

How Social Media Can Help—or Hurt—Your Reputation



By Charles H. Green, Contributing Editor

Social media are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they foster depersonalized, surface interactions that can erode trust. Yet the same breadth of interaction can leverage reputation gains. The key to managing social media for trust and reputation does not lie in trade-offs or in risk management but in applying some simple values and principles.

Social Media and Trust Erosion

We've all joked about the erosion of terms such as "friends," and the hollowness of "following" tens of thousands of tweeters. It is possible to be a huge fan of social media (I certainly am) and still raise a giant eyebrow at some of the ironies it reveals.

For one thing, there is the tendency of lowest-common denominator crass commercialism to overwhelm any new form of social media. We'll all see whether Google's decision to start Google+ without commerce gave it a head start of a different sort—or not.

At a personal level, something similar pans out. All new media seem to bring out a gold rush of number collectors. (Interestingly, FourSquare recognized this drive and made it central to its "mayor of..." concept.)

The combined commercial and personal drives to conquer quickly erode the personalness that many social media users initially found attractive. A thousand corporate entities asking you to be their friend doesn't induce trust.

And the stakes are being raised. As search engine optimization (SEO) became critical, Google attacked the so-called "content farms." But the content farmers have raised their game. There are now automated programs trained to "create content" by combining keywords into common grammatical constructs and then using synonyms in new combinations to create hundreds of "distinct" articles, blog posts, and "news" stories—all to get higher rankings for keywords.

In other words, the monkeys are jumping on typewriters in a very organized manner—to make you think you're reading something real. When content itself becomes stripped of meaning, there is a real assault on trust.

Social Media: The Trust and Reputation Upside

At the same time that social media can lower trust, the fact of that lowered trust increases the opportunity for differentiation. If you become less and less trustworthy, and I don't change at all, then I begin to look more trustworthy—at no particular cost to myself.

Not that many years ago, the rule of thumb was that a customer's good experience would be repeated to a half dozen or so people, while a customer's bad experience would be shared with multiples more. In the social media world of today, you might add three zeroes to each of those numbers.

And while we usually focus on the risks of bad experiences, we forget the also-considerable value of thousands of favorable comparisons—with no risk taken whatsoever.

Benefits of Social Media

[How to Use Social Media to Generate Speaking Opportunities](#)

[Social Media Marketing Better than SEO for Web Traffic](#)

The fact is as companies and people reveal themselves to be (pick your preferred adjective: shallow, commercial, selfish, disingenuous, etc.), those who benefit are those who remain (pick your adjective: deep, personal, other-focused, sincere, etc.).

At least, that is, if people retain the ability to tell the difference. I suspect they will.

The Relationship Between Trust and Reputation

Aristotle said, "Excellence is but a habit," the repeated doing of the excellent thing. Similarly, I'd suggest that reputation is the repeated personal experience of trust—or of its absence. We don't trust companies (with the exception of reliability or track records); we trust the people with whom we interact. Or we do not.

This view of reputation suggests it is best achieved as a byproduct of trust; specifically, as a byproduct of acting in a consistently trustworthy manner. By this view, trust drives reputation—not the other way around.

Also by this view, the best way to manage reputation through social media is *not* by attempting to harness the "power" of social media in service to a "good" message. The method inevitably swamps the message.

Any social media attempt at mass-scale communication, or at mass-produced content, is doomed by its nature to appear impersonal at best and crassly selfish at worst. It cannot create personal trust. And thus it cannot be a good foundation for reputation.

Reputation Management

Trust-based reputation—the only kind with staying power—comes from a consistent customer experience (ditto for the employee experience). If that experience is to be one of trust, then the people engaged in all aspects of the company, including social media, must behave in trustworthy ways. A quick list of such virtues includes:

Truth-telling, candor, honesty, a disinclination to blame, an ability to confront difficult issues, sensitivity to the needs of others, a relationship rather than a transactional mentality, the ability to defer gratification, reliability, self-confidence, competence

Some of these can be hired for; some can be trained for. They largely *can't* be gotten through reliance on business process design, incentive systems, communications programs, or policies.

Instead, they are best developed through the tools of leadership, corporate cultures, and values. Indeed, those methods are far better suited to the flexible needs of future organizations. This is as true for social media as it is for any other part of the organization.

The lesson is not to avoid social media; you are nowhere in the future if you are not online and in the cloud. But also beware of metrics that have become disengaged from the things they were meant to measure, of "best practices" that are based on reach and volume.

The power of social media, for those willing to see it, lies in making the world *more* personal, not less so. You do that by simply behaving personally in a trustworthy manner, online as in everywhere else. Your reputation will rise in comparison to those who don't.

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