TOP SECRET

How to avoid a social media disaster

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Let's start with a story.

It's a sunny Wednesday morning, the sun is shining and there are few signs of the menacing clouds of discontent soon to gather. Our protagonist is the MD at HUSH – that's HabitKatBucks United Southwest Holdings – a recent merger of several companies who had had some 'issues' recently.

On this fine day, our man, who we'll call Mr X to save his blushes, arrived at his desk at 8.30 as usual, double-shot caramel moccaccino in hand, to find an email from his PA Debbie who'd overheard a bad customer experience on the train that morning.

"Don't worry, Debs" Mr X assured her: bad reviews are ten a penny, but sales are up and the HUSH brand has just crashed through the magical 100 likes on Facebook, or so his daughter had assured him.

Ten minutes later, Mr X's new Marketing Director flagged up a familiar sounding complaint he'd found on Twitter. Sounded potentially damaging, but, undaunted, Mr X dismissed it. He was feeling bullish and besides, his double-shot was going cold. "People whinge all the time," he repeated. The Marketing Director really should meet Mr X's wife who has turned moaning into an art form.

An hour later, HUSH's PR Manager emails Mr X: there's a video, apparently, on YouTube, showing the source of the complaint – an HUSH store manager appears to throw a cup of coffee in the face of a disgruntled female customer. It looks bad. Mr X tells the PR Manager to get the PR Director to deal with it immediately.

Two hours later, the Daily Mail calls Mr X wanting an official comment on 'Cappuccino Gate' as it's being called. Mr X's blood is up. He's furious. He calls the PR Manager to find out why it hasn't been dealt with only to discover the PR Director's on an outward bound training course in the Brecon Beacons. "No phone reception. Sorry."

"Surely the PR agency knows this hack at the Mail?" Mr X demands, only to be reminded he'd had the agency dropped three months ago – "luxury item" was the phrase he'd apparently used at the time.

Mr X decides to Google 'Cappuccino Gate'. There are links galore. He loosens his tie. This is not ideal. Not ideal at all.

He watches the YouTube video (currently 15,000 views), reads the blogs. Trouble's brewing. The forums are abuzz; Facebook is awash; Mr X needs 'awayout.'

The content links have acted like candles and disgruntled moths are fluttering around, all too eager to share their bad experiences.

Mr X does what everyone in his position would do - he concludes he is surrounded by idiots. Mr X was always a fan of Billy Ocean and when the going gets tough…

He resolves to snuff these candles out personally.

He demands access to the HUSH feed on Twitter, only to find out the @Hush hashtag was registered 18 months ago by a friendly neighbourhood anarchist called 'Scud', who has helpfully used Twitpic to broadcast the most damaging still of the event to his 716,000 followers, half of whom have retweeted it to their collective secondary audience of 6.2 million people.

"Breakout the Social Media Crisis Plan," bellows Mr X to the PR Manager. Apparently there isn't one. Mr X draws on his military training and tells her to "Foxtrot Oscar."

"Always fight fire with fire," concludes Mr X – echoing his father's motto which, incidentally, lead to Mr X Snr's dismissal by the fire brigade.

Mr X instructs his PA, Debbie, to post positive testimonials on every forum she can find under a pseudonym. The PR manager is told to delete as much negative comment as she can find on Facebook. Bud successfully nipped, Mr X is now in his stride…

He orders the Store Manager who threw the coffee to be sacked on the spot and instructs the PR Manager to post the following edict immediately on the company website.

"With reference to the so-called Cappuccino-Gate fiasco, I can assure HUSH customers that this is an isolated incident. One swallow does not make a summer. (Even if the swallow in question was thrown all over a paying customer LOL). HUSH is a family company and refuses to be dragged through the 'cyber-mud.' (He was especially pleased with his turn of phrase.) This is a storm in a coffee cup and HUSH has instructed its lawyers to follow up on any libellous rumour-mongering."

"That's shown them," he thought. Decisive leadership. Disaster averted.

But Scud has noticed the Facebook deletions and exposes the practice as 'the most crass kind of ham-fisted corporate censorship'. Worse still, he has traced the sudden bout of flag-waving advocacy to 'Debs', Hush's PA to the Managing Director. 6.2 million people are updated almost instantaneously. Mr X's hole is suddenly a lot deeper.

