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(i) Social Media

Considerations for Interacting with Detractors on Your Social Media Properties

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I. Introduction

1. Social media technology has provided organizations and brands with new tools and opportunities to engage in conversations with their constituents. However, these same tools can be co-opted by detractors (or “trolls” in industry lingo) intent on criticizing, attacking or being downright disruptive. While detractors can exist anywhere on the Internet - broadcasting negativity through their own social media platforms and commenting on 3rd party news articles - the focus for this paper is best practices for managing detractors on your own social media properties, specifically your agency’s Facebook page and an open comments section on your agency’s blog.

2. The launch of the U.S. 2010 Census communications campaign marked the beginning of the Census Bureau’s foray into social media. Every social media asset deployed by the Census Bureau for 2010 did not exist for the previous decennial in 2000. The Census Bureau’s social media outreach in 2010 strove to reach younger residents through these popular communications channels, and to facilitate a national dialogue about the census.

3. The Census Bureau was motivated to facilitate two-way communication for a number of reasons. The agency prides itself on a general commitment to transparency, it had a desire to operate with transparency and candor specifically around the 2010 Census, and the census took place during a larger government initiative to increase openness throughout the federal system. In addition, the agency hoped that the American people would be more inclined to participate in the 2010 Census if they were fully informed about its purpose, and if they could have their concerns addressed.

II. Why Your Detractors Should Have a Voice

4. The distinctive functionality of social media is its ability to host a public dialogue. Two-way communications with your customers and constituents provides the obvious benefit of allowing you to answer questions and correct misinformation. During the 2010 Census, we were constantly explaining

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via Facebook the purpose behind the questions, our strict rules around confidentiality, and the legal justification for the census.

5. But as importantly, an organization that encourages cyber-debate builds trust and credibility among its social media followers. Had we used our Facebook page to posts only positive news, and had we allowed only supportive comments, our page would soon have been viewed as little more than an advertisement for the census. Somewhat counter intuitively, giving your detractors a voice helps to build a community of advocates. As our Fan base grew, we found that our followers frequently rose to our defense against negativity and criticism, enabling us to remain above the fray. In addition, an environment of honesty and transparency often disarms independents who are intrigued by your fairness and lack of defensiveness.

6. Negative comments also provide the first indication of developing issues that may become much larger two or three days later. These comments gave us the opportunity to plan a comprehensive response through a variety of public relations channels. For example, we first became aware of a highly controversial YouTube video when it was posted on our FB wall. We prepared our own videos in response and worked with “Mythbuster” websites to counter the misinformation.

7. Permitting negative comments also helps build your credibility as a source of authentic information. Our online reputation greatly enhanced our ability to manage issues and crises through this social media channel.

III. When to Respond: Considerations

8. When deciding to respond to a negative comment, it is important to keep in mind the relative standing of the parties involved. In our case, our posts and comments represent the U.S. Census Bureau, and by extension, the U.S. government. When we engage with a private citizen, we unavoidably give legitimacy to his or her comment – we have deemed it worthy of a response. You must take into account the risk of elevating your detractor and, in a protracted debate, diminishing yourself.

9. In addition, there is a particular sensitivity in the United States to the perception of heavy-handed government. When the Census Bureau debates someone on Facebook, it is very important that we avoid the appearance of the government attacking a private citizen.

10. The best practice to avoid these pitfalls is for your community of advocates to make your case for you. Give them a chance to respond. We found Facebook fans advocating on our behalf to be an even more powerful statement than if we had mounted our own defense. It is obvious that we reply with bias; frankly, it’s our job. But a clear and thoughtful response from a member of the general public is a very strong validation of our position.

11. We did learn, however, that it is important to be prepared for criticism with messaging that has already been vetted and approved. In some cases, the issues involved may require an authoritative reply from your agency, or be of sufficient complexity, so that your community of advocates cannot respond intelligently. You likely know your agency’s or brand’s vulnerabilities in advance; allowing negativity to sit unanswered while you scramble for an answer only lends it greater credibility.

12. Deep concern over negativity on your Facebook Wall may be misplaced. It is important to remember that your Facebook wall is seen only by new visitors. Anyone who has already Liked your page will see only your status updates (and associated comments) in their news stream. You should

also consider moving contentious discussions from your Wall to your Discussion Board. Detractors who are interested in having a serious conversation should have no problem continuing the dialogue in a less conspicuous place. In fact, we even had one detractor who asked us to activate our Discussion Board so that the lengthy debate wouldn't clutter our Wall.

IV. The Importance of a Comprehensive Comment Policy

13. A clear, detailed and easily accessible Comment Policy is the key to successful two-way social media. Your Comment Policy sets the rules for communication on your social media properties, and makes clear how public comments will be moderated. Once you have your Comment Policy in place, you can delete inappropriate posts with confidence. Moderate frequently, consistent with your Comment Policy (and irrespective of your own political views or personal feelings), and your Comment Policy will serve as protection against accusations of censorship or prejudice. Given this framework, there should be little hesitation to delete inappropriate comments and even block users when necessary.

