

Social media: forcing the issue

By  Danette Breitenbach

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As the value of a good reputation becomes more and more important, brands will not only have to deliver more, but also be judged and held accountable on more. The time has come to own a position, to be bold enough to have an opinion and get more involved.



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Much of this has to do with how consumers use social media platforms today as opposed to a mere year ago. While 2016 held lots of surprises, such as the recent United States (US) presidential elections, if we had been tuned in to social media, we might not have been so surprised, says Jared Carneson, director and head of ContentWorks at FleishmanHillard.

“Social Media is far more tuned in to what is actually happening than traditional media and is a great indicator of how people feel and an incredible source of market research,” he adds.

“Of the 60 million plus tweets on the US elections, 80% of the hashtags were pro-Trump. From the beginning, there were more Trump followers than Clinton followers and this trend continued to grow with the gap widening as the election continued.”

He maintains that the same can be said for Brexit. “There are 45 million global tweets on Brexit and if you examined the conversation on social media, you would have picked up that the leave sentiment was higher than the remain sentiment, with 68% of the conversation on social media indicating an exit. If you examine the hashtags that percentage goes up to 73%,” he says.

Social media has surpassed traditional media in terms of conversation, says Francois Rank, head of written content and associate director at FleishmanHillard South Africa. "Social media is not only serving the conversation; it is reflecting it more accurately."

He adds that while South Africa has not yet shown the levels of mistrust in newspapers already present in the US, South African brands need to be aware that different types of media are driving things today.

This is important in terms of a trend that is growing globally and CEOs are speaking about more often. "CEOs are beginning to talk about more than just results or products, with conversations ranging from world issues, strategy, politics, industry trends and popular culture. This points to audiences wanting to hear more than just results and product news."

Another trend starting to be felt is that it is okay for companies to have an opinion and express them. He explains that CEO activism can sway public opinion positively. "The side effect is an increased interest in your brand. Apple's Tim Cook's support of the LGBT community when Indiana and Arkansas passed their controversial "religious freedom" bills had a positive effect as people who already had a strong affinity to the brand and they believed in what he was saying, while those with a lesser affinity to the brand, now believed in it."

In South Africa, the silence of the private sector has frequently been criticised for not voicing their opinion on political and socio economic issues so the recent vocal criticism of Government by several CEOs is an unprecedented move.

While in South Africa it can be hard for a CEO to step up, he says, the thinking should be around shared value concept and having an opinion, for example on health or education. "Brands need to ask themselves do you stand for anything other than profit. Generation X and Y demand that brands care about more than just making money and brands need to think about how their CEO plays a role in this narrative."

His advice to brands going forward is that social media is more important than ever. "Follow your communities' agenda, do not set your own. Speak to your customers about more than just your financial results, have an opinion and express it and be completely immersed in the news agenda."

Carneson and Rank were part of a presentation on Getting your Reputation 2017 ready by FleishmanHillard at the Slow Lounge, Radisson Blu Gautrain Hotel in Sandton.

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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