Ten minutes later, Mr X receives a phone call from the Chairman. Mr X's hardline policy has been picked up by CNN and the homepage is lead story of CNN.com. Why hadn't they seen this coming? And what are they doing to make it go away?

The new Marketing Director hands in his notice highlighting as a parting shot that he'd just joined the 'Bollocks to HUSH' group on Facebook which already has 23,000 likes. The Chairman's back on the phone; the company's share price is down 15 per cent.

Mr X stiffens his upper lip; time to draw on the Dunkirk spirit. He decides to blame the PR Director and jumps in a taxi to the Brecon Beacons. Best to tell him the news in person.

Turns out, the store manager who had thrown the coffee was conducting a staff training session on the perils of bad customer service. The hot coffee had in fact been harmless dietcoke. No harm done - it was all a misunderstanding. He was just about to seed a full explanation absolving HUSH on any involvement…until he found out he'd been sacked.

He decided to join the 'Bollocks to Hush' Facebook group instead.

An extreme case of social media failure, but you get the point. The lesson behind the funny story is that being prepared really is critical when an issue starts to bubble up.

Spot the issue before it becomes a crisis.

The first stage in avoiding a crisis is being able to spot when that crisis is about to break. The beauty of social media is its visibility: it is possible to monitor what people are saying about you in real-time. Some companies (like PepsiCo's Gatorade) have gone as far as to set up a "Mission control room" to monitor real time tweets, blogs and sentiment to allow them to engage with consumers in real time.

For most companies, this isn't practical. But the fact is, that to avoid a crisis, you need to see it coming, and the best way to do that is to listen to what people are saying about you. Imagine you're a multinational retailer, and a human rights charity has just discovered that one of your factories in China is using child labour to make cheap T-shirts. (You know nothing about this, and you have an ethical trading policy in place.) The charity is organising a demonstration outside your flagship stores in every major city where you have a shop. It's all being organised via a purpose-build Facebook page, and excitement is building.

If you don't know about the Facebook page, chances are the first you'll know about it is when a national TV journalists puts a microphone under your nose and asks you what your view is on child labour used in the manufacturing of cheap clothes; and filming customers being blocked from going into your shop.

But if you did know about it, you could investigate whether the claim was true; publicly fire the offending supplier (and thank the charity for bringing it to your attention); call for a review of your entire manufacturing supply chain in the Far East; review your ethics policy; and answer questions honestly over Facebook, Twitter, your own website, and other communities.

Know what you're looking for in social media monitoring.

The difficulty with monitoring everything that's being said about you on social media is that if you're not careful, you can get bogged down in data, and be no closer to really understanding what's going on in the market. Only by interpreting the data on social media, understanding which sites are influential, and translating what is 'real' information and what is just background chatter, can you create an effective 'early warning system' to alert you to an impending crisis or issue. (This is in much the same way that the security services have to interpret whether a conversation about an attack in an online community is just people having a laugh, or whether it poses a serious threat.)

Used properly, monitoring social media can give you a real warning that an issue is about to break, and help you avoid the issue becoming a crisis.

Not all crises can be avoided completely. But good preparation and having the tools in place to handle a crisis when it hits can be the difference between a crisis and a disaster.

How do you define a crisis?

At its most serious, a social media crisis will look very like a 'real world' crisis. Often a crisis will start in the real world, and will play out over social media. Whether it is Greenpeace's organised campaign against Nestlé – where Greenpeace broadcast real-world demonstrations outside Nestlé's headquarters over YouTube and Facebook; or a case of bullying on a social network where some very real danger is faced; or an issue where a brand's product has been found to be unsafe and the resulting photos of the damage

