CONTROLLING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK ON THE WALL: HOW LARGE COMPANIES REACT TO UNFAVORABLE COMMENTS POSTED TO CORPORATE-SPONSORED FACEBOOK PAGES

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Abstract

Seventy-nine percent of Fortune 100 companies use some form of social media to communicate with customers and other stakeholders. However, these media pose the risk of providing a forum for comments critical of corporate leadership, services, or products. Most marketing specialists recommend that negative comments should be treated as opportunities to resolve potential problems. This paper assesses if large companies adopt the recommended approach when reacting to negative comments. The study identified official Facebook pages sponsored by the top 10 companies (as defined by the Forbes 2000 for 2010) in four industry groups—banking, retailing, software and services, and household and personal products. The number of negative comments posted to these pages was calculated and corporate reactions to the comments analyzed. The study concluded that large corporations do not generally approach negative comments as public relations opportunities, but prefer to censor or ignore critical feedback. Practical implications of this strategy are discussed.

Introduction

When Facebook was launched in February 2004, the website was intended as a communications forum for students enrolled at Harvard; the site was later expanded to include other universities. In fact, the term "Facebook" is derived from publications, issued at many American colleges, that display the names and photographs of students attending an institution for the purpose of promoting social interaction. Following the site launch, however, the owners of Facebook commenced to implement a series of enhancements that altered the site's original scope. High school students were invited to join, and the posting of photographs and videos was promoted. A "live chat" capability was added to the site. Eventually, corporations and other businesses were accommodated within the Facebook community.

A recent survey indicates that, as of January 2011, 84% of the 200 fastest-growing private companies in the United States maintain a Facebook presence (Van Sack, 2011). Horton (2009) discovered that, of a randomly selected population of 33 companies in the 2009 Fortune 100, 73% were represented on Facebook. Business participation with Facebook and other social media sites is motivated primarily by the desire to utilize a global and popular marketing, public relations, and recruiting channel that permits direct interaction with clients and potential customers or employees. In addition, the marketing potential of Facebook is enhanced by useful demographic data provided to corporate sponsors of Facebook sites; these data allow companies to display customized advertisements to site visitors, based on the visitors' age, gender, geographic location, interests, and other factors. Finally, Facebook is an especially attractive medium for corporate marketing because businesses are permitted to develop applications (or "apps") that link their Facebook site to the company's official web page. This facilitates

the placement of orders and other transactions. For example, the official Facebook site of Amazon.com includes an "app" that allows visitors to write book reviews and submit them directly to the company's web page.

Interaction is made possible by the "Wall," a component of the Facebook page available for every registered individual and organization. Corporations generally post five types of entries, or discussion threads, to their Wall:

- Direct marketing of products or services (e.g., launches of new products or announcements of sales)
- Promotion of sponsored events (e.g., charity walks or tennis tournaments)
- Surveys (e.g., polls concerning future business locations)
- Informational announcements (e.g., openings of new stores)
- "Fun" postings, usually in the form of questions related to recent or upcoming events (e.g., "Who will win the Super Bowl: Steelers or Packers?")

In order to comment on these entries, individuals must become a "fan" of the company's page; being a "fan" indicates that the commenter has clicked a button indicating that he or she likes the organization's products or services, or has a favorable opinion of the sponsoring business. Many employees of the organization choose to become fans of their employer's page.

Most companies also permit fans to initiate their own discussion threads that do not originate from the sponsor. Other fans, or representatives of the company, can post responses to these comments. Visitors to an organization's Wall can select to see only those discussions initiated by the sponsor or, alternately, to view a complete set of all comments initiated by the sponsor and its fans; some organizations do not allow initiation of discussion threads by fans.

Social media and public relations specialists have admonished corporate sponsors of Facebook pages to analyze fan comments with considerable care. Although the individuals permitted to contribute to a company's Wall are putative friends of the company, some persons become fans merely to post comments of a negative, or even highly derogatory, nature. In addition, legitimate fans may write comments that are critical of an organization's products, services, or employees. Social media specialists have attained near-consensus concerning the most appropriate method of handling unfavorable comments: Do not delete (censor) negative postings; rather, attempt to respond to these remarks in as positive a manner as possible (Angermeier, 2010; Baird, 2011; Hinmon, 2011; Kiesow, 2010; McColough, 2010; Schiavone, 2010; Schwab, 2010; Social Rabbit, 2010; Wieting, 2010; Williams, 2008). Appropriate responses are intended to foster good public relations by assuring customers that their voices are being heard, their complaints are taken seriously, and problems are being addressed. Unfavorable comments must not be ignored, because this clearly demonstrates a lack of corporate concern for the opinions of current or future clients.

