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Guest comment: When social media becomes the Elephant in the Room

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With corporate scandals hitting the headlines, companies can no-longer elude the evolution of social media. Jason Woodford, CEO at one of the UK's leading digital marketing agencies SiteVisibility, suggests that the horsemeat scandal can be used as a platform on which to finally inform and educate company directors the world-over that social media is no longer a novel stakeholder and consumer outreach tool; it is the new normal in the modern-day business operations environment.

So far this year we have seen two extremes on how not to manage social media. Firstly, HMV's soon to be made redundant staff ran amok on the company's Twitter account and then Findus, following the horsemeat scandal, did the polar opposite; absolutely nothing. It wasn't until almost a week after the news broke that they even had a statement on the website.

The phrase, "Elephant in the Room" is an English metaphorical idiom for an obvious truth that is either being ignored or going unaddressed. The idiomatic expression also applies to an obvious problem or risk no one wants to discuss. For too long now; social media has been that elephant. Now, however, with new liabilities and new mandates for elevated levels of transparency and accountability, this will, in fact it has to change. We find ourselves in the middle of a social media revolution- and no public company large or small, can elude its impact.

Social media engagement has evolved to the point that it is absolutely essential in today's marketplace. You can't hide behind bog-standard, conservative reactive statements anymore. The evolution of social media renders that almost impossible. By failing to respond to times of crisis on these channels gives the impression that a specific brand is stagnate, and that its social media policies are low on the boardroom agenda. Something that is quite unforgiveable in today's modern business environment.

There used to be a time where companies only had to worry about a damaging headline in the paper or a negative report on the news. Now they have to be on the lookout for comments about a negative experience on social media platforms, because the inter-connected nature of social networking means that the story could go "viral" before the company even knows it's out there. Social media monitoring isn't just about reputational risk management; but brand building as well. When a consumer does put something out there that could be damaging to the brand, companies need to remember that it is only the start of a conversation. If they respond quickly and act fast to resolve the problem, they often win points for their care and attention to the matter- and they do so in a public venue where others can see just how seriously they take customer service."

However, this is where Findus failed following the horsemeat scandal. They came across as incredibly naïve when it came to responding on Twitter and Facebook. The impact on the brand is quite unforgiving. Now, if you use the search engines and look for the term 'Findus horse' then hundreds of amusing horse lasagnes – not so amusing to Findus – will appear, not to mention the constant stream of breaking news stories filling up the top of the Google search pages. I'm not sure if they fully appreciated at the time how much this would negatively impact the brand's online presence both now and for months to come.

Social media can no longer be classed as the elephant in the room. It needs to be top of the boardroom agenda and taken seriously by company directors across the world. Whilst customer service on social media is one thing, and widely used by brands, crisis management is a whole different kettle of fish. Unfortunately for Findus; learning that fact has come too little, too late."

About the author

SiteVisibility CEO Jason Woodford is a member of the South East Leadership Team of Business in the Community (BITC). One of the key areas of focus for BITC is to improve young people's skills, attitudes and understanding in preparation for the world of work and employment.
SiteVisibility brings a team of SEO, PPC, social media, strategy, technical and R&D boffins together to create flexible, future-proof and truly integrated digital marketing campaigns that deliver better results from sensible budgets.

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