

Degrees of separation, stupidity and success in social media

By  William Smook

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The Mayans prophesied long ago that 2012 will see social media playing a crucial role in business communication. Why is it then, that this exciting communications channel sees otherwise good, beloved brands making avoidable mistakes? Here are a few trends, suggestions and case studies that should help you work both hard and smart in the coming months.



1. Credentials will be disposable

Let's start with [Woolworths'](#) frankly cack-handed response to allegations that it had stolen a concept for soft-drinks from [Frankie's](#), a small operation in KwaZulu-Natal. Woolworths blundered, firstly by [not responding to the initial reaction](#) across social media platforms, and crucially by declining to be interviewed on the matter.

Perhaps Woolworths had good reason for not using the platform of [Bruce Whitfield's World At Six](#) to state its case. Perhaps it simply hoped to remain impassive long enough for social media acolytes to go on holiday.

Whatever its reasoning, its initial refusal to engage with the public and the media and the issue fuelled the perception that this is a David-and-Goliath issue, and that Woolworths is as imperious and high-handed with media - both social and mainstream - as it's perceived to have been with Frankie's. It also ensured that there'll be interest in the issue when [it's taken to the Advertising Standards Authority](#), which reopened last week.

Woolworths can be faulted, firstly for not recognising the potential for damage and providing with a quick, pithy, reasoned response for social media, and secondly for underestimating the empathy for the underdog in that sphere, as manifested in a [Facebook petition against them](#). Woolworths' initial reaction seemed to consist of sticking its fingers in its ears and going "LA-LA-LA-LA-CAN'T HEAR-YOU!" So its belated blaming of their suppliers seemed disingenuous.

Social media is often about perception-equals-reality snap-judgments, so a lesson: make your first reaction count. Many communicators err with the wrong reaction too soon or the right reaction too late. Woolworths seems to have achieved the worst of both worlds. It's a popular and aspirational brand, which has touted its integrity long and loud. This crisis called into that integrity directly into question.

Is the David-and-Goliath angle that important? Twitter was alive with people saying they planned to support Frankie's as a matter of principle, and *Business Day* reported that the company did [better than usual](#) over the festive season.

2. Don't make your reaction the story

The rapidity with which issues blow up in social media can trigger overreaction, which can lead to instant reputational harm. It needn't.

An example in the UK is coverage of Virgin Media's electronic programme guide, which [Bowdlerised inoffensive words](#), protecting viewers on breakfast TV from such filth as Alfred Hitchc**k, musician Jarvis C**ker, author Charles D***ens and famed soccer team A***nal.

The Guardian website reported: "A Virgin Media spokesperson said: 'Over the weekend a temporarily over-zealous profanity checker took offence at certain programme titles. The altered titles have been swiftly analysed and we're fixing any remaining glitches.'"

A wordier, more visibly embarrassed response, perhaps awash with three-letter acronyms and blameworthy about software would have kept the issue alive, turning the blushes into a story in itself. In this instance anyway, a brief, canny, response helped move the issue down the media agenda.

In other words, let's all have a laugh and then move on.

3. Content will STILL be king

Good content will still drive traffic and justify investment, but whether it's internal or outsourced, originality will be key. Newsfeeds provide basic information, but the stuff people want will differentiate you. So don't shout about your content if you're offering the same as everyone else, but do bang on about it if you have something that's worthwhile.

I follow [The Daily Maverick \(@dailymaverick\)](#) on Twitter because I like most of their writers: I think [Ivo Vegter's \(@IvoVegter\)](#) contrarian, free-market views are sometimes overstated simply because he likes a good tiff - he suggests [scrapping CITES](#), for example. But I'll put up with them because I think he often gets things right, and I enjoy the insights of Stephen Grootes ([@StephenGrootes](#)), Kevin Bloom ([@KevBloom](#)), Siphon Hlongwane ([@comradesiphon](#)) and others on the site.

4. Let journalism, not hype, drive content

Unless it's that circle of hell that follows the cult of celebrity, social media is as allergic to hyperbole as any other communication channel. [Kardashian VPL \(visible panty-lines\)](#) aside, business content should read like journalism, not infomercials. Exclude anything you wouldn't expect to read in a sober news report.

So if, for instance, your client insists on being referred to as "The leading airline/pharmaceutical manufacturer/steel manufacturer," you as the communications professional or brand custodian need the confidence to assert that such overstatement is ill-advised.

The social media environment smells hype at a great distance, and also quickly tires of verbiage such as "[going forward](#)" or "currently" or the perennially pointless "exclusive" or "executive" - if a word doesn't add value, cut it.

