

The responsive brand: how to handle social media

By  [Danette Breitenbach](#)

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It took six months after the first reporting of the rear windows of Opel Corsa Lites shattering for the manufacturer to issue a recall. Today, this matter would have been handled very differently. The reason why: social media, and the power it has handed to consumers.



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Wendy Knowler, consumer journalist for *The Star*, who first reported on the problem says that thanks to the retweet, one person's complaint today can escalate into thousands in a very short time span. "Social media moves fast."

Knowler's fellow panellists, Richard Boorman, executive head for media relations and social media: Vodacom, and John Beale, MD of NotaBene, discussed how brands should be operating in a world where social media has impacted so dramatically on consumer expectations at the Consumer Goods Council of South Africa Summit 2014 held recently at Vodaworld in Midrand.

Boorman spends a third of his time on customer care. He says he does not always win and in some cases he has made himself unpopular within the company. "It is important to be fair and reasonable. Defending the company will make things go away - but only for a while. This strategy only works for a limited time."

Acknowledgement: first line of action

Beale says the trick with social media is to respond quickly, even if actually fixing the problem might takes days or weeks. "Respond quickly even if you do not know the answer. Admit you do not know the answer. It's okay not to know, but it's not okay to leave a social media complaint hanging."

Boorman agrees. Have a disaster check list, he says, "When a crisis hits, have a consistent message that goes out. Do it

quickly. If you cannot resolve it, still acknowledge it."

He recommends dealing with the crisis. "Be prepared. If the first time you talk to a journalist is when there is a crisis, give up. Do the legwork beforehand and make sure you know and have some sort of a relationship with journalists, thought leaders and influencers. Journalists are not the enemy."

Importance of framework and focus

Have a risk framework in place that sets out what you want and how to achieve it. Work out an average response, escalation and resolution times. Ensure that the staff responsible are empowered to answer questions. "Your team must be multifaceted, understand the environment, the situation and the person they are dealing with," says Beale.

He advises you handle the core rather than the crowds. "Have the right software in place to identify your audience. Know your audience. And who are the leaders in the conversation," he says.

Honesty goes a long way

Be human and honest. It is amazing how many companies forget this, he says. "We are not robots. Humans are human so talk to them like they are. Define your company voice on social media and align it with the type of audience you want to talk to."

Boorman agrees, saying: "Spin will come back and bite you. Be sure of your facts, be honest and know what you are."

Know your audience, act appropriately

Companies in denial and not on social media such as Twitter, do so at their own peril says Knowler, adding these brands are blind to where people are interacting.

"Other issues with brands on social media include brands not handling it locally, such as Coca-Cola's social media which is not handled locally, but from Atlanta in the US. Clever companies have two Twitter accounts, such as FNB. One for the fun stuff and one for the complaints. Many company bosses are not on Twitter. Instead they hired a young person, because they are active on social media, but this does not mean they necessarily the right person."

Brands show their maturity when they respond on social media appropriately, says Knowler. "You need to have a sense of humour, but take the complaint seriously. It is a difficult balance between flippant, serious and empathetic that needs to be achieved."

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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