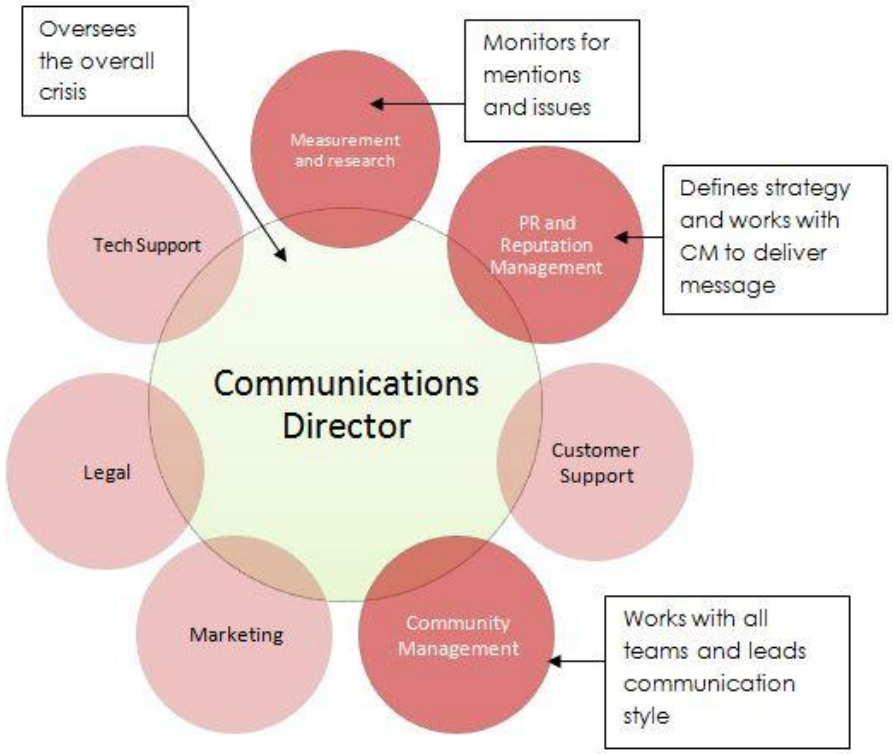
they've caused posted online - the threats to the organisations and people in the worst case situations will be very much real.

Of course, there are some less serious, 'pure' social media issues, such as: rogue tweeters (as Vodafone saw when an unauthorised member of staff tweeted obscene messages from its account); badly behaved users in communities who need to be dealt with; brandjacking – which could have serious consequences; disgruntled ex-employees (like our store manager in the story above); and people badmouthing products on forums. All with varying degrees of seriousness.

Know what a crisis looks like.

Every brand should define what its crises might look like, and prepare to manage them if the worst should happen. Much of the work in managing a crisis is actually done before the issue hits. Have a detailed crisis plan in place, including who you can phone at 3am if a crisis breaks; have lists of mobile numbers and office keyholders; access to lists of press contacts;, emergency staffing plans (even call centre arrangements set up if appropriate); and pre-prepared statements where possible. Bring all your agencies in on this from the start – PR, social media, monitoring, search marketing, advertising and sales. You don't want to be briefing them on handling a crisis when the news has broken. This will save valuable time.

Your crisis team should include anyone that you're likely to need during the crisis. Usually, it will look like this:



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If you had a bad reputation before the crisis, you'll certainly have one afterwards.

This is an incredibly important point. If you do nothing to manage your reputation during the good times, then you'll have no goodwill to carry you through the bad times. Reputation management is not something that can be done while you're over a barrel. Make sure you have some goodwill in the bank.

Don't assume you can control social media.

Some of the biggest brands in the world have assumed they can control social media by imposing censorship on it. It's simply not possible – in the way that trying to stop people talking in the pub isn't possible. In legal terms, you may be able to persuade YouTube or Facebook to remove content that breaches copyright laws, for example – but the reality is that all this will do is antagonise your followers, and make you look heavy-handed. It certainly won't win you any of that goodwill to carry you through the crisis. And even if you do, as Greenpeace demonstrated, consumers will just be even more determined to carry on the conversation over another channel.

The truth is that in these days of Twitter, mobile phone video uploads and consumers tapping into their online networks, word of mouth spreads like wildfire. The US Airways Hudson river landing is a great example of a real crisis that unfolded over social media, with the first pictures of the rescue operation being taken on a mobile phone and uploaded to Twitpic.

But you can control what your employees post on social media. Have a clear social media policy in place, that includes the repercussions of breaking the policy if they bring the company into disrepute. (Of course, if your employees are loyal to you, this will be a lot easier to manage. Disgruntled employees won't be nearly so co-operative).

Communicating through a crisis

Understand what can be solved by clear communication, and what can't. If a brand is abusing human rights in China, no amount of positive PR will help. Be prepared to take some serious business decisions. For this reason, involve your most senior people early on – it'll get those decisions made more quickly. Primark avoided a serious issue when it was alerted (by the BBC) to one of its manufacturers in India using child labour. It acted quickly to sack the contractor, and enforce its ethical policies across the world.

Once you've agreed any action that needs to be taken, agree your public response. Make sure it's consistent across all your audiences and channels. What you say on Twitter will probably reach the same people as your press statement, or your customer service announcement. These channels can't be split into silos any more.