The purpose of this study was to examine the Facebook pages sponsored by major international organizations to determine if the advice proffered by social media professionals is actually being adopted. More specifically, the study investigates if large corporations are responding to the unfavorable comments posted on their Facebook Wall, or if these businesses prefer to delete or ignore the critical voices.

Method

Between January 29, 2011, and February 20, 2011, the official Facebook pages of the 10 largest organizations in each of the following four industries were surveyed: banking, retail, software and services, and household and personal products. The sample population was derived from the Fortune 2000 listing for 2010 (DeCarlo, 2010). These four industries were selected because each serves a broad base of consumers and was likely to have large numbers of Facebook fans and Wall comments.

For each organization, the following information was collected:

- Whether the company has an official page. This information was derived from the "Info" component of a Facebook page associated with a business. The fact that a specific page is branded with an organization's logo was not adopted as the primary criterion for determining the existence of an official page. Of the 40 corporations examined for this study, 25 (62.5%) had an official Facebook presence; Banking represented four sites, Retail provided eight, Software and Services offered six official pages, and Household & Personal Products supplied seven. (See appendix for details.)

- The number of positive and negative comments posted to each company's Wall. "Negative" comments were defined as remarks that evince criticism of an organization's products, services, employees, or social practices. Negative feedback included, for example, disagreement with a specific sponsor posting, anecdotes that reflected unfavorably upon the sponsor, sarcastic remarks directed to the sponsor's posting, and admonitions not to use the sponsor's products or services. "Positive" comments were those remarks that were not clearly negative. That is, a positive comment was not necessarily promoting or praising the company's products, services, employees, or social practices; rather, the comment lacked any negative content. Comments that were neither negative nor positive—postings that offered no opinion of the sponsoring organization—were not collected as relevant data. For those sites that permitted only company-initiated discussion threads, comments posted on the first full page were counted. For pages that allowed both company- and fan-initiated threads, all comments on the first four full pages were counted. This methodology was adopted in order to more easily manage the data collection process; the number of comments posted to company-initiated discussion threads is considerably higher than postings to pages containing a mixture of company and fan threads. A total of 22,014 comments were assessed during the course of this study.

- The percentage of positive and negative comments included within the sample for each organization.

- The percentage of negative comments to which responses were posted by the sponsoring company. Responses may have been posted by representatives of the organization, by fans, or a combination of both.

Results of the survey are included in the appendix of this study.

<p style="text-align:center">Findings</p>

The data revealed two general categories of findings: censorship or deletion of negative comments, and reposts to negative comments.

Censorship (Deletion) of Negative Comments

The study revealed that, at a minimum, 48% of the sampled corporations (N = 12) are likely to engage in the practice of deleting negative comments posted to official Facebook pages.

It is difficult to obtain direct evidence of censorship because it would require continual observation of a specific page to note the absence of comments that were previously posted. During the course of the study, this occurred only once.

However, two types of indirect evidence were available. First, many published posts referred to the names of individuals who wrote unfavorable comments; careful review of the page indicated that no posts from the named individual were then available. It is likely that the original posting was deleted by the sponsoring organization.

Second, five of the sampled pages contained only positive comments. Although it is conceivable that unfavorable postings were never submitted to these pages, this seems improbable. It is more likely that the sponsors adopted a policy of deleting, or not permitting the posting of, negative remarks. Some Facebook participants—such as the official page of the British monarchy (The Vivid Consultancy, 2010)—publically announced that negative comments would not be published.

