

How to manage a social media crisis.

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Just how do brands manage a social media crisis?

How do you prevent a seemingly innocuous incident from snowballing into a PR nightmare, and how do you win back the trust of your community?

Social media is now an established component of the marketing strategies for most major brands and yet, too many are still falling victim to bad crisis management. Time after time, we see brands that should know better find themselves at the centre of an entirely preventable crisis.

We'll look at why brands get social media crisis management wrong. Using genuine examples, we will explore the key issues and explain how brands succeed and fail in managing the chaos. We'll also give our top tips to ensure that your brand isn't the next victim of a social furore.

The importance of social media crisis management

When a crisis breaks on social media, it can be incredibly difficult to devise a response that mitigates the risk and restores a case of normality to the brand, making a robust crisis management plan an essential part of any social media strategy. Sadly, it's one aspect that many brands have either failed to follow, or neglected altogether.

As a brand, you are not going to be able to please all of the people all of the time. However, you need to acknowledge that fact.

Frustration with standard communication channels, such as lengthy waits on hold to a call centre or painfully slow email response times, has created a situation where social media is often the de-facto method for communicating with brands.

The importance of engaging with the public cannot be underestimated. As many as 66% of global consumers have stopped doing business with a provider and switched to another in the past year due to poor customer service experiences on social media (Accenture), whilst more than 50% of consumers expect to get a response to a query in under two hours (Hubspot).

And when we say response, we mean something meaningful. So many brands respond to social media queries in a 'tick box' fashion, responding to some of the people some of the time, often in a badly formulated way. Some brands take days to respond, while others direct users to another channel.

If you're not going to bother to respond to complaints properly, you're putting yourself in the firing line for a crisis, as it would suggest that you're not listening either. The brands that respond quickly and effectively to crises are those that proactively listen at all other times too.

Your crisis management plan is not simply something that falls within the remit of the social media team, it is something that has multiple stakeholders throughout all levels of the business. Depending on the nature of the crisis, you are going to have to bring various departments and levels of the business, from the CEO to the customer services teams, together to agree a plan of action to resolve the crisis without any undue harm to the brand's reputation or revenue.

Defining what a social media crisis actually is can rouse various opinions, ranging from views that treat every negative comment as a 'code red' situation to others that significantly underestimate major threats to the business.

All brands at some point or another will face challenges, and understanding what constitutes crisis will help you to prepare and execute a swift, measured and effective response.

Typically, for an event to be considered a crisis, it needs to meet three criteria:

What constitutes a social media crisis?

1. A change from the norm

Crises occur when current events are a change from the normal day-to-day operations of the business. If things are normal, there is no crisis. Business operations are finely balanced, and anything that breaks this equilibrium has the potential to spiral out of control on social media. It could be a self-inflicted controversy, such as a misguided product, a controversial comment or a negative public interest story that comes to light. Whatever it is, if it creates an abnormality in the day to day operations of the brand, treat it as a potential crisis.

When an executive of the lift-sharing service Uber claimed that he has used tracking software to follow a journalist who used the service, it created a huge sense of disruption within the business operation. The comments cast a spotlight on a culture that many customers of the brand would understandably feel uncomfortable with, they undermined a key USP of the service and they raised a host of privacy and legal questions. For Uber, this was a huge break from the norm.

2. A lack of control

Social media is a naturally unpredictable platform. Any form of media which allows millions of individual people, all with different opinions, cultural backgrounds and political leanings, is incredibly difficult to predict; what some may find humorous, others may find deeply offensive. As a result, social media crises typically catch brands off-guard.

This creates a situation of information asymmetry, where one party has more information or more powerful information than the other. For as much as the risks can be mitigated, few brands can accurately predict exactly how social media will react to a particular brand action.

3. A material impact on the business

A crisis should only be seen as an exceptional circumstance that requires an exceptional response. If events do not have a material impact on the business, consider them as a challenge and not necessarily a crisis. Over-reacting to a minor challenge is just as bad as under-reacting to a crisis.

