

# Teamwork: How to Fight Back Against The Weaponization of Social Media



When social media channels started to emerge in the early 2000s, many of us thought these platforms would improve business understanding and help break down barriers between companies and their critics. More than a decade later, it hasn't exactly turned out that way.

These days the chatter in business sanctums is more about the weaponization of social media. **Twitter**, **Facebook** and others are being used to denigrate, belittle and demonize brands as well as the people who run them.

The paramount question for upper management regarding social media is not so much how companies can use social channels as a charm offensive—that now seems to be the easy part—but how to defend against the increasingly nasty things being said on social platforms.

Communicators are being asked to confront myriad critics who will say things about companies via social channels that few would dream of uttering in public. The source could be the U.S. president or an irate individual who will stop at nothing to criticize a brand.

## C-SUITE KNOWS SOCIAL MEDIA'S DANGERS

As we know, communicators are paid to distinguish between a brush fire online and a legitimate threat via social platforms that, if left alone, could cost the brand dearly. Communicators have their work cut out for them.

Losses linked to reputational damage at publicly traded companies grew 461% during the past five years, says a recent study from **Steel City Re**, which supplies reputation-protection solutions, and **Hanover Stone Partners**, a risk evaluator. The study is based on analysis of reputational-related losses for roughly 7,500 companies. The primary culprits, the study says, are a large spike in anger from the general public and the weaponization of social media.

Prior to the barrage of tweets since Inauguration Day, we counseled communicators to prioritize carving out time to communicate firsthand the threat of social media-originated crises to the C-suite. Now, we can't imagine the C-suite is unaware of the existence of that threat.

There are other measures—preventative in nature—that

communicators can take to mitigate social media trolling against their brand(s) and boost their value in the eyes of the C-suite.

“The single greatest strength and weakness in crisis always has been the team. Today, when there are too many things to know...no one discipline should dominate the strategy conversation for long.”

## CANARY IN THE COAL MINE

Communicators need to constantly track threat assessment via social media platforms. **Mylan's EpiPen**, the **Wells Fargo** crisis, the Keystone Pipeline, GMOs, fracking, sugar, you name it; the coming communications crises for these issues and more were foreseeable with a careful reading of the digital tea leaves. Remember: Companies advertise, critics organize. Your adversaries need to leave their footprints to find allies.

The onus is on communicators to monitor the social conversation. Learn about the trends in hashtags that critics are using, company-focused grassroots organizations fundraising and communications strategies; what the plaintiffs' bar is posting; who Change.org or #Grabyourwallet are listing; and what videos are trending, to name a few. Such tracking gives communicators a clearer window into what's next. If you track successfully enough, you can modify behavior, negotiate or counterattack, as the opportunity dictates, without being surprised.

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For companies fearing the enterprise risk of a new president bent on exercising his powerful thumbs, look at what has happened in the opening weeks of the administration. Threatened boycotts against brands emerged, but have yet to be effective. Share prices of targeted companies such as **Nordstrom** are either unaffected or rise, and even **Koch Industries** has gone on the offensive. What was an existential threat less than one month ago appears to be gone.

Look within, too. As **Verizon's** VP for corporate communications Torod Neptune says, as a communicator who works with all the parts of your company, you know where 90% of the risk of crisis exists internally. It's critical that you be on top of these issues, look to help reduce the potential of crisis and develop relationships with relevant personnel in these areas should a crisis erupt.

“**Brilliant strategy is a team sport played collectively.**”

### THE INTEGRATED TEAM

The hyper-democratic age of digital communications and transparency requires that communications professionals have a deep appreciation of, if not a much closer relationship with, legal, investor relations and government and public affairs. If the whole world has been a stage for 400 years, everything, as of November 8th is political, even your brand. If you do not understand these influences, you cannot communicate effectively.

A critical point: “Hyper-democratic communications” is a revolutionary transformation. Most of us grew up with a republican form of communications. That is, we knew the key journalists, thought leaders, financial analysts and politicians. It was a small group and we were the gatekeepers. Now communications is more about ideas sprouting from the grassroots up and becoming movements, much more than from the boardroom down, becoming fads. Understanding how grassroots movements work is about as important as knowing how to use your phone. If you don't get this, well, you don't get it.

In a Twitter age, huddling in a defensive crouch after the damage is done is too reactive—it is the electronic equivalent of no comment. Shareholders will not be pleased and consumers may decide to shun your brand's products and services altogether. Use peacetime wisely and, as we said above, develop relationships with these team members now. It will only get harder in a crisis.

### KNOW 'EM BEFORE YOU NEED 'EM

Similar to the above counsel, communicators need to cultivate audiences and influencers now, during peacetime, so when the company is attacked various stakeholders can act on the company's behalf.

“Companies have to assess social media and create buckets of risk—cultural risks, political risks and regulatory

risks—and plan defenses accordingly,” says John Kelly, managing partner of Hanover Stone Partners.

It may be comforting for boards of directors and C-level executives to watch other brands melt down due to nasty messaging via social media and think, “We're doing it right, because our company has yet to be attacked.”

But clinging to an it-can't-happen-here mentality does communicators and corporate managers no favors when it comes to effectively dealing with the weaponization of social media. Does your brand or organization have a crisis plan? Nearly half the communicators polled last year in a **PR News-Nasdaq Public Relations Services** survey did not. When asked if they regularly run mock crisis scenarios the results were even worse (*PRN*, Mar. 28, 2016). The 2017 edition of **PwC's** annual survey of CEOs here and abroad found sentiment similar to the Nasdaq-PRN poll: Nearly two-thirds were concerned about their company's ability to respond quickly to a crisis, despite 50% who said they'd experienced two or more crises in the past three years.

People used to find truth in advertising and trusted media. Now they find it in what they hear first, most often and from trusted influencers. If you don't have a game plan now, you will be a case study later.

### THE TEAM AND THE BEST IDEAS WIN

The single greatest strength and weakness in crisis always has been the team. Today, when there are too many things to know, all changing too fast, no one discipline should dominate the strategy conversation for long. Far too often communicators substitute tactics with the title strategy. They think that switch fools people; it's not even sufficient to win.

The strongest people and communicators are the ones willing to show their vulnerability, while the weakest people are those who already are certain of the answer. If you are not learning, you're dying.

Today's fully integrated, rapidly changing communications environment—where a brilliant solution one month ago is antiquated today—requires people to work as teams, being unafraid to try new things, expose personal limitations and weakness and ask great questions. Protecting professional territory, believing you already know the best way and cutting and pasting past solutions is a recipe for disaster.

As Stephen Covey wrote, “Start with the end in mind.” Do solid research *first* so you have a deep understanding of the problem's extent and its many permutations. It's not the tweet, it's what drove it in the first place. Only when you know the real challenge can you develop the elegant solution.

Strategy is about what drives people and markets. The best ideas win. Period. Check your ego and fears at the door. Brilliant strategy is a team sport played collectively. ■

**CONTACT:** @richardlevick

*Note: Ernest Del Buono, a senior strategist at Levick, will be speaking at the PR News Digital Media Summit and Crisis Management Boot Camp, Feb. 23-24, Huntington Beach, CA. For more information: [bit.ly/prnewsHB](http://bit.ly/prnewsHB)*