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Public Shaming of Individuals and Companies on Social Media

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Abstract: The birth of interactive social platforms and the conditions for online, live dialogue with brands and institutions worldwide has made possible the appearance of a new social paradigm. Social media make possible the appearance of new communication techniques which shorten the distance between institutions, public figures, brands and companies, and people. They are changing not only communication norms but the ways in which people interact. The present research is based on three case studies of mistakes which need to be avoided when communicating via social media. The reason for analysing these is connected, on the one hand, to the presence of some most common mistakes made in the social media sphere and, on the other hand, to the enormous effect which such media have had on changing people's perceptions and attitudes and on building corporate and institutional images. They also show how damaging an underestimation of the new power of social media can be. Nowadays public shaming of individuals, brands and institutions is much easier because of unrestricted access to the social media -- the new tribune for the public voice. The power of these new communication channels is undeniable but also uncontrollable and thus should be treated with caution. The three examples above clearly show the power of the social media and the effects of underestimating their possible impact upon the reputations of both brands and individuals.

Keywords: social media, public shaming, online communication techniques, new social paradigm, online PR instruments, trust-building online.

Introduction

One of the most recent tendencies in the contemporary communication environment is the development of social media. These provide a new model of communication on account of their broad range of influence, speed of accessibility, and new opportunities for content creation and sharing. The contemporary role of the social media nowadays has changed considerably previous methods of trust-building and initiated a new kind of interaction between the business and the audience.

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The present research is based on three case studies of mistakes which need to be avoided when communicating via social media. The reason for analysing these is connected, on the one hand, to the presence of some most common mistakes made in the social media sphere and, on the other hand, to the enormous effect which such media have had on changing people's perceptions and attitudes and on building corporate and institutional images. They also show how damaging an underestimation of the new power of social media can be.

The research hypothesis is that although public shaming via social media is a relatively new phenomenon, it very often results in a crisis which spreads fast both online and offline. Overcoming it requires specific social communication approaches. Successful online image building is a long process which needs to be started long before any crisis starts to loom.

The role of the Internet is now extremely important because it provides both businesses and people in general with new ways of communicating and exchanging ideas. This provides businesses with new opportunities to communicate with citizens, who via social media now have the freedom to express their opinions publicly. People have become direct participants in the communications process and may post freely questions or comments in the numerous blogs, forums and social networks which now exist online.

In his theory of public trust, Guenter Bentele [1] distinguishes between two main types of trust - interpersonal and public. Public trust is based on experience gained through interpersonal trust, and building it is a long on-going process which can be jeopardised in an instant. Bentele highlights the fact that the media have a double role in the public process of trust-building. On the one hand, they are mediators of institutions and the public figures and, on the other hand, they themselves undergo a process of trust-building in relation to their audiences. Consequently, these two types of trust influence one another.

The birth of the social media, as part of the new virtual reality, has changed the idea of trust-building in the audience. The social media sphere is a new digital communication environment, where everybody can participate, inform, educate, build trust or mistrust in a certain person, brand or even in an institution. Trust-building online is a dynamic process which is quite different from that in the traditional media. The social media create a public platform online, where the

interpersonal communication and the direct communication with public figures or brands are essential for trust-building.

The important role of the social media in the contemporary world defines the increasing need for sound knowledge of the new PR instruments. The Internet provides numerous options for conducting communication of a new type which reaches effectively and purposefully its targeted audience. Thus, active participation in the communications process, feedback, and dialogue with the audience are crucial for the process of trust-building in Internet-mediated communication.

The new communication environment is quite different from the media environment which preceded it. The new media, which can easily connect people all over the world have changed the rules of “speaking”, “listening” and “sharing”, and they have inspired a new mechanism for public shaming as well. In this new environment it is particularly important to follow the online rules for communication and to listen to what the public is saying about a certain brand or public figure. As Plamen Rusev puts it: “With or without you, there is social media communication. It is a matter of choice to be part of it since this is the only way to listen to what the others say about your brand, to participate in the conversation and to have a position.” [2] So, in order to be able to prevent public shaming and a consequent crisis of confidence, understanding how the new social media work is of primary importance.

The difference between the traditional media and the new social media lies mainly in the changed role of the communicators and the lack of strict regulations concerning and limits on providing information to the broad public. The social media have become instruments for transmitting messages to a large number of different audiences which now have the opportunity to change, share and even influence the digital communities through interacting with these messages. Thus, spreading the news online and engaging in the process of shaming are far easier than they ever were in the world of traditional media.