If there is no immediate threat to the business, treat events as simply a challenge that can be overcome in the general course of the business. It will help you to prioritise and rationalise your response to a genuine crisis.

1. Prevention

This is the first line of defence in your social media crisis management plan. This is where you work to identify the potential risks and minimise the chances of any crisis occurring in the first place. Different brands will have different challenges on various different scales. What is important is identifying the strengths and weaknesses of your brand to identify any potential risks that, if they came to light, you would need to address.

Is your brand scrutinised on issues such as employee welfare, taxation or customer service? Are there environmental concerns in your industry? Could external forces, such as adverse weather, industrial action, technology failures or political unrest put impact your business? If so, consider how you could manage these factors through social media.

Whilst it may be an unpopular sentiment, there are brands for which having a presence on social media could be more trouble than it's worth. If you're a brand that is receiving more complaints than it can deal with on social, answering hardly any of them or providing responses that are bound by regulations on what you can and can't say, you're probably better off not being there.

This is not to say that you should put your fingers in your ears and pretend it isn't happening, quite the contrary. It's critical to listen to what people are saying and give them the outlets that you can to help them. If you can give better service elsewhere, such as a live chat function, you can take better control of the situation. Only have a social customer service presence if you can staff it, provide genuine help and advice and perhaps add value to your brand as a whole.

2. Preparation

Once you have identified the potential risks, you need to formulate a plan or procedure that you can deploy as soon as you have established that your brand is experiencing a social media crisis.

This is about ensuring that you have a defined procedure that clearly spells out how your brand is going to react to different scales of crisis, and with whom the responsibility lies for deploying that reaction.

Have a process flowchart in place for determining the severity of a problem. For example, if a controversial comment is made, there should be a flow of processes in place if that comment has come from someone influential (for instance, a celebrity with a large number of followers), whether a comment is gaining traction or whether the comment has come from an internal source. It's often useful to grade the threat out of 10 or by colour to highlight its severity.

Each crisis flow is also linked to appropriate stakeholders and these flows need to be completed for the different types of problems faced by specific businesses.

In the case of a small-scale challenge, you may feel comfortable allowing your customer services team to be at the forefront, addressing comments directly. However, for larger scale crises, more senior people may be needed to address the problem – from PR or legal, up to and including the CEO.

Following this process allows you to quickly and objectively determine the severity of the problem and allocate the most appropriate resource to deliver that response.

The core principles of social media crisis management

3. Response

You will rarely get advance warning of a potential crisis, but try to apply the events that have unfolded to your preparation plan. Understand what is happening, gather the people necessary to respond to the problem and define your solution.

Timing is also critical here. You want to be responding quickly enough to appease your audience but at the same time, it is vital that you take time to reflect and construct an appropriate response. Those that respond rashly, particularly in serious circumstances just add fuel to the fire.

4. Recovery

Some social media crises will naturally calm down very quickly, whilst others will continue to rumble on for days, weeks or even months.

The recovery process is about returning the brand back to normality, assessing the damage caused and ensuring that the brand has addressed, where possible, the cause of the problem.

> **Have a plan in place to not only recover from a crisis, but work hard and encourage practices that minimise the risk of one occurring in the first place.**

Why brands get things wrong

There are many reasons why brands, of all sizes, become embroiled in a social media crisis and why they get things wrong; no two situations are identical. However, most social media disasters are rooted in at least one common factor.

Lack of control

Empowering employees to become the voice of your brand on social media is important, but brands must have a degree of control over who has access to their social channels.

A disgruntled employee, one who doesn't fully understand cultural sensitivities (particularly if you are operating in multiple territories) or who goes against official brand policy, has the power to create a reputational crisis for your brand.

Ignorance of Context

Context is a crucial part of any conversation, and that is especially true in social media.

Brands need to understand the context of the content that they are posting as, one incorrectly understood post could end up causing serious offence.

Lack of restraint

There is a time and a place for branded content. Unfortunately, as more brands turn towards real-time marketing and brand newsroom models, too many brands feel the need to comment in places and on topics where it isn't appropriate.

