

How to Preserve Brand Health in Social Media

Executive Summary

Many companies tap into social media to foster engagement with their audience and to stay abreast of customer needs, market trends and breaking news requiring attention. However, even the savviest of organizations may overlook the need to monitor for brand protection-related issues, such as brand impersonation, account spoofing or even counterfeit goods. With a growing focus on social media channels — and growing pressure to deliver measurable results — it's critical that marketing executives address these risks. Otherwise, they're at risk of sacrificing hard-earned brand trust and the ability to engage consumers one-on-one. This paper explores these issues and offers best practices for protecting your brand in social media channels.

Social Media: The Double-Edged Sword

Digital channels — including social media — are an increasing part of people's personal and business lives. It's no wonder that companies are dedicating more branding and marketing resources to these channels. In particular, social media marketing has taken great leaps in the last few years. Simple "buzz building" has evolved to unleash new opportunities for brands to engage with customers and consumers, deliver customer service and even conduct real-time market research. While some executives have not fully adopted and integrated social media into their overall marketing, others have made it an essential component of their brand-building strategy. However, while they are familiar with the rewards of this channel, not all marketers are aware of the potential

“Authenticity has become a prerequisite to doing business in this new era, and empowering employees to use social media for business will be the number one way companies stay relevant and top of mind.”

“What’s the Endgame for Social Media?” Harvard Business Review Blog, January 9, 2014⁴

pitfalls associated with it.

With every new communication channel comes challenges, and social media is no exception. Just as email spawned spam and phishing, and the Internet bred sites selling knock-offs and promoting fraudulent offers, social media is ripe for exploitation by brand impersonators, counterfeiters and scammers. Consider spoof accounts. These are sometimes created by satirists and others who wish to parody a company for entertainment purposes. However, they can also be created by people intent on damaging a brand or lining their pockets by confusing consumers who associate social media with transparency and trust.

Because social media is touted as a way for brands to show their authentic, “human” sides, many consumers take brands’ social media accounts at face value. In fact, Time magazine reports that the Millennial Generation puts more stock in social media than in anything said by government, business or religious institutions.¹ Yet, a survey by Grant Thornton found that 59 percent of companies do not perform a social media risk assessment and 84 percent of executives surveyed were concerned about the potential risks involved in the use of social media.² Many companies underestimate the importance of including a brand protection element within their social media strategy. Indeed, a recent survey found over half of brands don’t have a strategy in place to manage social media complaints.³

Even the most robust social media strategy is incomplete without a brand protection component. The ability to identify and, more importantly, take action against brand hijackers (brandjackers), impersonators and others with nefarious intent is critical to ensuring the success of social media initiatives.

The Good and Bad of Social Media

The very characteristics that make social media incredibly appealing to consumers are the same ones that make it ripe for those with ill intent. Social media enjoys a tremendous amount of experimentation. It’s not unusual for fans and consumers to be exposed to something new every day, whether a promotion, contest, fan page or enticing content. And, without much to signal what is genuine and what is not, consumers find themselves at risk of being hoodwinked — especially those who place unquestioning trust in what they perceive to be “authentic,” personal and transparent social media channels.

At the same time, the viral nature of social media is a boon for marketers because it affords the opportunity to reach a large number of people quickly. But this same instant reach can be a curse when consumers are presented with false or misleading information or offers. Just as they’ve done via emails and other digital channels, scammers, impersonators and counterfeiters are now using social media channels in creative ways to dupe consumers into believing false stories about a brand or into handing over their credit card or other sensitive information. The negative impact on a brand is magnified exponentially when

these “offers” — or stories of brand deception — get shared via social media.

As marketers continue making strides in quantifying the business impact of their social media efforts, they must protect their brand in social media channels. Just as important, brands need to be able to take effective action when they identify problems so that they maintain the trust of their customers, fans and communities and avoid tarnishing their reputations.

Your Brand is at Risk in Social Media

While brand protection is paramount in the social media realm, it starts by understanding the various ways that brands are vulnerable. After all, brand protection issues are unique to each business and must be dealt with appropriately. The key is to identify the effect of brandjackers on your social media programs and your brand.

Undermining Brand Engagement

Impersonators with malicious aims get between your brand and your customers in order to advance their own purposes. Whether they are misappropriating copyrighted images and photos or trademarked brand names or slogans, the intent is to fool consumers and your customers into thinking an offer or message is legitimate. Imagine how such activity could interrupt your brand’s attempts to foster engagement and goodwill with consumers.

Sometimes someone with malicious intent simply wants to damage a brand. In such a case, the person may spread misleading or dangerous information, such as a false stock tip or a lie about a product recall. Regardless of the method employed, this person is focused on causing harm, often by casting doubts on the brand’s viability or credibility.