Also, many page sponsors inform their fans that profane, obscene, or other objectionable material will not be published. In addition, one of the sampled sites announced that it would not permit the posting of content concerning customer service issues; these matters must be communicated to the corporation via a dedicated telephone line or email address. Another sampled page explicitly refused to post comments that were not directly related to the main theme of the page. For example, remarks pertaining to poor (or excellent) service would not be published to a page whose purpose was to recruit employees. Thus, deletion of negative comments is an accepted practice within the Facebook community, and the conditions of deletion are often carefully explained by the sponsoring organizations. However, the high volume of censorship evinced by this study seems to indicate that unfavorable feedback may be occurring for reasons other than those stated in published rules for posting.

Responses to Negative Comments

Sixty percent (N=15) of the corporations represented in this study responded to fewer than one-fourth of unfavorable remarks posted to their sites. Nine of these organizations never responded to negative comments. Only one corporate-sponsored site, 4% of the total sample, responded to more than three-quarters of negative comments.

For those organizations that issued responses, not all feedback was provided by an official representative of the page sponsor. In many instances, fans assumed the role of defender of the

company's products, services, employees, or social practices. Because a large number of "fans" of corporate pages are also employees of the organization, it is conceivable that these defenders are also employees. In fact, responders occasionally identify themselves as individuals employed by the corporation.

Industry-specific trends concerning responses were discernible. Seven of the eight representatives in the retailing industry (87.5%) responded to some negative comments posted to their sites. However, only two of six (33.3%) corporations associated with the software and services industry responded; one of four banking industry organizations (25%) and none of the seven companies representing household and personal products responded. Thus, virtually all organizations that posted any responses to unfavorable comments were associated with retailing.

The study revealed that a majority of negative comments were posted in response to explicit marketing efforts initiated by the sponsoring company. For example, a large retailer received 263 positive remarks and 88 negative comments in response to the promotion of a new line of sportswear. This pattern was especially prevalent on Facebook pages associated with large retailers and major manufacturers of household and personal products.

Discussion threads initiated by the page sponsor, but not having an explicit marketing focus, elicited the largest number of positive responses. The majority of these responses were received as a result of "fun" postings. For example, Target attracted more than 3,100 positive responses when fans were asked: "Which eye does the bullseye [Target's logo] appear on Bullseye the dog [Target's "mascot]? No Googling."

Pages that allowed comments to be posted only to discussion threads initiated by the sponsoring company received fewer negative comments than those pages permitting fans to originate their own remarks. "Company only" (N = 3) pages had a median average of one negative comment, while pages allowing discussion threads from all fans (N = 16) elicited a median average of six unfavorable remarks for the sampled pages.

Discussion

The study revealed that advice proffered by social media and public relations professionals—that negative comments should be answered in a constructive and positive manner—is largely unheeded by major corporations sponsoring Facebook pages.

There are two basic types of negative comments: those inviting genuine discussion or making a concrete suggestion, and those posted by "trolls." Trolls (also known as "haters") are individuals who, according to social media specialists (Baird, 2011; Kiesow, 2010), provide comments that do not invite genuine discussion, or feedback, between the poster and the sponsoring organization. For example, the remark "You Suck!" is not necessarily intended to resolve a specific issue or to promote constructive interaction with the company. Thus, responding to such comments serves no useful purpose. Based on an examination of more than 22,000 comments, this study could identify only a very low number of comments initiated by "trolls." (Perhaps these were censored by corporate sponsors prior to posting on Facebook.) However, nearly half the sampled pages evinced evidence of censoring (deleting) unfavorable comments. Further, a significant majority (60%) of the sponsoring organizations responded

to fewer than one-quarter of negative postings. Of the corporations representing banking, software and services, and household and personal products (N=17), only three (17.6%) responded to any negative comments. These companies did not, apparently, envision responses as opportunities to enhance customer service or satisfaction.

Public relations professionals note that organizations with a social media presence may neglect to respond to unfavorable feedback for fear that the response will further incite fans and result in an ever-expanding thread of unpleasant communications (McCarthy, 2010). In 2009, Honda experienced this potential danger. One "fan" posted the following comment to Honda's Facebook page dedicated to discussion of a specific product, the Accord Crosstour:

> If I had the cash, I'd buy one of the most fully optioned examples, pay for a day's worth of insurance and take it straight to a crusher. I wonder if Fed-Ex can handle a crate that heavy addressed to Honda HQ (Herinckx, 2009).

Soon, Honda posted the following response:

> Many of you don't like the styling: It may not be for everyone. Our research suggests that the styling does test well among people shopping for a crossover (Herinckx, 2009).