Done correctly, commenting on current events can be a perfectly acceptable and effective form of marketing. However, done badly, it can create a huge backlash. Lots of big brands have been caught out by misguided comments on current events.

This is an incredibly difficult balance to get right and even the most well-meaning, best intentioned post can go wrong, so have some restraint and set some guidelines on what your brand does and doesn't discuss.

> **Know how to objectively assess the extent of a crisis. Over-reacting is just as dangerous as under-reacting.**

Failure to recognise your flaws

There isn't a single brand without one unhappy customer, so don't try and hide from them when they rear their head on social media.

If your product, service or brand has failed somebody, don't go on the defensive. Instead, acknowledge the problem, apologise and try to find a resolution.

No brand has ever won an argument with a customer.

Misjudging the reaction

A campaign can be developed with the best intentions, but social media is an incredibly unpredictable, and often cynical, form of media. Misjudging the reaction of your audiences is one of the quickest routes possible to a social media meltdown.

There are lots of brands with reputational baggage and failing to perform a thorough and objective risk assessment of any campaign prior to launch is, in many cases, simply asking for trouble. Even if your brand doesn't have those legacy problems, consider how your campaign, post or tweet could possibly be misconstrued.

Robotic, overly structured responses

When you engage in social, you tend to be dealing with the public, rather than the mainstream media. So why respond to a problem with a heavily structured, rigid and sanitised press statement?

Too many brands go into information 'lockdown' in times of a social crisis, responding to events in a manner that is far too corporate, robotic and distant. The regulated media may be used to this form of crisis management, but your typical social media user isn't going to accept it.

Too slow to respond

Whilst many responses are too robotic and impersonal, others are simply too slow.

Without having a crisis management plan in place, you're at risk of responding to a crisis well after it has consumed the brand. It takes time to get various stakeholders around a table to agree a plan of action, particularly if those stakeholders are at different levels in the business, in different offices or even in different time zones, so do it before a crisis occurs, not after.

But how did these problems affect some of the world's leading brands?...

Risk assess the campaign



Like any good back-up plan, knowing what to do when things go pear-shaped is the best way to deal with any incident effectively.

Social media is incredibly volatile, so take an objective look at your campaign and assess the ways in which your campaign could go wrong. Identify and understand the risks behind your campaign and decide if those risks are greater that what you feel you can comfortably handle (even the best natured campaigns attract the odd negative comment). If they are, reconsider the campaign.

This doesn't mean deploying a completely uninspiring, structured and vanilla social media campaign. Instead, it means deploying campaigns that are designed to minimise the risk of a backlash and ensure that if there is one, you have a readily prepared response.

"Before you hit 'post', have an objective process to risk assess your campaign to make sure that it is actually viable."



Case in point: MasterCard

#PricelessSurprises

As a sponsor of the Brit Awards, MasterCard arranged for free limousine travel to the event for numerous journalists. The catch? The journalists would simply need to tweet using the hashtag #PricelessSurprises. A free limo ride to the Brits in exchange for a tweet? Sounds like a great deal.

Unfortunately, if there is one thing that journalists hate more than anything else, it's being told what to write. Predictably, the reaction wasn't positive.

Trouble started when Daily Telegraph journalist Tim Walker leaked an email to Press Gazette that detailed the conditions to his press accreditation, including a requirement on him to publish pre-written tweets with the #PricelessSurprises hashtag and the MasterCard Twitter handle.

The hashtag spread, but not for reasons MasterCard had hoped. The lesson? Don't base a campaign on the obedience of others.

