



Social Media's Impact on Your Brand: The Good, Bad, and Ugly

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With millions of users, social media including Facebook, LinkedIn, and twitter have become a huge engagement, staffing, retention, and increasingly, branding tool. They are at the foundation of what I call tri-branding, where companies use social media to link both product and employment brand, and to get their customers to sing their praises or “live” their brand.

Like any marketing strategy, social media can work for or against an organization:

The Good

Companies must proactively leverage social media to drive their tri-branding efforts, posting recent wins, new products and services, job openings, key promotions and hires, and press releases. All are opportunities to effectively brand who you are.

Tri-branding occurs when your customers promote the company for you. When keynoting, I often show a You Tube video of a Southwest Airlines flight attendant singing a country song as part of pre-flight “buckle up” speech. The video has now been seen by millions of viewers. Think of the marketing and benefits of this example for Southwest Airlines because a customer, on his own, branded Southwest’s product in a positive way. How much would it cost Southwest to proactively seek similar brand and culture exposure?

Another example of “the good” within the airline industry is Cebu Pacific, an Asian airline. Google them, and you’ll quickly see that they are also beneficiaries of tri-branding, with their customer base uploading You Tube videos on their behalf, resulting in millions of views. Tri-branding is all about your customer base branding—and in fact, funding—your message.

The Bad

Subway customer Matt Corby from Australia was eating the fast food chain’s

signature “Foot Long” sub when he noticed that the sandwich appeared smaller than advertised. He measured it and discovered it was 11 inches long, not a true “foot long” as advertised. He posted a photo of his discovery on Subway’s Facebook page, positioning his sub next to a tape measure along with the message “subway pls respond.” Mr. Corby’s photo was seen by thousands of Subway customers, and resulted in copycat photos all over the social networking site, including one featuring a sandwich compared to a human foot in a sock. Subway had a PR nightmare on its hands and remarkably, some disgruntled Subway customers even filed lawsuits against the fast food chain, claiming false advertising.

The Ugly

Many companies are afraid of the downside of social media (employees saying the wrong thing, badmouthing the employer, or inadvertently sharing confidential information about the company publicly, customers saying negative things about their experiences, etc.). Their concern is legitimate, as employees and customers, along with other stakeholders, often say negative things about a brand—especially if they had a negative brand experience or if the brand has a toxic culture. However, unless you take control of your brand’s social media, you risk social media taking control of your brand.

Here’s another example from the airline industry: a well-known customer service case study known simply as “United Breaks Guitars,” featuring Canadian musician Dave Carroll. While flying on United Airlines, a fellow passenger stares out the window after landing, and announces to those around him, including Carroll, “Look at those baggage handlers throwing that poor passenger’s guitar...” Sure enough, Carroll’s guitar was broken. When he sought reimbursement from United he faced a mountain of bureaucracy and denials and, ultimately, rejection. So he decided to take matters into his own hands by writing a song titled, “United Breaks Guitars,” which he proceeded to upload to YouTube. At last count, “United Breaks Guitars” had close to 13 million views. Mr. Carroll has appeared on many national media outlets, released follow up videos, saw an increase in his recording business, and even published his first book! United ultimately offered an apology, reimbursement, and now includes “United Breaks Guitars” as a customer service training video, but the damage to its brand won’t be easily undone.

Moving Forward

If you’re not proactively embracing and leveraging social media to serve your brand, chances are your employees, former employees, and customers will do it for you. Your social media stakeholders include former employees, applicants, customers and clients, vendors, the media, and even the government. Sites such as Glassdoor.com are increasingly popular with departing employees who feel their companies did not treat them fairly. One of the fastest growing sites, Klout.com, provides individuals with their social media “ranking.” In the future,

instead of asking employees what their credit ranking is, they might ask for their Klout ranking.

Social media is the world where Gen Y lives, and if companies want to engage and communicate with this group, they must embrace social media. Here are some ways to do it: —Create the company’s own You Tube channel where Gen Y employees and customers can learn about the firm’s values and culture. —Ask employees to join LinkedIn groups to share job opportunities. —Identify the most “connected” employees and ask if they would be interested in serving as brand ambassadors, to tweet about new products and or services, advertise new developments, post new positions, etc.

To reinforce the concept of tri-branding, I often ask my clients a simple question: What do BMW, Apple, and Southwest Airlines have in common? The answer: they all are exceptional at linking employment and product brand. Apple hires the most creative people to make the most creative products. BMW hires people who are driving enthusiasts to build the ultimate driving machine. Southwest Airlines hires people who have “fun” in their DNA. These three companies excel at tri-branding. In addition to linking both product and employment brand, they also get their customers to sing their praises and live their brand. For example, I’m a Droid user, and I continue to be amazed at the number of iPhone friends who take delight in “trumping” my Droid apps with their Apple apps. They’re actually living the Apple brand. Isn’t it time your company came up with a well thought-out social media branding strategy?

You can learn more about social media strategy in this AMA seminar

About the Author(s)

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