

Chapter 8

Surviving the Conflict of Self-Inflicted Organizational Crises

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms provide channels for both individuals and organizations to engage with global audiences. A successful social media message can reach millions, and shape the way publics view a particular person, group, or cause. As organizations become more engaged with publics through social media platforms, a new area of organizational risk has also developed. It is possible for an organization to create a self-inflicted crisis through the unintentional transmission of a poorly worded or ill-conceived social media message. This type of self-induced crisis event creates organizational conflict that must be managed quickly. This chapter explores three cases of organizational conflict resulting from self-inflicted crisis events. All three events caused major conversations to erupt on social media platforms. The author examines the social media-based communication practices of three organizations and draws lessons from both successes and failures for how organizations should respond to self-inflicted crises.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media platforms have provided channels for both individuals and organizations to engage with vast global audiences. It is not an overstatement to say that a successful social media message can reach millions and shape the way publics view a particular person, group, or cause. For example, the “ALS Ice Bucket Challenge” went viral in the summer of 2014 and raised more than \$115 million by November of the same year (Worland, 2014). The challenge consisted of a bucket of ice water being dumped over a person’s head, and then challenging other people to do the same within 24 hours. If the

challenged individual did not comply, they were expected to donate money to a charity (Worland, 2014). The specific charity that made the challenge go viral was for research into amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease (ALS Association, 2015). The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge began to gain major traction when former Boston College baseball player Pete Frates, diagnosed with ALS in 2012, decided to challenge some friends via Facebook (Keyes, 2014). Frates was not the first to use the challenge with the hashtag “#StrikeOutALS,” but he appears to be the person whose social network launched the challenge beyond a local fad to an international phenomenon.

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Another dimension of the power of social media messages is the case of Justine Sacco, former senior communication director for media company IAC, whose thoughtless and insensitive tweet went viral and caused international outrage. Shortly before boarding a flight from London to South Africa, Sacco tweeted, “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!” Sacco was not concerned about the influence of her tweet – with only 170 followers on Twitter she tended to use her account as a personal space for venting frustration; she likely did not think anyone would read the tweet (Ronson, 2015). Instead, the tweet was noticed, was passed along via Twitter, and eventually became the “No. 1 worldwide trend on Twitter” (Ronson, 2015, para. 5). Before Justine Sacco landed in South Africa she had already lost her job, become the subject of international disdain and ridicule, and sparked a global conversation about race, class, and the influence of social media.

As organizations become more engaged with publics through social media platforms, a new area of organizational risk has also developed. One of the greatest strengths of social media messaging is also one of its greatest weaknesses. It is possible for an organization to create a self-inflicted crisis through the unintentional transmission of a poorly worded or ill-conceived social media message (Bhasin, 2012). This type of self-induced crisis event creates organizational conflict that must be managed quickly.

This chapter consists of three parts. The author begins by reviewing relevant literature. Next, the author conducts a comparative case study of three distinct self-inflicted crisis events: the Starbucks “Race Together” campaign (Hensley & Blau, 2015); the ineffective response from Urban Outfitters following the production of offensive products (The Week, 2015); and the mistaken tweet sent by the DiGiorno account which misused the “#WhyIStayed” hashtag (Griner, 2014). Finally, the chapter concludes with lessons learned from

the case studies, as well as a set of principles to inform organizations managing this type of organizational conflict.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social Networking Sites

Social Network Sites (SNSs) as they are currently conceived have existed in some form since 1997 (boyd & Ellison, 2007). SNSs, such as Facebook, MySpace, or Twitter, are:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p. 211).

These sites exist to serve a variety of functions, from maintaining connections with existing friendship networks, to finding other individuals who share a particular interest (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In addition to these functions, SNSs exist as a space for engaging in dialogic communication.

Micro-Blogs

Within the context of social media and SNSs exists a subset of platforms called “micro-blogs” (Edwards, Edwards, Spence, & Shelton, 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). These types of sites, such as Twitter or Tumblr, “allow users to exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011, p. 106). Zhao and Rosson (2009) found that people tend to use micro-blogs to share information they might not otherwise share on existing channels, such as a real-time update on their actions, or for pervasive access to information in a format that requires brevity.

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