Know when & where you're welcome

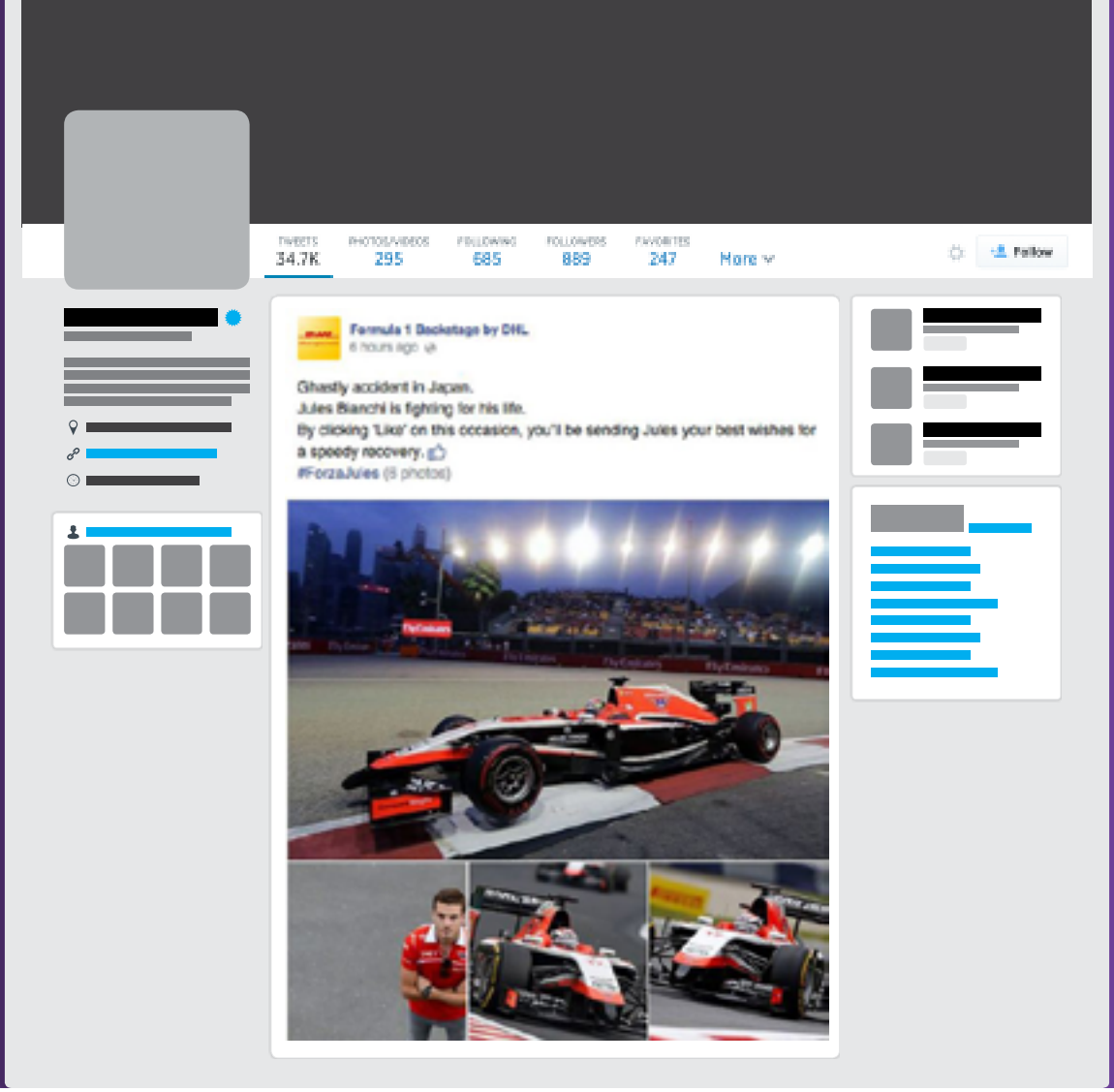


The popularity of real time marketing, the growth of 'news jacking' and the proliferation of brand newsrooms has resulted in brands commenting on practically any event that could be of interest to their audience. Whilst, in principle, there is no harm in this, it is incredibly easy to get this wrong.

