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Public Relations, Publicity, and Corporate Advertising

SOCIAL MEDIA INVOLVED IN CREATING AND FIGHTING NEGATIVE PUBLICITY

These days it seems like one of the goals of nearly every company, large and small, is pretty simple: generate as much “buzz” as possible. If their “likes,” “tweets,” comments, and memes aren’t increasing every day, these companies feel that they are probably falling behind the competition. Indeed, companies dedicate millions of dollars and thousands of hours of time to improve their social media presence, hoping that their efforts will help their messages spread throughout the digital world like wildfire. But what happens when a company or brand experiences negative publicity resulting in negative buzz? While social media can do wonders for a brand when news is positive, what happens when the news is likely to be detrimental? The business of “damage control” has been around for years, but how it is being done has fundamentally changed over the past decade. Newspapers, radios, and magazines are all seemingly being replaced by computers, tablets, and mobile phones that power social platforms capable of spreading news at speeds previously unseen or unheard of. These social media provide a platform for both proponents and opponents of brands to “talk” directly to a company as well as numerous others. The old days of sending a company or a celebrity a letter in the mail hoping it gets read and responded to are long gone. Today’s methods of providing feedback—posting on a brand’s Facebook or Twitter page—have a better-than-average chance that someone will read it and perhaps do something about it if placed in a public forum.

One example of a brand responding to negative publicity and reversing course on a decision is whisky distiller Maker’s Mark, which in 2013 abruptly changed its mind on a publicly announced plan to dilute its whisky from 45 percent alcohol by volume to 42 percent to meet unanticipated demand. The company announced the change in an e-mail to the brand’s most loyal fans claiming that the change in alcohol content would not make for a dramatic

difference in how the whisky tastes. Unfortunately, the e-mail quickly went viral among Maker’s Mark drinkers through numerous social channels. The feedback was so negative that within just one week of the announcement, Marker’s Mark reversed course and canceled plans to dilute the whisky.

Another example demonstrates that even the most popular and respected organizations are not immune to negative publicity. Just ask the Susan G. Komen Foundation, the nation’s most prominent breast cancer advocacy organization, which decided to end its decades-long partnership with Planned Parenthood. Despite the fact that the funding Planned Parenthood would lose from the foundation constituted only a tiny portion of its annual grants, Komen’s decision ignited heavy opposition within its own ranks as well as from everyday citizens, politicians, and particularly breast cancer survivors. Komen’s social media channels received thousands of threats by longtime supporters to put down their pink ribbons and no longer support their fund-raising efforts. At the same time, Planned Parenthood actually *received* thousands of donations directly from supporters who thought Komen’s decision would forever cripple the organization. While the Komen foundation believed it had good reasons for curtailing its support for Planned Parenthood, one can argue that it did not voice the reasons adequately. Perhaps had the public been aware of these reasons, those opposed to Komen may have had a different opinion (or, again, maybe not!). The end result was the resignation of Komen’s senior vice president of public policy, decreases in contributions, and a black mark on Komen’s positive image among its supporters.

Yet another well-respected foundation also felt the wrath of negative publicity when Nike announced that it would dissolve its partnership with the Livestrong Foundation. After years of standing by seven-time Tour de France winner and famed cancer survivor Lance Armstrong, a week

after the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency released thousands of pages of documents showing the biker had used performance-enhancing drugs, Nike reversed course. While Nike said it would continue to support the foundation itself, it terminated the sales of Livestrong gear, which helped bring in over \$500 million to cancer research. Armstrong's Twitter account was quiet after the announcement.

The effects of negative publicity have been felt by a wide-range of brands, as well as individuals. For example, ultra-conservative talk radio personality Rush Limbaugh saw a stable of long-time advertisers (nine at final count) pull their sponsorships from his program after he publicly denigrated Georgetown University law student Sandra Fluke for her testimony supporting the Obama administration's requirement that health care insurance plans cover contraceptives for women. Limbaugh's comments—too inappropriate to be reprinted in this book—prompted immediate action; those disagreeing with his comments took to social media in an effort to boycott Limbaugh's talk show as well as the advertisers affiliated with the show. Not even an apology from Limbaugh could save advertisers—from ProFlowers to LegalZoom to AOL—from leaving Limbaugh in droves. ProFlowers, in particular,

noted that posts it received from customers on Twitter about Limbaugh had "affected its advertising strategy." Limbaugh is an interesting example of the effects of negative publicity because he was not the only one affected by the social media firestorm that ensued from his comments. Limbaugh's radio show is among the most widely listened-to daily programs in the country, and is the lead revenue generator for parent company Clear Channel Media and Entertainment. While it remains to be seen how the aftermath of Limbaugh's comments will play out for Clear Channel from a business standpoint, one can only assume that losing a large number of advertisers from its most popular program will not help the company's bottom line.

Sources: Mark J. Miller, "Nike and the Livestrong Foundation Dissolve Lucrative Partnership," www.brandchannel.com, May 29, 2013; Chris Otts, "Maker's Mark Defends Watering Down Its Bourbon," www.courier-journal.com, February 12, 2013; Mark Boxley, "Maker's Mark to Restore Alcohol Content of Whiskey," www.courier-journal.com, February 17, 2013; Brian Stelter, "Limbaugh Advertisers Flee Show amid Storm," www.nytimes.com, March 2, 2012; Jennifer Preston and Gardiner Harris, "Outcry Grows Fiercer after Funding Cut by Cancer Group," www.nytimes.com, February 2, 2012; Shirley Brady, "Susan G. Komen for the Cure Policy Exec Resigns," www.brandchannel.com, February 7, 2012.