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PR, Perfected: Protecting Your Brand Online

Defend your brand's social media presence with these precautionary tips and response tactics

By Jessica Howell – April 27, 2010



Every day, technology places communication tools more easily within consumer reach. But with the prolific integration of online networking emerges the underbelly of social media, ripe with hackers, squatters and a slew of Internet-savvy coders harboring ill intent.

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In February 2010, United Airlines made news after its Twitter page was hacked with inappropriate, sexually-explicit messages. The company quickly deleted the offending posts and issued an apology to its then 57,000 followers: "We're sure you know that tweet wasn't ours. Our Twitter account was hacked. Problem resolved. Sorry about that." Simple and succinct. (And really, in what other way can you respond when limited to 140 characters?) It seems even the White House is susceptible to such pranks. When questioned about an alleged hacking of President Obama's official Twitter account, White House Chief Technology Officer Aneesh Chopra declined comment, saying only that cyber security is taken very seriously.

While both incidents left many public relations professionals biting their nails, they also raise a valid question: How can we best protect a brand in the ever evolving digital space? In the Wild West of the Web, it takes a bit of throw-it-against-the-wall-to-see-if-it-sticks mentality to get by. Currently, both the good guys and the bad are testing the water to see what works, and sandwiched in between are the social networking conglomerates like Twitter and Facebook, carefully navigating legalities. Or so we think.

Behind the Hack

In late 2009, marketer Michael Werch took it upon himself to see how a major corporation would respond to a Twitter impersonator. He crafted a mock account using the handle @HJ_Heinz and filled the page with Heinz Ketchup bottles to resemble H.J. Heinz Company, one of the top 10 most equitable brands, according to the 2010 Harris Interactive EquiTrend study. Werch later chronicled his experiment for Advertising Age in the article, "My Life as H.J. Heinz: Confessions of a Real-Life Twitter Squatter."

"At the time, Twitter didn't have many rules," said Werch, recounting the thought process that sparked his squatting idea. "A lot of companies had already registered their name and I began to wonder what actions would be taken by a company like Heinz, and a website like Twitter, if an [average] consumer like me took over."

Labeled as "News, recipe ideas & fun facts for all things Heinz," Werch tweeted historical facts about the company and links to recipes on the Heinz website, growing his follower base to 367 in two weeks' time. And on the 14th day of his experiment, he logged on to Twitter to find that his handle had been changed to @NOThj_Heinz and his account page edited to make no mention of the legendary ketchup company. In his email inbox, a message from Twitter Trust and Safety noted that Werch's Twitter account was "in violation of the Twitter Rules, specifically the section on Trademark" and that "To avoid confusion regarding the brand and/or official affiliation with the business or company in question," several changes had been made to his account. Included in the subsequent edits: changed username; removed profile picture and background; and edited real name, website and bio.

Says Werch, "I don't know if Heinz ever considered any type of leverage -- a partnership or transfer of the account." He would have been open to it if they had, he says, and was clearly not working to negatively impact the brand.

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"The Heinz experiment wasn't done to make the case that the company needed to be on Twitter," says Werch. "My objective was to show what brands can do, aside from due diligence, to protect themselves and to serve as a lesson for Twitter too. As I see it, there's currently no business verification process and the responsibility falls on Twitter to create a legitimate community for businesses to engage with consumers."

Anatomy of a Bad Review

The concept of consumer engagement, resurrected as more businesses converse in the social media sphere, actually has its roots in user reviews. With sites like Amazon, Yelp, and Angie's List leading the way, certified media are no longer the "watchdogs" of industry. Today, anyone with an Internet connection has the ability to boost or bash a brand. According to a recent CNNMoney.com article, online retailer Alpaca Direct increased sales of reviewed items by 23 percent simply by allowing buyers to post reviews, positive or negative, alongside product details.

However, in some cases, negative comments do immeasurable harm. Take for instance the recent online [backlash](#) directed at Nestlé's Facebook fan page in regard to the company's use of palm oil. Encouraged by Greenpeace, Facebook users have posted numerous comments, including links to news articles, videos and photos that spotlight the effects of palm oil to rainforests. Nestlé's response, which at one point included deleting comments and questioning user remarks in an unprofessional banter better left for the playground, has been widely criticized.

In [Small Business Trends](#), Lisa Barone, co-founder and chief branding officer, Outspoken Media, Inc., writes, "The only way a bad review can really hurt you is if it's the only review on the page. The same way you work to get testimonials for your business, you should be working to encourage users to leave reviews. Sometimes the best offense is a great defense."

Taking Action

So what should you do to best protect your company or client's brand? According to Barone, a company should respond to negative online commentary only if: the company is at fault, the facts are misstated, the review is gaining traction, or if a bad experience can be salvaged. Otherwise, let it be.

When it comes to Twitter, Werch advises that the first step is to monitor social sites and review posts that could cause harm from a public relations standpoint. Also, companies should register a handle or page name, even if they don't plan on participating, to secure its ownership. And if a company finds someone squatting their handle, they should reach out to the individual directly to question the reasoning. "In my case, the PR director came off as shortsighted," he says of Heinz. Today, @HJ_Heinz is registered on Twitter, but not as an active account.

Jeffrey Cohen, social media marketing manager at Howard, Merrell & Partners and contributing editor of [SocialMediaB2B.com](#) recommends contacting the platform in question immediately to gain control of your trademarks if an imposter is using your brand name.

If a hacker is posing as your company or brand on a page already registered, "Try to login yourself, although you may not be able to. After you gain control of your account, delete all infiltrated posts and send a message to your followers that your account has been hacked and things are better now," says Cohen.

To prevent hackers in the first place, Cohen advises companies to create passwords that are hard to guess and to use varying passwords for every site.

Twitter says, "Companies and businesses should report accounts misusing their trademarks or brand by filing a complaint under our [Trademark Policy](#)." The platform is also beta testing a new [Verified Account](#) feature, which hopes to further prevent identity confusion on the site.

When it comes to maintaining brand presence on social media, the bottom line is that continuous monitoring, along with swift reaction when needed, is critical to success. There will always be risk associated with online engagement, so being adequately prepared to address and apologize, when needed, is the backbone to consumer trust.

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