Making a comment on a major event, particularly one that has a degree of sensitivity around it, is incredibly risky, so think about why you feel the need to make that comment. Tactfulness is a very difficult skill for brands to pull off, particularly in the heat of the moment, and many brands have found out that even genuinely good natured intentions can be considered crass if they are ill-thought and badly executed.

Don't just rush in to be the first to pass comment on an issue and instead, think about why your audiences would expect you to be talking about an event. If your brand is one that they would expect to see in the discussion (for instance, a sportswear supplier commenting on a football match), go ahead. Planning on passing comment about a major political event or an impending hurricane? It's probably best to keep quiet.

"Know when your comments are going to be welcomed, rather than forcing your way into a debate that you have no right to be in – even if your comments are well meaning."



Case in point: DHL

#ForzaJules

DHL is an official supplier of Formula One racing and, as part of that partnership, it has access to millions of motorsport fans. In October 2014, Jules Bianchi was involved in a serious accident at the Japanese Grand Prix. He was rushed to hospital, where he remained in a coma before tragically passing away in July 2015.

DHL posted a message on its Facebook page in support of Bianchi, but it was the way that the post was constructed that drew criticism.

The post suggested that by 'liking' the post, fans would be sending their best wishes to Bianchi and it was this aspect that fans objected to. In the process of 'liking', fans would be endorsing and amplifying the brand message and that, some suggested, was a cynical attempt to increase DHL's brand presence.

DHL later retracted the message and issued an apology, claiming that the post was not intended to come across as cynically as it may have appeared.

As a sponsor of Formula One, DHL arguably has a right to comment on this topic but it has to be done with sensitivity. People do not need a brand to 'deliver' best wishes on their behalf, so asking people to engage with and amplify your branded post is inevitably going to create hostility.

Read more about this example at http://bit.ly/1sjNGtI

Don’t be ignorant to context



Lots of brands use social media as a vehicle for joining in with a conversation, be that a current event, a prominent news story or simply just a red letter day in the calendar.

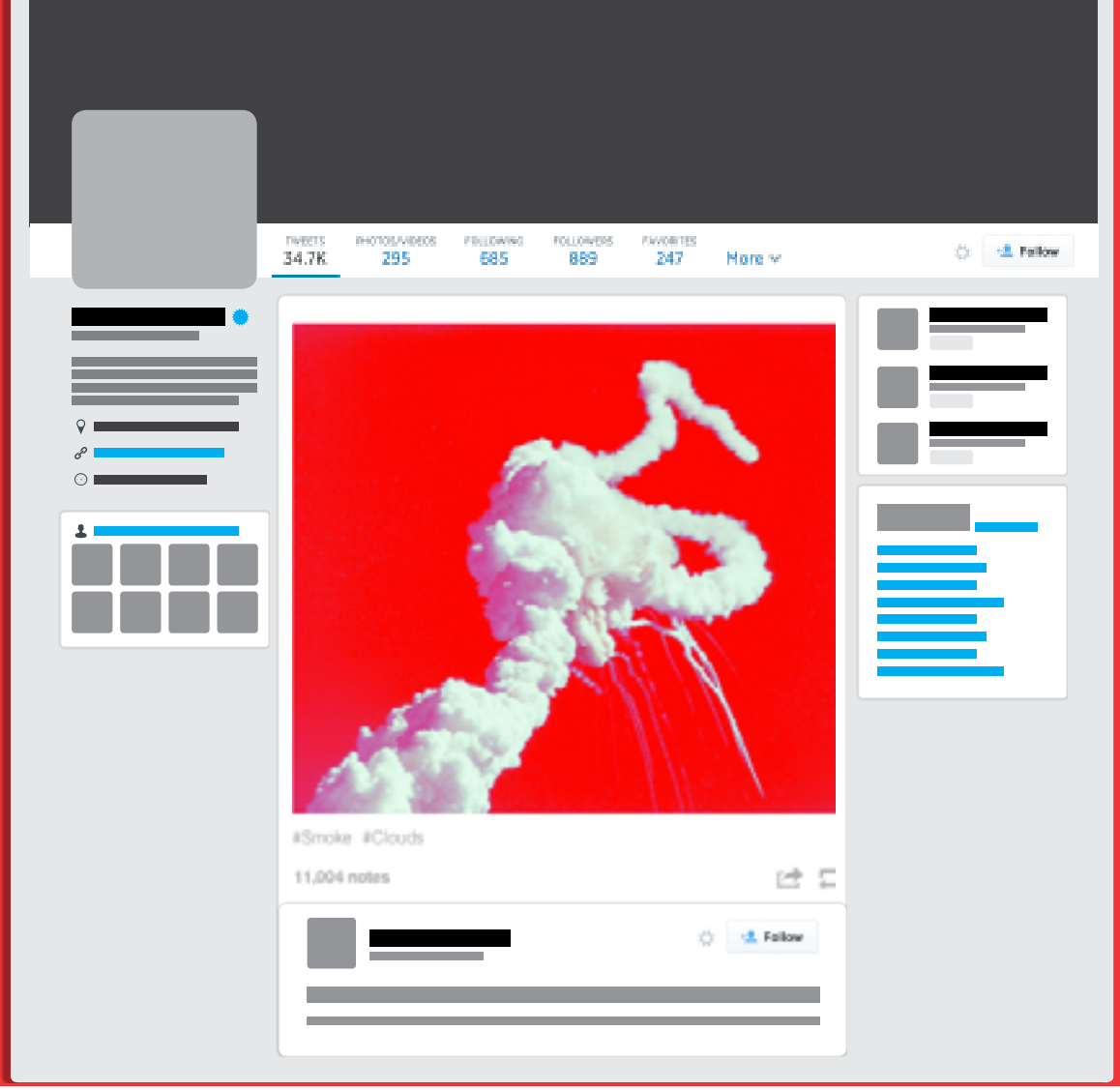
Understanding the context of that conversation, and the context of the content you post, is critical. Get it wrong, and your social media strategy can turn to disaster.

