

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESEARCH QUESTION

For those companies that allow and encourage their people to represent them via external social media, what types of activities and level of scrutiny are applied to manage risk and monitor brand reputation?

INTRODUCTION

Social media has been lauded for its ability to connect people and quickly disseminate information to large audiences. In the past decade, these technologies have rapidly become more ingrained in the workplace. A recent survey of 1,100 companies revealed that 75% of employees access social media daily on the job with 60% accessing social media outlets several times per day.¹ With this in mind, it becomes paramount that companies develop ways to protect their brand reputation and manage the risk that comes with increased presence on social media through their employees. In the same survey, 24% of companies monitor social media access by employees. (See Appendix A) Given the varied approaches to protecting brand reputation in light of employee social media usage, several key practices have been highlighted below to guide companies in creating non-invasive, protective measures to mitigate risks related to social media usage.

KEY PRACTICES

I. Social Media Teams

Purpose: The establishment of dedicated social media teams expands the capability of a company to provide guidance and support for employees using social media. Teams can establish social media guidelines and policies to dictate acceptable use of social media by employees when posting about their respective employers.² These teams can also facilitate training on how to utilize these platforms correctly and spend dedicated time on collecting trends and reports relating to a company's social media presence.³

Implementation: An ideal social media team should be cross-functional and incorporate technology experts, employees who have deep knowledge of a company's organizational culture, and multiple employees with familiarity in different business units. This knowledge facilitates the formation of a team with a comprehensive perspective of the current climate of the company that can mitigate risks during periods of high tension and the ability to focus on areas of the business that may be facing controversy in a timely manner.⁴

II. Formal Guidelines and Policy

Purpose: The creation of well-established and comprehensive social media guidelines allows a company to internally promote the do's and don'ts of social media usage. These guidelines can also serve to demonstrate externally to courts, regulators and other key stakeholders that a company is dedicated to operating in a compliant non-invasive environment.²

Implementation: Effective guidelines should be developed in a concise manner, with short, straightforward language to make quick reference as simple as possible. Guidelines should also include concrete examples whenever possible to conceptualize key points to employees.⁴ Also, a widely important and commonly overlooked component of an effective guideline is to cover in detail the measures of disciplinary action in case of violation.⁵

III. Training and Education

Purpose: Policies and company preferences surrounding the use of social media need to be reinforced through education.⁶ These educational opportunities can serve to educate employees about policies and reinforce other forms of communications materials pertaining to social media policy. Through training opportunities, employees receive an opportunity to learn and ask questions about the risks, rules, policies and procedures when it comes to social media.⁷

Implementation: Training materials need to target employee groups through different outlets such as onsite training, online platforms, and interactive methods to fully engage the employee population in an efficient manner.⁷ Training can also include certification systems, rewards and a tie to performance review in order to facilitate participation.

IV. Monitoring Software

Purpose: Utilizing specific software designed to monitor social media gives companies the capability to monitor many social media platforms at once. These platforms also tend to come packaged with

dynamic search functions and analytic capabilities to allow companies to key in on specific phrases, geographic regions and time periods.⁸

Implementation: There are a wide range of products available to companies seeking to buy software to monitor social media. These packages also typically come with expert help to teach companies what to look for, track the most popular forms of social media and efficiently sort through immense amounts of information to key in on possible social media risks.⁹

CASE STUDIES

These cases highlight the issues companies have faced when dealing with employees using social media:

Applebee's: In 2013, Applebee's fired a waitress when she posted a customer's receipt on social media to bring attention to a customer who failed to tip. This led to outrage when Applebee's justified its actions as part of its policy to protect customer privacy despite having posted a customer receipt the week prior to highlight compliments a customer had written down about their service. The issue escalated as social media users took to posting on Applebee's social media pages to question the company's actions. The company responded to comments by deleting negative comments, responding with blanket, repeated statements, and blocking users from commenting on their pages. This in turn further escalated outrage as the public questioned Applebee's response to negative press on social media.¹⁰

Lessons Learned:

- Keep consistent social media policies and hold corporate social media postings to the same level of accountability for following guidelines as employees. This promotes consistency and prevents accusations of unfair practices when a company needs to do damage control on social media.
- Despite all measures companies take to mitigate risks before they happen, they should also maintain policies on how to firefight once negative postings have gone public on social media. A strong systematic approach will prevent further damage from occurring.¹¹
- For companies seeking to use social media internally and also for companies developing guidelines for their employee use of social media, proper understanding of social media etiquette is essential to prevent alienating the public.¹⁰

Domino's: In 2009, a YouTube video posted by two employees of a Conover, N.C., Domino's went viral. The video presented one of them engaging in various unsanitary acts with food items that were later allegedly sent to customers. Domino's spent a day identifying the responsible people and investigating whether the video was real. The following day, Domino's began crafting its social media response of a YouTube video featuring now-CEO J. Patrick Doyle explaining the incident as a hoax and offering the company's response. Domino's deliberately mirrored the keywords and tags used in the original video. Therefore, when people searched for the offensive video, they would simultaneously see the response video. Despite the quick response, VP Communications of Domino's said in hindsight he wished they had posted the VP response video one day earlier.¹²

Lessons Learned:

- An effective way to deal with social media reputation crisis is to use the social medium in which the threat was developing as a cornerstone of the response.¹²
- Timely response is the key to social media reputation crisis. However, investigation before the response inevitably takes up time, and poses a barrier to a timely response. One solution is to keep the public informed, not just about the results of the investigation but about the measures being taken as well.

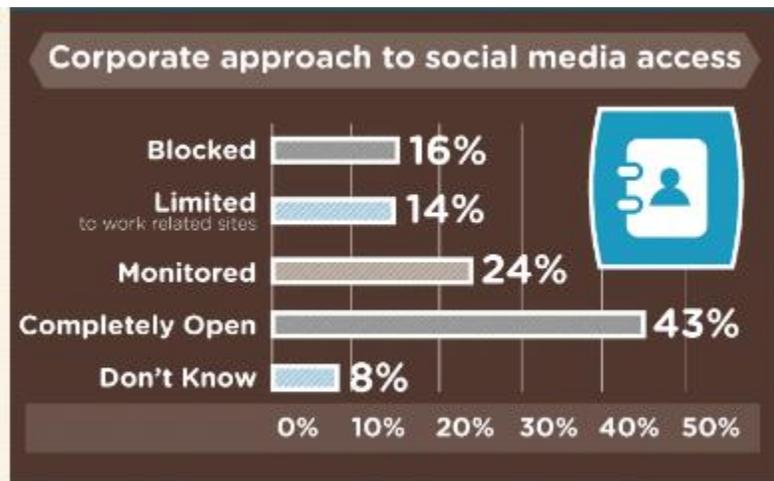
CONCLUSION

As social media usage continues to increase, employers will need to form clear guidelines on how employees can post about the workplace. Employers will likely need to dedicate resources to monitor social media, leverage new technologies to quickly scan common social media platforms and provide formal rules and trainings on social media usage. Likewise, companies will also need to develop clear-cut contingency plans in the case that inappropriate materials are posted by employees in order to mitigate brand damage. Having set protocols in place will allow for swifter action, consistent responses and a well thought out approach that can diminish any reputational damage. As companies continue to explore social media outlets, these practices can guide them in protecting their brand image.

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APPENDIX A



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