

The writing is on the wall

 By [Matthew Stone](#)

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Social media... that fickle friend. Get it right and it will provide you with some of the cheapest, best quality and most extensive brand interaction possible. Get it wrong and you create a legion of scorn and risk turning yourself into the butt of a viral Internet joke.

The line that you walk can be a thin one. Even younger tech companies, raised in the culture of the social Internet, have made costly blunders in PR and advertising in social media.



A daunting experience

For the old guard, those used to the traditional media, those who are not particularly web savvy, it must be a daunting experience. There are few well-established and reliable practices on which to rely.

In South Africa particularly, we have a young (both in terms of age and experience with the web) and small Internet community. Still, over 70% (3.5 million) of Internet users in SA are on Facebook. Twitter, the heart of social media brand discussion, has just over 55 000 active users. Not only are these communities growing rapidly, but they also tend to be younger, with high buying power. It is an important place for your brand to be represented.

The beauty and curse of the social web, however, is that it is not a controlled environment. This means that things can go as wrong as they can go right. You cannot tell people what to say about you.

Famous international example

One of the more famous international examples of bad social media management is [Nestlé on Facebook](#). Nestlé has often fallen under attack by environmental groups (such as Greenpeace) for a host of ecologically shaky business practices. This year it fell under fire for sourcing palm oil from areas in Indonesia that were suffering rapid deforestation and pushing the orang-utan to extinction.

But this is a normal situation for Nestlé, which has a history of conflict with such groups. Its PR failing, in this case, occurred when Facebook users started using modified Nestlé logos as their profile pictures and posting on the Nestlé Facebook wall. The profile pics included the Kit Kat logo, with the word "Kit Kat" replaced with "Killer".

Nestlé's moderator issued a statement on its wall, stating:

“ To repeat: we welcome your comments, but please don't post using an altered version of any of our logos as your profile pic – they will be deleted. ”

Not a good way

Now this is generally not a good way to deal with cyber-protesters. Even if they are 'within their right' to delete the images, it illustrates a complete denial of the issue trying to be raised.

In response, the following comment stream developed from a customer named Paul Griffin:

Paul Griffin: *Hmm, this comment is a bit "Big Brotherish" isn't it? I'll have whatever I like as my logo pic thanks! And if it's altered, it's no longer your logo is it!*

Nestlé: @Paul Griffin - that's a new understanding of intellectual property rights. We'll muse on that. You can have what you like as your profile picture. But if it's an altered version of any of our logos, we'll remove it from this page.

Griffin: Not sure you're going to win friends in the social media space with this sort of dogmatic approach. I understand that you're on your back-foot due to various issues not excluding Palm Oil but Social Media is about embracing your market, engaging and having a conversation rather than preaching! Read www.cluetrain.com and rethink!

Nestlé: Thanks for the lesson in manners. Consider yourself embraced. But it's our page, we set the rules, it was ever thus.

Darren Smith: Freedom of speech and expression

Nestlé: You have freedom of speech and expression. Here, there are some rules we set. As in almost any other forum. It's to keep things clear.

Griffin: Your page, your rules, true, and you just lost a customer, won the battle and lost the war! Happy?

Nestlé: Oh please .. it's like we're censoring everything to allow only positive comments.

Far worse reactions

In the history of public relations, there have been far worse reactions, from both customers and brand representatives. Nevertheless, Nestlé's reaction dripped with sarcasm, arrogance and snappiness. You can understand the moderator's situation. He/she was curating a Nestlé Facebook page inundated with insults and criticism and, even though his/her comments were valid, it succeeded only in portraying Nestlé in a negative light.

Griffin was right; Nestlé lost the war. For a brand already under fire, it was a disaster. What's worse is the comment stream sat there on the wall for everyone to see and share.

Everything on the Internet is public. If you are rude, incompetent or otherwise damning to a customer over Facebook or Twitter (or any Internet media), then expect it to be shared. Even emails, which are private, will be posted if the recipient feels offended by it.

Online influencer

If you are unfortunate enough to have offended someone with a large audience, ie an [online influencer](#), a great deal of damage can be done to your brand in a very short space of time. This means that you need to be careful of not only what your brand "officially" says via its social media, but also what representatives of your brand say (whether they be employees or spokespeople).

The key here is to be polite and helpful in all communications with customers, especially when it is in writing. While this may seem like common sense for PR, the stakes are higher than ever before.

In [part two](#), we deal with other examples of good and bad social media management, focusing more on Twitter.

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