Make sure that your content is relevant to the context of the conversation, and that you fully understand how that content relates to the conversation. If you’re posting a famous quote, make sure you understand the background behind that quote. If you’re posting an image, understand where that image was taken, and what it represents.

You should also be mindful of tone of the conversation. If you’re attempting to show empathy and support during a time of crisis, trying to squeeze in a light-hearted sales call to action isn’t going to end well for you.

Ignorance is no defence in this situation and you cannot simply blame mistakes on the office intern who didn’t know better.

“Context should be towards the top of your social media checklist.”



Case in point: American Apparel

Challenger

The 4th July holiday comes with a lot of traditions in the United States, and one of those involves fireworks.

Clothing brand American Apparel tried to get in on the act by posting a photo to their Tumblr page that to them, represented a cool image of a firework.

Unfortunately, the image that they posted wasn't a firework at all. It was, in fact, an image of the 1986 Challenger space shuttle disaster. The disaster, which saw the shuttle explode shortly after launch, killed all seven astronauts on board.

Negative comments began to flood the American Apparel social media channels, prompting the company to delete the post and issue a grovelling apology. They put the gaffe down to a member of their social media team, born after the Challenger disaster, being unaware of the context of the image.

American Apparel was not the first, and will not be the last brand to unwittingly post something on social media out of context, but it shows the need for at least some sort of process for editorial control in a social media operation. It is likely that a more senior colleague would have been aware of the context of the image, or at least questioned the source of the image, thereby preventing a situation where the brand comes across as ignorant and insensitive.

Acknowledge the problem





When faced with a problem, don't stick your head in the sand.

Some problems you will be able to fix very quickly, if not immediately. Other problems will take time to resolve. The task at hand is not necessarily to resolve the problem (although if you can, you obviously should) but to simply acknowledge it.

Acknowledging the problem not only demonstrates that you're alert to the issue and are working to resolve it, it also takes the sting out of any complaints that come your way.