Misleading Consumers in the Name of Fraud and Counterfeits

Scammers and impersonators also set up fake pages or profiles with the unauthorized use of copyrighted materials and/or trademarks to give off an aura of legitimacy. And, they are savvy enough to tap into the latest trends, such as the growing use of digital coupons and gift cards. Over 100 million people — more than half of the Internet users in the U.S. — now redeem digital coupons,⁶ and 80 percent of U.S. consumers say they will buy at least one gift card a year.⁷

Scammers don’t hesitate to circulate fake coupons and gift cards that unsuspecting consumers try to present — unsuccessfully — at the checkout counter. In a digital twist on an age-old problem, counterfeiters promote e-commerce sites by selling fake goods through spoofed social media accounts. By posting links on their fake profiles or fake pages featuring your brand’s logo and legitimate product photos, they may mislead consumers into purchasing counterfeit wares. Whether a high-priced fashion accessory or an everyday necessity such as batteries, no product is off limits and no brand is exempt from counterfeiters.

“Consumers are more likely to engage with companies through social media when they believe those companies’ intentions are genuine. They look for real people and real communities. Therefore, companies that want to become part of the conversation must shift their social media initiatives to be more authentic, responsive and compelling.”

“The Myth of Social Media.”
Gallup, June 23, 2014⁵

The majority of successful brands have a social media page in order to widen their marketing coverage of making their brand more accessible among the social media users

“The Impact of Social Media Marketing Trends on Digital Marketing.” *Social Media Today*, March 17, 2014⁸

Bottom line: These scammers pose serious danger to your brand, potentially leading to customer service nightmares, brand damage and lost brand trust. Moreover, impersonators’ and counterfeiters’ activities in the digital realm can increase your marketing costs while negatively affecting social media metrics.

Proven Ways to Protect Your Brand in Social Media

While more and more companies are monitoring the social media channel, they often overlook the need to monitor for brand misuse or misappropriation. By incorporating the following best practices into your social media program, you can safeguard the health of your brand and preserve customer trust.

Establish a Registered, Official Presence on Social Media

Whether you’ve created a blog, microblog and/or social network page, be sure you’ve taken steps to “make it official.” Some social media platforms make it possible to prove your legitimacy. If your chosen platforms let you add a “verified” label to your pages, take advantage of this. If they don’t offer a way to show that your pages are bona fide, make sure your company’s main website includes information about and links to your presence on social media.

And while you’ve probably already registered and/or recovered all of your brand’s vanity URLs, don’t overlook emerging, special interest or lesser-known social media sites. After all, the Internet is home to hundreds of these sites, and new ones are cropping up all the time, making this an ongoing process.

Monitor for Impersonation and the Misuse of Brands and Trademarks

In social media, scammers can easily impersonate a brand. The key is to prevent those with ill intent from fooling consumers and your customers into thinking they’re engaging with your brand when they’re actually interacting with an imposter. Actively watch for signs that impersonators are tampering with your brand and trying to lead consumers astray.

Take Action Against Brandjackers

It’s not enough to keep an eye out for scammers, impersonators and counterfeiters — you need to take appropriate action. Depending on the circumstances, this may mean contacting the individual to understand their motives, establishing a relationship and explaining how his or her activity is in violation of your brand guidelines. It may require cataloging the activity and reporting the malicious impersonator, counterfeiter or scammer to the social media site so the site can enforce its terms of service. Remember, while social

media sites want to provide safe environments for their users, they can't possibly be monitoring and catching every instance of brand infringement. That's why it's critical that your social media strategy incorporates a brand protection component to watch for brand misuse, conduct appropriate enforcement measures and monitor compliance.

Conclusion: Complete Your Social Media Strategy with a Brand-Protection Component

Along with the advantages of social media — such as the ability to engage with consumers — come risks. The far-reaching, transparent and viral nature of social media makes it ideal for scammers seeking to exploit the value and power of established brands.

Marketers have no choice but to fight back. Facing growing pressure to build brand engagement and loyalty through social media while measuring its impact, they can't afford to be undermined by brand impersonators' and counterfeiters' intent on causing damage to reputations and the bottom line.

Three Signs Your Brand Has Been Hijacked in Social Media — and How to Respond

1. Someone is using your brand as their registered username, such as with malicious-intended spoof accounts.
2. Your trademarks and copyrighted content are used liberally, including within the name or description of pages, blogs, etc.
3. The look and feel is difficult to distinguish from your legitimate social media presence.

How to Strike Back:

1. Proactively register your brands as usernames across both leading and emerging social media sites.
2. Use tools to automatically search social media for unauthorized use of your brands and trademarks.
3. Take appropriate action against unauthorized use by notifying the individual or contacting the social media site to report a violation of its terms of service.
4. Make sure your monitoring program is designed to provide constant vigilance to discourage repeat offenders as well as opportunists.

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