Case studies

First Investment Bank (FIB)

First Investment Bank was founded on 8 October 1993 and is the seventh largest Bulgarian bank, measured in terms of total assets. The bank is the parent bank of a financial group in the Balkans -- it has a branch in Albania with ten offices, one in Cyprus, as well as a subsidiary bank in Macedonia. In Bulgaria it has 21 branches and 68 offices throughout the country. Its clients include 380,000 individuals and 21,000 corporate bodies. One of the most trusted Bulgarian banks, it passed

through a social media hurricane in April-May 2008. Everything started with a couple of postings in some of the most popular Bulgarian online forums. The content was as follows: "Since the beginning of April, there have been some rumours about the failure of the First Investment Bank. Have you already heard anything more about this?" This initiated a very considerable activity in the social media, including on some well-known professional, financial and business forums like investor.bg and odit.info

The Company's Reaction

Unfortunately, the bank did not pay enough attention to this case, relying on its positive image in society and among the majority of its clients. A month passed but the rumours did not stop, indeed just the opposite -- they were escalating and turning into a huge wave of mistrust which resulted in many people waiting outside the bank's offices and wanting to withdraw all their money. At the same time, the FIB was planning to change an administrative programme which caused additional problems with the bank's services. These factors precipitated a crisis. Soon the bank collapsed on the stock exchange and the first reactions of the FIB Executive Director, Maya Georgieva, appeared in the press. But her reaction was not just too late, it actually made the situation worse by making it seem that, in the bank's view, the Internet had been used as an instrument for compromising the bank. Georgieva stated that there were no real problems with the finances of the FIB; the only problems were the Internet and the bloggers who were writing there.

The bank did not issue any statements for almost a month, but there were a couple of well-intentioned bloggers who shared a certain amount of positive content about the FIB. Indeed, in mid-May, Georgieva sent a grateful message to the bloggers who had supported the bank in those hard times. She also expressed the view that what had occurred was a very well planned war aimed at destabilising the country's banking system, and actually had nothing to do with the bloggers, to whom she expressed her willingness to answer their questions at any time. This immediately led to a change in the bloggers' attitudes and comments. The crisis was overcome because of the willingness to engage in open and honest dialogue with Internet users, and also because of the clear support for the government in the mainstream media.

The Consequences of the Crisis

The consequences of this crisis were very frustrating for the bank, which had hitherto been a very stable and trusted financial institution. The lack of dialogue in the social media led to a huge wave of anti-bank sentiment which was not easy to overcome. In this respect it's important to bear

in mind that search engines' "memory" is long and that they keep online stories for years. A clear proof is the fact that, even three years after the case, putting the words "bank" and "failure" into Google still yields some very negative results concerning the image of FIB.

The lessons to be learned from this episode are quite clear and they led the bank to create a digital unit with professionals in charge of online communication. Furthermore, one of the best and most up-to-date Bulgarian financial blogs nowadays belongs to the FIB. The management of the bank has realised just how influential bloggers are in the Internet world and how important it is to work constantly on building open and honest relations with them.

DELL – HELL

Dell Inc. is a multinational information technology corporation that sells personal computers, servers, data storage devices, network switches, software, and computer peripherals. Dell also sells HDTVs, cameras, printers and MP3 players, as well as electronic devices built by other manufacturers.

How public shaming works via social media

A simple complaint posted by one of the most influential bloggers -- Jeff Jarvis -- caused a real social media disaster for the company. In 2005, Jarvis had a problem with his Dell computer and was refused help by the company. This made him start criticising it on his own blog, which in turn set off a series of complaints about the company's product and customer service. Very soon plenty of dissatisfied customers joined what became this newly formed net community. Hundreds of bloggers started complaining publicly about the service they had received from Dell's technical support. It was clear that there was a problem – namely that Dell did not care about its customers. In point of fact, the blogosphere campaign exposed a customer problem that had been there all along, but the impact of the blogging was enormous, and Dell's reputation and stock price were severely hurt.

The company's reaction

In order to be able to stop the hurricane of unsatisfied customers in the Internet, Dell should have known better the mechanisms to counteract. Unfortunately, the management of the company was not prepared for that and it underestimated the importance of the social media conversations. One of the biggest mistakes of the company was its attempt to win the battle, by trying to control the conversations and to reduce their negative effect. Actually what was most important was solving the main problems related to the client service which could have really changed the attitude of the customers to the company.

The Consequences of the Crisis

Following the crisis in 2005, Dell undertook the following actions:

- Investments amounting to \$ 150 million were made in their customer service operations.
- An official customer services blog was launched.
- In 2007 IdeaStorm was launched. This allows Dell users to engage in debate and vote on ideas which they or the company think would improve Dell's service.

Dell's corporate blog, Direct2Dell, is currently ranked at about 700 on Technorati; it receives more than five million unique viewers per month, which is among the highest rates for a corporate blog.

Further efforts on the part of the company to create a more open and direct relationship with consumers are related to two Dell communications employees, John Pope and Richard Binhammer, who began to surprise and delight online customers by reaching out to those who needed support and also to thank satisfied customers for supporting Dell on blogs, forums and social networks. This new programme now includes more than 50 Dell employees who monitor online conversations about the company in nine languages around the world.

As a consequence, Dell has become much more customer friendly and also a very active listener and participant in social media. At one point the company even published an image of one of its exploded laptops on its corporate blog in order to admit that there was a problem but also to point out that it was caused by the battery manufacturer.