There will be some problems that you may not be able to solve quickly, or may be exacerbated by external forces beyond your control (the travel industry, for example, frequently has to deal with problems created by inclement weather, industrial action or political unrest), but acknowledging the problem at least demonstrates that you are on the side of the consumer.

"Whilst it might be tempting to 'lock the doors' during a time of crisis, that doesn't work in social media.

"Your business will still be operational and your social media accounts need to be too. Otherwise, you're creating additional problems to compound the one you are trying to resolve."



Case in point: US Airways

Toy aircraft

In response to a customer tweet about a delayed flight, US Airways replied by posting a lewd image. This reply, and the image, was instantly distributed to more than 420,000 followers of the airline. US Airways removed the image, and tweeted an apology 22 minutes later.

At this point, the airline had made a mistake, but had apparently dealt with the issue with little more than a few bad headlines.

Where US Airways went wrong was in the days following the incident. As airline operations continued as normal, US Airways' Twitter account lay dormant for more than a day. Any tweets from delayed passengers, any complaints about missing bags or any queries from passengers about their flight went unanswered and ignored.

The incident demonstrated a complete sense of panic and lack of control in US Airways' social media procedures. That's not good for passengers and it's catastrophic for the brand. As the world was started to forgive and forget about the tweet that caused the crisis in the first place, US Airways gave its passengers a reason to remember it.

Take control



In times of crisis, taking control of the situation is critical to minimising the damage to your brand reputation.

This isn't just about ensuring that you take control of the situation externally, but also internally. For instance, you need to make sure that the messages being delivered by your social media team are consistent with the messages being delivered by your customer service teams, your sales team and your PR team.

An inconsistent message, a disgruntled employee or a department interpreting a message the wrong way can undermine the control that you have over the situation, so make sure that you make everyone in the relevant teams and departments aware of what is happening and how you intend to resolve it.

You should have a procedure in place for ensuring that this happens as quickly as possible.

"Taking control of a situation internally is just as important as taking control of it externally.

"Everyone affected in the business, be they in the boardroom or the customer service centre, needs to be aware of the plan of action."



Case in point: HMV

Risk of redundancy

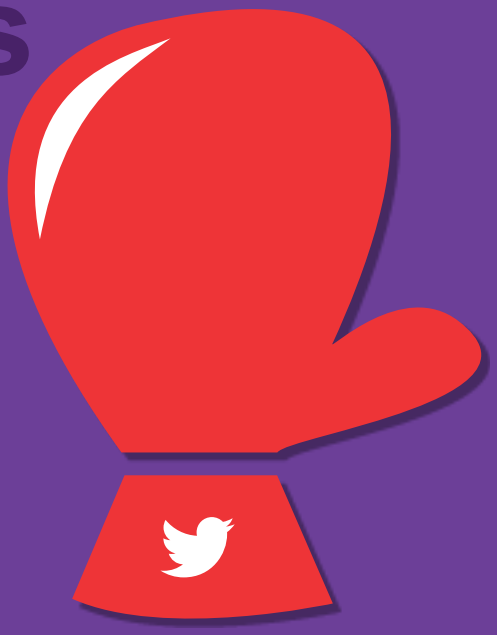
British music retailer called in the administrators in January 2013, putting 4,350 employees at risk of redundancy. Amongst those 4,350 were the company's social media team.

As time ran out for the company and it became clear that job losses were imminent, the general public were given a window into the sheer level of crisis at HMV through social media. A series of posts appeared on the brand's Twitter feed sharing the news that around 60 employees were being fired in a "mass execution", accompanied by the hashtag **#hmvXFactorFiring**.

Further tweets, clearly from at least one of the about-to-be redundant employees, were posted, highlighting the level of chaos at the company. One such tweet was "Just overheard our Marketing Director (he's staying, folks) ask 'How do I shut down Twitter?'" The account also claimed that the company's social media accounts were created by an unpaid intern.

The situation highlighted the need for taking control of your social media processes, particularly in situations where multiple employees may have access to your accounts. Had HMV's management taken control of the situation before commencing a rather sensitive process, it would have prevented a rather public bashing of its reputation.