14. When a detractor posts a provocative comment on our Wall, it is not unusual for our social media team to review the statement together, to ensure that the comment is being processed fairly in accordance with our Comment Policy. Does the comment attack a particular individual? Is it on topic? Does it include any personal information (such as an email address) that violates our policy? For Comment Policy judgment calls, don't hesitate to work it through as a group.

15. When you do moderate out a comment, you may want to take that opportunity to repost key sections of your Comment Policy or post a link to it. Since your fan base is always growing and turning over, you should post frequent reminders about the rules of your page, while at the same time encouraging healthy debate. You may also want to consider posting a permanent link to your Comment Policy in the About section on your Facebook homepage so that your moderation rules are as transparent as possible.

16. The U.S. Census Bureau Social Media Comment Policy has been attached to the end of this paper for you to view as a reference.

V. Case Studies: Pesky Posters

17. When you give your detractors a voice, and their comments do not run afoul of your comment policy, you can handle them in three ways: Respond, let your community of advocates respond, or ignore the comment.

A. When to Respond

18. G.T. – According to his Facebook profile, G.T. was a college student with conservative political beliefs. This individual posted a detailed question on our Facebook page about the marketing budget for the 2010 Census. Without these figures readily at hand, and given the sensitive nature of this information, we chose to reply in generalities and direct him to news reports on the subject. G.T., awaiting his specifics, threatened to post his question and commentary every 8 hours until we fully and completely answered his questions. We assumed that G.T. would eventually give up and decided to ignore him. However, true to his word, G.T. came to dominate our Facebook Wall, even ignoring the pleas from our community of advocates to cease and desist, and to “get a girlfriend.” Eventually, we deemed it best to provide him with the specifics he requested. G.T. promptly disappeared from our Wall.

B. Successful Community Self-Policing

18. A.W. – A.W. was a woman who posted almost daily on our Facebook page complaining about the 2010 Census’s intrusion into her life and the lives of private citizens. She felt that the information we were asking for on the survey went far beyond the type of information that private citizens should be forced to divulge, or would ever produce about themselves.

19. Someone in our community of advocates decided, through Google, to do a little research on A.W. In response to A.W., this person posted virtually all the information A.W. would have had to provide about herself on the census questionnaire – age, address and race. By making clear to A.W. what information about her already existed in the public domain, A.W. was clearly persuaded to stop her negative posting.

C. When to Ignore

20. The 2010 Census was promoted by a robust, multi-dimensional national communications campaign in an environment of almost unprecedented hostility towards the federal government. We anticipated that many people – hundreds, perhaps thousands - would be motivated to express their grievances on our Facebook Wall.

21. We found that the vast majority of serial posters, allowed to express their negativity uncensored for a couple of days, would stop abruptly. The maxim “Don’t feed the trolls” is an excellent strategy and starting point for dealing with your detractors. Unable to provoke a response, most detractors will quickly burn themselves out and move on. Of course, any comments in violation of your Comment Policy should be removed immediately.

Attachments

CENSUS BUREAU SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS COMMENT POLICY

The purpose of the Census Bureau's Web 2.0 presence that includes social media channels is to engage residents from across all walks of life in an online platform where they can learn about and share their important topics regarding Census Bureau programs and services.

Census Bureau Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social media channels allow visitors to interact with the agency and others, and encourage visitors to freely comment and give welcomed feedback. We encourage your comments. Your ideas and concerns are important to us because we want you as an active participant in our programs and to be well informed about how the Census Bureau's work gets done.

Visitor-generated comments made on any and all Census Bureau social media channels become public domain.

We also want to publish your comments, but we expect conversations to follow the conventions of polite discourse. Therefore, we moderate social media; meaning that all comments are subject to review. In our review process, we try to remove any objectionable content.

Objectionable content includes but is not limited to:

- Abusive or vulgar language
- Offensive or threatening language
- Personal attacks of any kind against any individual or group
- Spam
- Links to any site
- Off-topic statements
- Advertising and/or other endorsements about products, businesses, individuals, or parties

Any comment with specific allegations of misconduct will be removed and referred to the appropriate authorities.

- We will not post any comment that contains personally identifiable information (PII):
 - >>>>> Email address
 - >>>>> Employer identification number
 - >>>>> Business address
 - >>>>> Personal address
 - >>>>> Phone number

Your privacy is important to the Census Bureau, and we make every effort to ensure your privacy under Title 13 and other applicable laws (See the Census Bureau's Privacy Policy for more information). We ask that you also protect your own privacy by not including any personally identifiable information within your comments.

Under the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998, persons under the age of 13 years old are not allowed to submit questions or comments.

Reporters are asked to send any comments or questions to the Census Bureau's Public Information

Office through their normal channels and to refrain from submitting questions on our social media channels. Reporter questions will not be posted.

For quick answers to questions related to receiving and filling out your census form, please visit our Question and Answer Center at ask.census.gov.

For official public statements and releases, please contact the Public Information Office.

This comment policy may be updated at any time without notice at the discretion of the moderator, so check back for changes.