Social Media and Managing Your Online Reputation

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Business needs to have a social media presence. They may not like it or understand it, however, they need to be a part of it. Social media is an emerging risk that all businesses need to take seriously if only for risk management and protection of their brand. The nature of social media means that someone airing their bad experience online does so, instantly and potentially to a massive audience. This terrifies business, as they are afraid of losing control of their brand. However, instead of being fearful they should become proactive and join in the conversation and welcome what consumers say. Here are some guidelines to manage your online reputation.

Conduct an Audit

Before joining the conversation you need to conduct an online audit of your business. It is essential to assess your business reputation online and see what people are already saying. These online conversations are happening with or without your presence. Once this assessment is complete you can begin to manage your risk.

Social media sites rank highly in Google searches because they are considered 'safe' websites, so negative comments from these sites are likely to be highly ranked in searches. This is why it is vital for business to be a part of the community and monitor what is being said about them. When you are part of the online conversation you can minimise the damage.

Every business at the very least should monitor the following: their name, company name, brand name, company executives, media and PR representatives, and their competition. With any luck the majority of the content online is positive but there is likely to be some negative comments. You need to track the source of these negative comments and see how you can reduce the damage.

Positive Content

It is probably unlikely that you will be able to have every negative comment or image removed from its original source, which means this content will still be part of the Google search results. However, by being proactive and publishing positive and useful content you can probably diminish the negative content's visibility to the lower end of a Google

search. By posting positive comments regularly, these comments should slowly overtake the negative comments in the search rankings.

The negative comments will most likely keep coming, as it is difficult to keep everyone satisfied. And it is important for business to understand that they can't control the conversation, therefore, they can't stop these negative comments. They can only monitor and negate. However, if you are not online and part of the conversation you will have no idea about the damaging content.

In the majority of social media disasters that have occurred they have arisen because business has failed to adequately deal with a customer grievance or failed to respond to a negative comment online. This is a good reminder to give first-rate customer service and not to be afraid of adverse comments. Turn them into PR successes; if you don't, your competitors will.

Build Relationships

Once you have managed to contain the negative comments and have established a social media presence it is time to build relationships. By this stage, any business should have ample intelligence on their brand and business occurring online. Here are some ground rules when building relationships:

- Don't be a bully and try to promote or sell. Social media is not all about marketing

- Know you can't control the conversation. If you try to shut down debate, you will fail and create a controversy. Accept that you don't own the content

- Don't dismiss or trivialise comments just because some consumers don't agree with the business brand. Not everyone has to agree with you

- If you say you are going to fix a problem do so

- Reward loyal followers

- Be authentic and accurate – no spin

Building relationships is all about listening to what people are saying and genuinely understanding what they articulate so you are able to assist. Social media is predominantly a 'social' tool but business can leverage this to their benefit by being authentic and valuing and respecting what consumers are saying. This will create trust and confidence in your business.