The beauty of social media is that it's far harder to write well while keeping it short, so investing in writing skills will pay off.

As a rule, if the journalist's not going to use a phrase in his or her story, or if the curmudgeonly sub-editor will edit it out, why use it at all? By all means, include the phrase in your notes-to-editors section, but don't expect it to be used in the news report, and don't alienate the newsroom by trying to shoehorn it in.

Similarly, all your comms should by now be compatible with social media. Get the basics right:

- Make sure your press releases' headlines are tweetable or watch them sink without trace
- Tweet stats and facts
- Leave space in your Tweets for retweeters' comments, and so on.

Anyone in your comms team should be able to communicate key messages in 140 characters or less - make it a deliverable and make tautology a hanging offence.

Above all, don't waste the media's time. In [Forbes Magazine](#), Robert Wynne wrote: "Everybody hates writing press

releases. They're usually dull, self-serving, full of insider speak, silly acronyms and when the news is really important, it leaks well in advance of the official document."

If that describes your releases, it's time to outlaw them for a month. A four-week break from the standard media statement will force you and your team to communicate directly and resourcefully. Ignore the squeals and try it.

5. The effective CEO will demand integration social media in communications strategy

The lingering mind-set that communication is something done by the CEO's PA, "the girls in marketing" or the perennially juniorised folk who don't fit into the organisation's admin, manufacturing or sales divisions is archaic. An effective communications chief should report directly to the CEO and should be able to align every aspect of communication: SEO, and so on.

This also dictates that you hire skills, not just an interest: The [Dilbert cartoon](#) that shows a "social media expert" as someone who gets paid to Facebook all day pokes fun at the skills required to work in social media.

In short, hire a communications professional and up-skill social network skills where required, rather than vice versa. Similarly...

6. Plan for social media threat in your communication strategy

A statement of the obvious, but one clearly not done by some of the brands discussed here.

Examine the viable threats to your reputation and compile an array of reactive statements, prepared for use on Twitter, Facebook and so on. This material should have your brand's key messages woven in and be ready for use with the most basic alteration in details.

Few brands will get it as wrong as Durex South Africa did with its [offensive and sexist Tweets](#), now filed firmly under ["What were they thinking?"](#) Your social media team and PR team need to meet regularly and ensure they're on-message. Presumably Durex could have avoided embarrassment in this way.

Err to the side of caution when being flippant: If your Twitter followers value your advice on trends in the derivatives market, they may be irked if you pepper it with chatter about your progress on Foursquare.

7. Build windmills in the calm

Last year Nando's drew some comment and criticism for withdrawing its superb ["Last Dictator Standing"](#) ad from TV (not the Internet). I'm not privy to the internal debate on the issue, but Nando's really had little choice: if ill had befallen any employees around that time, Nando's could've been accused of jeopardising their safety.

But the brand came out well in the issue because it communicates with its market constantly, not just when there's reputational risk. Nando's was able to hold the moral high ground by withdrawing the ad, yet have it retain talkability by going viral on YouTube. The only losers here were perhaps a few media buyers and Zanu-PF supporters - and a chicken or two.

8. Choose your fights

Opposition leader Helen Zille received a tweet from @uiopll, who threatened to shoot her in the head, eat her "brian" and rape her family. She [responded drily](#): "Good morning to you too", perhaps following the old saw of not arguing with a fool lest people fail to be able to tell the difference.

So far, so prudent. But she then mistepped on the issue of racism in Cape Town. Arguably you have to work quite hard to look sillier than Lindiwe Suttle once the spittle started flying, but Zille's reaction of "complete nonsense" to the on-going debate raised by Suttle about why blacks still feel socially excluded in Cape Town [seems to have achieved that](#)).

9. Stick to the basics:

One reason that otherwise seasoned communicators get it wrong on social media could be that they're intimidated by how quickly an issue can trend. And yes, if Facebook is to be believed, all its users are just [3.74 degrees away](#) from each other, as opposed to the six degrees separating Kevin Bacon and the rest of Hollywood.

But the trick is to stick to the fundamentals of communication:

- Work out what you want to say
- Who you want to say it to, and
- How you want to reach them.

Identifying your audience, message and channel seems almost ludicrously simple, but no good comms plan can be built without it.

Importantly, it'll help you stay on message when others in the social media space are beguiled by the breathless immediacy of the medium.

A brand may spend millions on say, sports sponsorship, yet be miserly on its PR budget. In 2012, that's wrong-headed, to use a polite term. Invest in communication that drives business growth, not just visibility. The Mayans said so.

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