

Is Your Business Managing Their Social Media Risk?

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As social media becomes more entrenched in our lives providing easy accessibility to communicate, the spectrum of technologies that is social media encourage sharing of content, interactivity and engagement. These aspects are core disruptors in business activities shifting communication behaviours.

Like most things social media is a duality, it has both positive and negative elements. In this case, this means opportunities and risks. With all the benefits social media can provide in terms of communication and branding there are also pitfalls which businesses need to be aware of.

Although large companies manage their social media risks quite well, most other organisations are nowhere near close enough to managing their impacts. Some of the most common excuses heard include, I don't have time, we don't use social media, it doesn't concern us, and we only have a few employees. These comments have even come from lawyers which is completely surprising. In this day and age this really doesn't cut it anymore and these reasons are basically excuses for masking fear or not understanding social media. And although it is okay to have fear, lack of knowledge is no longer acceptable simply because the risk to your business is potentially immense.

As technology is shifting communication, it is transforming how we socialise, how we connect, how we search for information and how we buy. Social media is part of this landscape and understanding the changes it is generating is vital for business innovation and development. Whether you like it or not, agree with it or not, it doesn't matter. Every business needs to be part of the social media landscape in some way. And engaging in the social media space requires managing the opportunities but also managing the risks in a proactive approach.

The reality is that social media impacts can come from a number of sources: internal (employees, managers) or external (third parties such as clients, customers). So the fact that you don't use social media for your business is irrelevant as the risk is still present.

Risks basically fall loosely into the following 3 categories:

- Reputational
- Legal/compliance
- Operational

Depending on what jurisdiction your business is located in these impacts will vary according to the laws and regulations of the location. However, there have been numerous examples around the world of how social media can impact a business. And although the laws may differ, the impacts on a business are the same harsh reality and can include:

- negative publicity in the form of rumours
- posting of unconstructive / embarrassing information
- disclosure of confidential or sensitive information
- misleading or deceptive conduct from third parties

If your business wants to harness social media (and this should be a yes if you aren't already) then being proactive is critical. The key question your business needs to be asking is "how do we manage and minimise our social media risk?"

5 things which are essential in any proactive approach are the following:

1. Buy in from the Top

A majority of leaders and managers don't understand social media, however, this is no longer adequate. Employers need to educate themselves about social media, the technology and the consequences. They need to be proactive, find solutions and accept that social media is now part of business. This can't be stressed enough how important it is for management to recognise that they must lead. It is such a simple step but the most crucial one. If management is unsure employ someone who can lead the way.

2. Social Media Policy

A stand alone social media policy is not sufficient as it needs to be part of a coordinated management strategy. However, it is an essential aspect. It is important to develop a social media policy which is simple to understand but also fits in with your industry, culture and values. Make the employees part of the policy making process.

Some of the things to include in a policy include:

- Social media definitions
- Complaints handling
- Content creation, posting and monitoring guidelines
- Consequences for breach of policy

Most employees will do the right thing. Unfortunately, however, there will always be a small percentage of employees who will not. That is why a policy is important in protecting your business.

3. Education & Training

It is vital to provide adequate education and training about your policy so it is understood by your employees. Provide guidelines in terms of acceptable boundaries around behaviour and content. Make distinctions between public and private information, what can be discussed on social media and what can't. This seems common sense, however, you will be surprised how little information needs to be disclosed for confidential information to be pieced together. Most employees will be eager and grateful for the guidelines.

4. Employers Need to Partner with Employees

Yes, your employees are your most important asset and resource. Striking a balance between the employer and the employee is important and working together with employees is much more effective than simply providing them with a list of what they can't do on social media. This will not work. It is about encouragement and persuasion not coercion. The most successful organisations find a positive way to partner with employees to get the best outcomes for all.

5. Monitoring

Monitoring is on two levels. (1) Making sure your employees are doing the right thing. That is why partnering and education of employees is so crucial. If you have a cooperative partnership with your employees then you have them on board and they are more likely to do the right thing as they have ownership. (2) Monitoring what individuals externally are posting or saying about your business. If people say negative things about your business don't delete the information from your platform as this will only draw attention to the comments and inflame the situation. Instead try some basic customer service – acknowledge the comments and contact the person privately if needed. Accept responsibility if your business is at fault and learn from it. Most of the negative publicity and damage to brands from social media doesn't come from the actual comments but from the way the comments are usually handled so badly by the business.

As social media communication continues to develop and become more important in business in terms of brand awareness, customer service and promoting your expertise, equally as important is managing the potential risks. As communication shifts become more pronounced and we move to a mobile society, a multi-faceted approach is required to offset against the possible negative consequences. Social media is a 21st century technology and its dynamic nature means that businesses need to be proactive and practical to be effective.

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Anna Cairo Bio:

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Anna is an educator and qualified online communications professional. She runs her own boutique consultancy providing social media risk management strategies, policy and educational in-house workshops for businesses, leaders and executives, assisting them to strategically recognise social media and communication impacts.

Anna's experience includes working with the legal, financial, HR and franchise industries. She is a prolific writer and you can read more about her thoughts at her blog [Social Media in the Workplace & Beyond](#) or follow her on FB: [Anna Cairo Consulting](#)

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