scale allows practitioners to assess the seriousness of the situation by evaluating its emotional impact: the greater the emotional impact, the higher the risk.

This article discusses research findings into social media crises, answering three key questions:

RQ1 How do social media contribute to the development of reputational crises?
RQ2 How does the risk of social media crises impact on organizations?
RQ3 How can they react to social media crises (i.e. communication strategies)?

First the research method is presented, followed by an analysis of three case studies before concluding with practical suggestions for managing social media crises.

2. Research method and data collection

This research used a multiple case study approach. Although case studies are often perceived to provide insufficient scientific rigor because of the alleged lack of generalizability (Ruddin, 2006), this research follows Flyvbjerg's (2006) argument that it is possible to generalize from a single case—as long as the case is carefully chosen. A case study is a "detailed examination of a single example" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 220), and is an empirical enquiry particularly useful in answering "how" or "why" research questions (Yin, 2009). It allows for "naturalistic generalization" where the responsibility for generalization is shifted to the readers, ergo what *they* make of the findings (Stake & Trumbull, 1982). In particular, the value of a case study lies in its tendency towards falsification and is thus best suited to test theories (Eckstein, 2000; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Walton, 1992). If one detail does not fit with the general proposition, the theory loses its validity. By the same logic, multiple case studies are more likely to produce reliable and generalizable data, depending on the context of the research (Ruddin, 2006; Yin, 2009).

To ensure that the chosen method met the standards of good social science research and in response to Cutler's (2004) critique that most researchers of crisis communication fail to explain their methodological approach, Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was applied. SCCT highlights the importance of negative emotions in crisis situations. It also shares the belief with Image Restoration Theory that the right communication protects against further negative reactions to a crisis (Coombs, 2007), and offers a framework to assess the reputational threat based on different crisis clusters and stakeholders' perceptions. Thus, it provides guidelines for crisis communication while taking into account the organization's situation and publics' emotions.

Three multinational profit-making organizations that had experienced a social media crisis were selected. The aim was to identify similarities in seemingly distinct patterns of interaction. The first case study involved Greenpeace's online attack on Facebook while the second case study investigated the crisis that followed when restaurant chain Applebee's fired a waitress. The third case study involved the low-budget airline Jetstar addressing poor service and an online attack on their Facebook account.

Sources were found by conducting a Google search using relevant search terms (e.g. "unfriend coal" for the Greenpeace campaign). On Facebook and Twitter, all posts were directly available on the organization's timeline. The data had to be accessed manually because the application programming interface (API) of Facebook and Twitter allowed key word searches only for the last seven days. While the duration of the "unfriend coal" campaign meant that the contents of the Facebook and Twitter pages had to be scanned for the whole twenty months (February 2010–October 2011), the focus for Jetstar could be narrowed to between October and December 2012, and for Applebee's from the 30 January 2013 to April 2013.

The information analyzed was public, although an issue with this form of data collection is that organizations can delete or hide material previously posted in an attempt to influence public opinion or hide unsuccessful communication strategies. Thus, some data may not have been accessed. A solution was to watch out for user comments and blog sites that pointed towards such behavior.

Due to the nature of social media, information is repeated or republished resulting in material being found through aggregated data. Different sources such as blog posts, websites and posts on Facebook or Twitter were used to find the necessary information. The website Storify^{TM} served as a curation tool and a valuable case study database where users had collected screenshots of online conversations. Text was added to connect and explain the material.

In analyzing the data, the focus rested on how the crises emerged, how each organization responded, and whether the strategies proved to be successful. Subsequent comparison across cases showed similarities and differences, contributing to a better understanding of social media crises. Explanation building was used to elucidate why certain approaches were successful and others not.

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