Public shaming of brands through social media – causes and mechanisms

When a certain brand enters the sphere of the social media it is important to realise that this is not a one-way communication field, but one which enables a very dynamic conversation in which each participant can be actively involved. The social media arena is a place of relative freedom, and every attempt to control the situation might actually worsen any incipient crisis. Freedom is one of the basic principles of the Internet and social media aspire to the condition of a real democracy which gives the power to exercise freedom of speech to every single person. Internet censorship is by no means impossible, as the case of China demonstrates, but it is more difficult to identify abusive behaviour in and impose sanctions upon the new, as opposed to the old, media. Particularly in a democracy, where freedom of expression is supposed to be sacrosanct, it is complicated and time- and effort-consuming to stop an item of news circulating online.

As information is disseminated through networks at such high speed and to so many people, instead of trying to control it, efforts should be directed instead to listening, speaking and reacting in an adequate fashion. In order to avoid a crisis that could turn into an episode of online public shaming, people should engage in dialogue. According to Brian Solis: "The social media are related much more to sociology and psychology, than to technologies. Technology is just that - technology. Communication instruments will change, the network will change and develop and platforms for content distribution will emerge. People, however, will not change." [3] Thus what is most important is to understand people's needs and interests and the reasons why they communicate in this or that way, instead of trying to control the technologies themselves. We should also understand that whilst the interactive media are indeed new, there are also ways in which they are not so different from the 'old' offline ones, and that technological innovations such as the Internet are not a reason for totally changing the existing communication model.

The social media bring a new dimension to the conventional forms of communication, in particular making it possible for people to access information very quickly. This new system of information dissemination has caused certain changes in public trust of information sources. Guenter Bentele's above-mentioned model of the two types of trust has multiplied in the social media and has turned every person into a communication channel. Thus the possibilities for content creation and sharing, for debates and discussions, for informing and educating, increase significantly. This has changed the possibilities for the public shaming of brands, institutions and individuals, too. Nowadays, thanks to the existence of global networks, everybody can criticise, shame or blame, which is a prerequisite for the establishment of new rules, rights and obligations.

Public shaming of individuals in the social media

A presidential election was held in Bulgaria on 23 October 2011, with a run-off on 30 October 2011. As a result, Rosen Plevneliev was elected the new president of Bulgaria. He is a former Bulgarian Regional Development Minister and is used to being the focus of the media. Despite this fact, his wife and his family have always been kept away from the media and people know hardly anything about the president's private life.

Even at the official inauguration ceremony in Sofia, Mr. Plevneliev's wife was not present. This caused a wave of comment, speculation and assumption on the Internet. This in turn triggered, on the one hand, public shaming and blaming, and, on the other, vociferous support. The most influential Bulgarian blogs and forums as well as the digital media became an arena of conflict between supporters of the president's wife and those who strongly condemned her.

The First Lady refused to give any comments to the media. However, she was very active in the social media and mostly in the micro-blogging platform Twitter which she frequently used to share her visions and beliefs as well her strong criticism of both the Bulgarian government and the political party to which her husband belongs. Most Bulgarians adopted a critical attitude towards her and did not hesitate to express it via the mechanisms of the social media. This marked the beginning of a new communication model between the institutions and the citizens in Bulgaria

A couple of days after the official inauguration ceremony, an interview with the First Lady appeared on the Internet, citing as a source a very influential business daily. The interview was full of shocking arguments and attacks on the prime minister of the country (who had nominated the newly elected president several months previously). Most people appeared to believe in the authenticity of the interview and another strong wave of comments (both negative and positive) started up in the social media. However, it soon became clear that the interview was fake. The matter was now taken up by the press as well

What the social media made possible here was the extremely rapid spread of news and comment about the First Lady. In so doing, they also gave birth to a new communication model with new players. People actively participate and comment, refute and accept, blame and praise certain personalities, institutions or brands. In this way they are both building new pillars of trust and destroying old ones, thus creating new rules in the communications sphere and in society as a whole.

Nowadays public shaming of individuals, brands and institutions is much easier because of unrestricted access to the social media -- the new tribune for the public voice. The power of these new communication channels is undeniable but also uncontrollable and thus should be treated with caution. Most of the people who act and react in the social media follow their own rules and it is important to bear in mind this aspect when any kind of campaign is to be launched. The three examples above clearly show the power of the social media and the effects of underestimating their possible impact upon the reputations of both brands and individuals.

Conclusion

Social media represent a new model of communication with the audience which has certain specific characteristics such as: wide-ranging impact, extremely rapid access, and new opportunities for dialogue and interaction with the audience. The significant role of the social media today has changed considerably older-established methods of trust-building and created a new method of interaction between institutions and audiences. New forms of communication such as the Internet bring with them new means of sharing, and this triggers certain changes in the democratic

processes and opens up new possibilities for governments, institutions and public figures to communicate with a broad public, and for people to express their opinions and to comment on issues which are important to their lives.

The new way of communicating online via networking also raises certain questions about the rights and norms involved in revealing information, and about the methods used in spreading the news through sharing and transforming the initial message. This digital reality also provokes serious discussions about the authenticity of the information provided online, as well as about any necessary mechanisms for regulating the Internet.

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