A fan quickly replied:

> RE: Message to Fans…the styling might not be for everyone? Who DOES like it? Maybe Flintstones cartoon fans, because the front looks like Dino, the dinosaur (Herinckx, 2009).

Honda continued to respond:

> There are more photos on the way. Maybe it's like a bad yearbook photo or something, and we think the new photos will clear things up (Herinckx, 2009).

Honda's responses seem to have halted the barrage of negative comments. Rather than ignoring the irritated fans, Honda chose to recognize the unfavorable remarks and address them in a calming manner.

However, unlike Honda, it seems that the majority of sampled corporations are uncomfortable with negative fan postings and have not developed a strategy for dealing with these challenges.

The study indicates that companies seeking to avoid a high volume of negative comments should consider mixing explicit marketing discussions together with "fun" threads that lack a marketing focus. Corporations with large numbers of positive responses—such as Nike, Walgreens, and Target—have adopted this strategy. This finding is consistent with the advice offered by social media and public relations professionals, who admonish companies to avoid "ham-handed" and traditional sales tactics when engaging with Facebook fans (McAshan, 2011; Roane, 2011).

Of course, the possibility of incorporating "fun" threads into the Facebook Wall may be limited by the industry of the sponsoring company. Wells Fargo, for example, may have difficulties initiating a "fun" thread. However, many organizations have resolved this problem by hosting pages dedicated, not solely to the company and its products or services, but to a company-sponsored event (e.g., a sporting event, a campus recruitment page).

The study also concludes that companies that permit fans to comment only upon discussion threads initiated by the sponsoring organization elicit less negative feedback than those pages that permit fan-initiated threads. Although the majority (N = 16) of sampled pages permitted any fan to commence a discussion thread, establishing an environment that encouraged sharing and open communication, these pages exhibited a considerably higher level of fan discontent (as measured by unfavorable comments) than those pages that did not allow fan-initiated discussions. However, it is conceivable that organizations which do not permit fan-initiated threads are also exerting greater control over all feedback received from fans; these organizations may also carefully scrutinize fan feedback to ensure that few negative comments are posted. Thus, these carefully monitored sites appear to elicit only a low number of unfavorable comments.

Social media, such as Facebook, present an opportunity for businesses to engage in real-time conversation with customers, and these conversations can be witnessed by millions of current and potential customers worldwide. However, the censoring of unfavorable comments and the refusal to respond to published negative feedback do not promote conversation. Unfortunately, it seems that many large organizations, as represented by the sample population of this study, have not adopted strategies that translate negative comments into useful opportunities for communication.

Implications for Future Research and for the Teaching of Business Communication

Social media represents a rich resource for future research focusing upon the rhetorical dimension of online interaction. For example, although certain comments may be generally classified as negative, these postings actually represent a broad diversity of types. Some are intended as sarcasm, others as direct criticism of a specific product or service, and yet others as attacks upon an organization's political or social involvement. In addition, the tone of unfavorable postings reflects a wide spectrum: profanity, reasoned analysis, dogmatic pronouncements, and humor are all represented. Careful analysis of the types of comments and their tone may reveal identifiable patterns of responses elicited from corporate sponsors. For example, are companies more likely to respond to reasoned, respectful comments than to emotional harangues? Will a series of sarcastic postings elicit a response from a targeted corporation?

A limitation of this study is related to the issue of defining and classifying comments as "negative." As mentioned previously, a comment was noted as negative if it evinced criticism of an organization's products, services, employees, or social practices. However, the identification of criticism is a subjective judgment of the researcher. Other readers—including Facebook fans or corporate sponsors—may not have similarly perceived negative, or critical, content. In addition, the definition of "negative" as employed in this study does not distinguish between comments intended to promote discussion by Facebook participants and those comments that represent opinions of respondents who neither anticipate nor desire feedback. Future examination of responses from corporations must consider these variables to more accurately analyze the extent to which organizations ignore negative comments posted to social media.

In addition, further research is needed to determine if negative comments contribute to the sense of community experienced at a specific site. It is conceivable that certain corporate sponsors do not discourage unfavorable feedback because diversity of opinion enlivens discussion and promotes a higher volume of fan participation. Such conversation may increase the credibility, or at least the entertainment value, of the site.

