The Good, Bad, and Ugly: Social Media’s Impact on your Brand

Summary: Social media is not going anywhere, and companies large and small should be using and embracing social media to promote their brand and engage both customers and employees. Below are three case studies of the effects of social media on three companies’ brands, as well as how organizations can use social media as part of a tri-branding strategy, to build an employer value proposition to which both employees and consumers will gravitate.

There is no denying the social media has taken the world by storm, and is here to stay. Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter boast millions of users. These along with other social media platforms have established themselves as both customer and employee engagement and branding tools.

Companies need to proactively leverage social media as part of their tri-branding strategy. Due to social media’s ubiquity and the consumer’s ability to post about any and every interaction with a brand on social media, it can have equally awesome or devastating effects on a company’s brand.

The Good

Cebu Pacific Airlines shows how fun and positive interactions with their customers – even in the most mundane of moments – can go viral and support tri-branding efforts. Google “Cebu Pacific safety video” and you will see videos that customers have uploaded of their flight attendants’ fun take on the airline’s safety procedures. Tri-branding provides a genuine branding message to your customer base, and it would be hard to quantify the cost of creating a similar branding exposure created in-house.

The Bad

Many companies are afraid of the realistic downside of social media. This is a legitimate concern, as employees, customers, and 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. Unless you take control of social media, you risk social media taking control of you.
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 the sandwich and discovered it was 11 inches long. 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.” This photo was seen and shared by thousands of Subway customers, resulting in copycat photos of sandwiches not measuring up. As a result, some Subway customers filed a class action lawsuit against the fast food chain, claiming false advertising, resulting in further negative media attention.

The Ugly

To keep our case study examples within the airline industry, there is a well-known customer service case study that recently emerged involving United Airlines. While on a flight inbound to Kentucky, four passengers were asked to leave the plane due to overbooking. Dr. David Dau refused to exit his seat, and was violently pulled out of his seat by airline security and dragged down the aisle of the plane. The incident was documented by multiple people and uploaded to social media. Although forced de-boarding is legal in certain circumstances, people were outraged following of Dr. Dau’s treatment, and called on the airline to update its policies on forcing paying passengers off flights.

Social media is not going away, and companies needs to embrace and allow its use, rather than trying to discourage its employees and customers from using it. In comparison, 40 years ago company executives were locking rotary phones so employees wouldn’t ‘steal’ company resources by calling their relatives or friends. At the advent of email, many were worried the employee access to email would result in widespread stealing and sharing of the company’s intellectual property. Reflecting back today, barring employees from phone or email use seems to be a ridiculous concern.

Social media is the world where pretty much everyone lives, and if companies want to engage and communicate their customers (and employees), they MUST embrace social media. How? All companies – large or small – should be creating their own online content where employees and customers can learn of the firm’s values and culture. Companies can also identify their most ‘connected’ employees and ask if them to be brand ambassadors, and share new products and or services, advertise new developments, post new positions, etc.

Social media should be used to further leverage one’s **employer value proposition**. Your employer value proposition is a clear, compelling story describing why people work for your
organization. A well-defined employer value proposition engages existing staff members while differentiating you from your competitors. Why do people want to work for your company? Why do people stay? What are the common behaviors and traits star employees possess?

How does the employer value proposition connect back to tri-branding and social media? What do BMW, Apple, and Southwest Airlines have in common? 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, their customers to sing their praises or live their brand. Tri-branding is an amazing opportunity to leverage social media as your brand accelerator.