Remember: the devil's in the detail. As Tony Hayward found out when he was spotted on a yacht on father's day, sailing what the papers reported as 'the clear blue waters of the Solent'. Contrast this with the workers in the Gulf of Mexico, cleaning up the BP oil spill. During a crisis, every move will be scrutinised.

Involve all your communications channels, including – importantly – search. A widely covered issue will show up on a Google search for a disproportionately long time after the event – make sure you involve your search agency in your communications plan, so that you can take positive action to neutralise negative coverage on search engines.

Fail to prepare, prepare to fail

If the crisis does hit, being prepared will be the difference between handling it successfully and losing control.

We often hear brands say: "but getting involved on social media is fraught with difficulties. Something will go wrong, and we can't control our corporate message in an open community." But your customers are talking about you regardless of whether or not you're proactively using social media to talk to them. And if truth be told, they were always talking about you in social spaces – it's just that those social spaces used to be the pub, or the playground, or in their homes. Now, social media is added into that mix: and you can choose to listen and respond; or ignore them.

But if you're not already in the conversation when an issue hits, you don't have a voice in social media with which to talk to your consumers. Be prepared: have a Twitter feed, a Facebook page, be involved on blogs and forums, and ideally, have your own online community so you can talk directly to those consumers with whom you have the strongest relationships – those that engage with you regularly and whose loyalty can help you through a crisis.

The temptation, in a crisis, is to hand over your social media accounts to a corporate communicator. It may surprise you that we don't necessarily think this is the best course of action (unless of course they're already running your accounts). Of course, your message through the crisis should be consistent, and your PR team will have a key role to play in safeguarding your reputation and answering queries from the media and public. But your voice on your social channels should stay true and authentic throughout the crisis, and your community managers should already be engrained enough into your business to be authorised to make quick decisions and take action where necessary to restore trust. This is not a time to hand your Twitter account over to the intern, nor to a junior exec at your agency.

There are very practical considerations, too. Have a list of who you can call on in an emergency, in whatever time zone you need them. Agree in advance what constitutes a serious issue and needs a clearly defined escalation path (including to the police or relevant authority in the case of criminal activity or abuse). Make sure you know the password to your blog, Facebook and Twitter accounts – it sounds obvious, but the best laid plans fall apart if the only person who has access to your social media accounts is on holiday with no mobile phone reception.

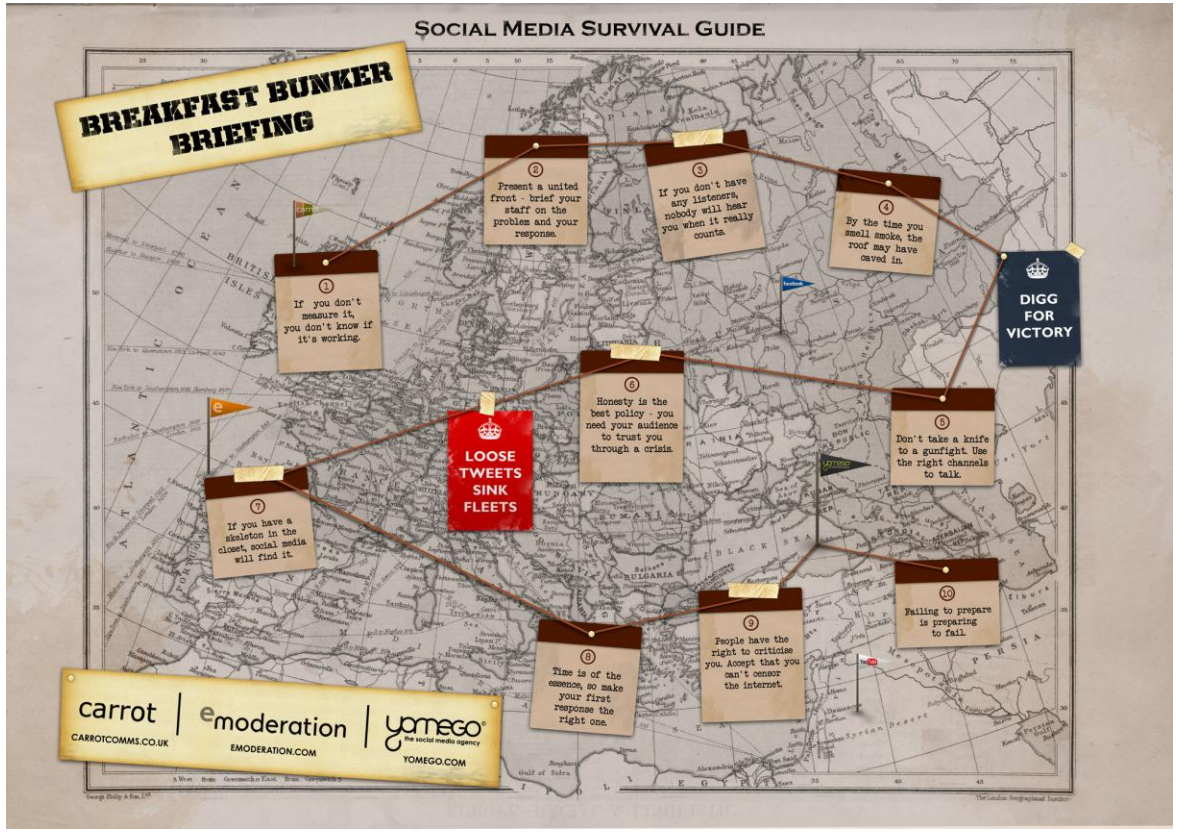
Throughout the crisis, monitor how it is playing out over social media, and keep in close touch with your monitoring team. If something changes, be prepared to respond quickly, and make sure all the parties involved in the crisis team are informed and up to date.