The ethical implications of using employees as respondents to negative comments deserves further study, especially when employees do not clearly identify their relationship to the sponsoring organization. Employee postings may offer legitimate defenses of an employer's reputation, services, or products; however, if these postings are published as the opinions of "fans" who masquerade as having no personal involvement with the company, then the integrity of the communication process is called into question.

The tendency of corporations representing specific industries—including banking, software and services, and household and personal products—to ignore unfavorable feedback deserves further investigation. What factors, for example, discourage these corporations from engaging in conversation with dissatisfied or irritable customers? Similarly, why has the retailing sector developed a reverse strategy, resulting in significantly higher rates of response to negative comments?

Useful research may also be conducted with sample populations other than major corporations. For instance, the Facebook sites of small businesses or companies located in a limited geographic area (such as a single city) may be examined to determine the nature of unfavorable feedback and the frequency of response. Results of this research may differ considerably from the findings of this study, which focuses upon major international corporations.

Instructors of business communication will find that Facebook, and other social media sites, contain extensive, and easily accessible, sources of data relevant to the online interaction between corporations and their actual or potential customers. As mentioned previously, these data are especially amenable to examination from a rhetorical perspective. In addition, social media provide examples of marketing strategies, attempts to encourage brand loyalty, announcements that convey "bad news," admixtures of textual and graphic content, and communications that explicitly, or implicitly, articulate an organization's culture and values. Sufficient information is often available for students to ascertain the success (or lack thereof) of these strategies and communications. For teaching purposes, social media present innumerable opportunities to examine rich veins of communication-related data.

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Appendix

Survey of Facebook Pages Sponsored by Major Corporations in Four Industries
(January 29, 2011 – February 20, 2011)

Forbes 2000 Industry Ranking (2010)	Company Name	Official Facebook Page (Y/N)	# Positive Comments	# Negative Comments	% Positive Comments	% Negative Comments	% Negative Comments with Responses
			Banking				
1	JP Morgan Chase	N					
2	Bank of America	N					
3	ICBC	N					
4	Banco Santander	N					
5	Wells Fargo	Y	28	4	87.5	12.5	75.0
6	HSBC-Students	Y	94	0	100.0		
7	BNP Paribas-Students	Y	23	0	100.0		
8	China Construction Bank	N					
9	Barclays-Recruitment	Y	0	0			
10	Bank of China	N					
			Retailing				
1	Walmart	Y	1191	43	96.5	3.5	4.3
2	CVS/Caremark-Pharmacy	Y	180	30	85.7	14.3	10.0
3	Home Depot	Y	1405	11	99.2	.8	18.1
4	Target	Y	9498	245	97.5	2.5	2.4
5	Lowe's Cos	N					
6	Walgreens	Y	3216	56	98.3	1.7	39.3
7	Costco Wholesale	Y	184	14	93.0	7.0	71.4
8	PPR	N					
9	Best Buy	Y	313	160	66.2	33.8	25.6
10	Amazon.com	Y	66	9	88.0	12.0	0.0
			Software and Services				
1	IBM	N					
2	Microsoft	Y	700	30	95.6	4.4	6.3
3	Oracle	Y	95	11	89.6	10.4	9.0
4	Google	Y	12	3	80.0	20.0	0.0
5	SAP	Y	31	2	94.0	6.0	0,0
6	Accenture	Y	35	2	94.6	5.4	0.0
7	Computer Sciences	N					
8	Yahoo!	Y	786	11	98.6	1.4	0.0
9	Tata Consultancy	N					
10	Computer Associates	N					
			Household & Personal Products				
1	Proctor & Gamble	Y	67	6	91.8	8.2	0.0
2	L'Oréal Group	Y	438	16	96.5	3.5	0.0
3	Christian Dior	Y	513	4	99.3	.7	0.0
4	Kimberly-Clark	N					
5	Henkel Group	Y	26	0	100.0		
6	Nike-Football	Y	2213	100	95.7	4.3	0.0
7	Reckitt Benckiser Group	Y	110	0	100.0		
8	Colgate-Palmolive	N					

| 9 | SCA-Svenska Cellulose | Y | 33 | 0 | 100.0 | | |
| 10 | KAO | N | | | | | |