

Social media crisis management

By [Gosi Legoale](#)

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The internet is continuously evolving, and the rapid pace at which it moves, affects everything we do as consumers, and as brands. Most brands are trying to define their online presence. Although a digital footprint exists, what they do with it is what sets them apart.



Image source: Gallo/Getty Images.

To get a better understanding of the online audience, brands have been forced to utilise an ORM tool to closely monitor internet culture and its prevailing trends, in a bid to leverage them for their own benefit. It's a hit or miss approach at the best of times peppered with Ls, however, insight is gained with regards to the social media habits of South Africans, and how brands can use these to effectively engage with the online community.

Social media is an internet beast, and extremely demanding for brands to adapt to its malleable evolution. From the initial, early stages to a tricky adolescent period when all they want to do is jump on every viral trend. With a newfound realisation about how important engagement is to their online existence, it's the other side of the coin that is proving to be a challenge, as brands find themselves inexplicably pulled into topical (read uncomfortable) conversations with no clear approach to speak of.



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This unwanted attention has placed a sharp focus on brands, and they find themselves having to decide whether or not to respond, while also being mindful of how their response may be interpreted.

As someone who manages the social media profile of a prominent FMCG brand, I address these aspects in my head on a tweet by tweet basis. I have to make instant judgement calls regarding tweets or posts we get tagged on. Before I decide to respond, and how I respond is based on three factors I internally debate with myself:

- What is the tone used, is it playful banter I can respond to sharply? Or is the tone a serious one meaning that my response should be as measured?
- I also consider the severity of what is being tweeted. Any complaint is acknowledged and dealt with swiftly using internal escalation processes so it can be instantly resolved, unlike a freebie request which we can be ignored
- It's also important that I weigh up the implications of each course of action. What is the likely reaction to a response from us? Do we engage, and if we do, will the community get involved and are there countermeasures in place should our response not be received well?

Once I've done my checks, weighed the pros and cons of each decision and the consequences thereafter, will I then decide on the appropriate course of action. No brand wants to find themselves trending in the alleys of #BlackTwitter for the wrong reason if anything because that leaves poor community managers as the first line of defence, and we could honestly do without the anxiety.



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South Africa is going through the most. Some might even argue that we've been going through it since inception. The one prevailing trait through it all is the avoidance of uncomfortable talks. This is the go-to stance for most brands, as it is assumed to be the safer option. This isn't the only way they react. Brands tend to deal with discomfort in one of the following ways:

- Head-in-the-sand approach and given the size of an ostrich's brain, it's a judgement call that could go either way. This is often a result of the uncertainty around the appropriate approach for brands to take in a crisis. Often, this route is taken in the hopes of going unnoticed and is a result of brands avoiding topical matters, and sometimes even continuing with their scheduled content.
- The tone-deaf approach is normally when brands completely misread the room like Adidas did, sending emails to its customer with the subject line, 'Congrats, you survived the Boston Marathon!'. Given the Terrorist Attack that took place at the 2013 Boston Marathon, it was hard for Adidas not to get called out for a faux pas for something as simple as phrasing.
- The martyr approach is often reserved for brands that take a stand. Martyrdom is a real thing and although it can bring about the adulation of the community, it is not without pitfalls, especially if it's inauthentic. Gillette attempted to 'jump on the woke brand bandwagon', resulted in an ad challenging toxic masculinity. The ad confronted male stereotypes and men across the internet were touched. Up in arms over being called out, they threatened to move to Schick, and some may have because P&G had to write down the value of Gillette by \$8bn after fourth-quarter fiscal losses. This was not the sword Gillette was willing to fall on, so they did the only thing they could do and distanced themselves from their #MeToo campaign.

September came, September went, and it was noticeable that not many South African brands knew how to navigate through seas of social discourse. If the president didn't know what to say, then what of brands. Then Woolies happened.



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A simple, yet powerful message captured the mood but most importantly, it was genuine. They showed their solidarity with womxn, and rightly won over the online community, by posting the names of female victims on a black background with letters spelling, 'UNITY'. Woolies went for a brave approach, lending a voice when many others didn't know how to react.

By showing solidarity and taking a stand, they won the Corporate Social Responsibility stance online. We can't track if their gesture directed traffic in-store or if it translated any more sales than they normally do. What it did do, however, was endear them to the online community and reinforce their position as a 'woke brand'. South Africa is always a tweet or an unfortunately timed post away from social media civil war.

This leaves brands vulnerable and open to getting caught in crossfires. They are awkwardly positioned to catch stray bullets, and given that events in South Africa are so triggering and barely sound out a warning shot, brands might need to figure out which of the three approaches best work for them, as well as contingencies for dealing with crisis for social media.

The current sea of social green will provide community managers with a brief respite from the inevitable trolls, but with the silly season upon us, what plan do you and your community managers have in place for an inevitable crisis.

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