Make sure your tone of voice is appropriate to the issue you're addressing. Nestlé got into hot water for being pretty punchy with the people on its Facebook page during the Palm Oil /

Greenpeace issue. Antagonising the people that can make your life harder isn't a great idea.

Finally, rehearse a crisis to see how well your processes and plan stand up under pressure. This could be a full-scale simulation exercise or a regular review of procedures: but we recommend as full a rehearsal as is practical. You don't want to find the hole in the plan when a real crisis hits.

If you'd like to contribute to the social media crisis discussion, join us on our blog: http://breakfastbunkerbriefing.blogspot.com, where we'll address issues around crisis planning, crisis avoidance and crisis management.



Your social media crisis checklist

Preventing an issue becoming a crisis: monitoring as an early warning system tool

1. Set up a social media monitoring system, so you know what's being said about you, where, and by whom
2. Know what you're monitoring, and why; and how you'll respond if you hear something that indicates an issue
3. Don't get caught in the numbers game. Be discerning and listen to what's important: if you try to hear everything, you'll miss something
4. Remember that automated monitoring on its own can't interpret tone, sarcasm, irony or humour. Only human analysis can do that
5. Follow who is saying what and where – and understand what influence they have
6. Don't create your own firestorm! Don't address an issue in a community where no-one knew there was an issue to start with
7. Monitoring isn't just for when the crisis breaks. If you do it early, it could prevent the crisis
8. Use monitoring tools to identify influential individuals. If you have a strong relationship with them when times are good, they're more likely to be nice to you when it all goes pear-shaped
9. Don't forget your official channels – your Facebook page, Twitter feed, and owned community (your customer service site, for example)

Managing your reputation through a crisis

1. Do the groundwork before the crisis breaks. Have some goodwill 'banked'
2. Define what a crisis looks like, and plan for every eventuality
3. Have a social media policy in place for all employees and agencies
4. Build your crisis team to include senior decision makers through the business
5. Involve your agencies in the crisis plan
6. Include search as an important part of the communications mix
7. Be clear about what can and what can't be solved by PR
8. Remember: you can't control social media. No matter what your lawyers tell you
9. Agree your response and communicate it consistently
10. Involve your employees in the process – you don't want them breaking the crisis for you.

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Your social media crisis checklist cont'd ...

Managing your social media channels and communities through the crisis

1. Be in the social media space already (and be able to access your accounts)
2. Authorise your community managers to act on your behalf
3. Keep crisis team contact numbers accessible and updated at all times
4. Involve all your third party vendors (legal team, community management team, moderators, all your marketing and media agencies)
5. Have a pre-defined escalation path for serious incidents
6. Keep in close contact with your monitoring team
7. Keep the tone of voice appropriate to the issue; and keep it true to your company values
8. Rehearse, and learn from your experience. Share the results internally and know what you could do better next time.

If you'd like more information, please don't hesitate to get in touch:

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