Recognise, embrace & address flaws



There isn't a brand in the world that doesn't have at least one unhappy customer, so don't hide from that fact. One of the biggest reasons why social media crises can spiral out of control is because brands fail to acknowledge their failings and commit to putting them right.

It may well be that your brand is in the right, and that a social media storm has been created on the basis of misinformation or a malicious campaign, but whatever the circumstances, it doesn't pay to go on the offensive. Instead, understand the nature of the complaint, acknowledge it and state how you intend to use that information to improve in the future.

Starting a fight with someone on social media is only going to end badly.

"No brand is perfect, and every brand has at least one unsatisfied customer.

"Identify what your brand's flaws are, work hard to fix the ones you can, and acknowledge the ones you can't."



70% air

30% chips



Case in point: Ruffles

Hot air

Ruffles Crisps, part of the Frito-Lay empire and massive in the US, is also extremely popular in Brazil.

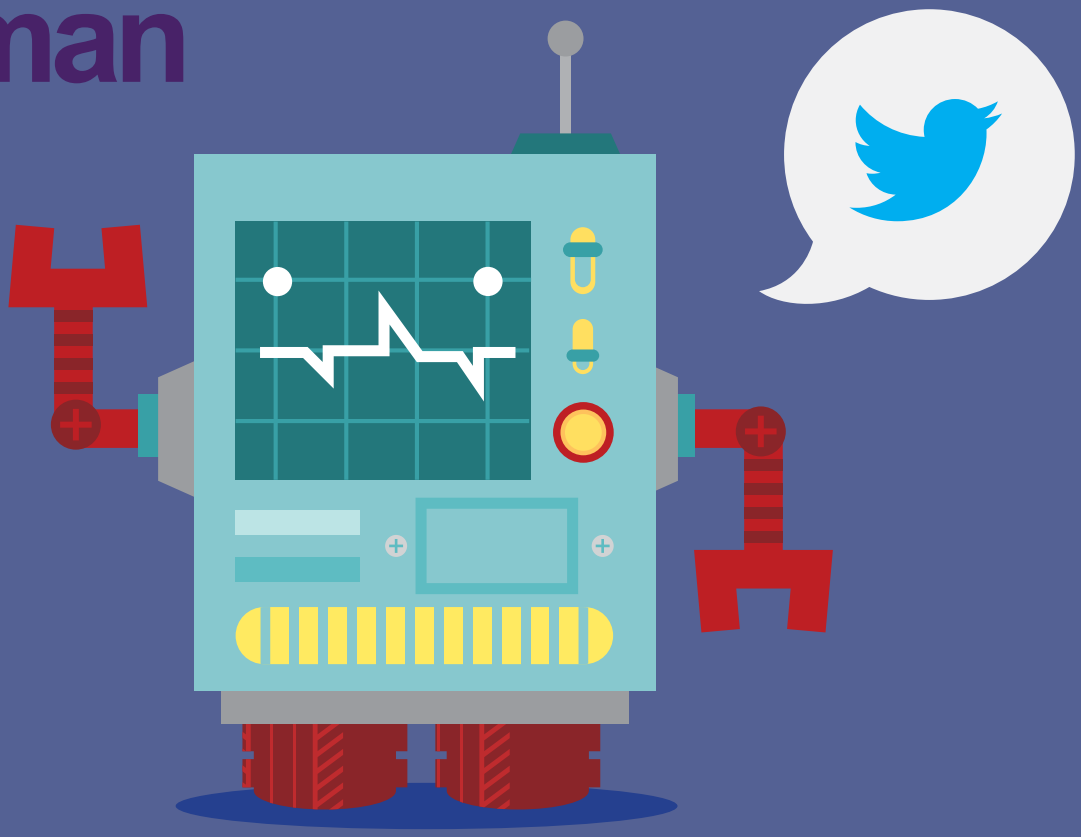
In 2012, an image published on Facebook did that scary thing and went "viral". The image, created by a consumer in Brazil, inferred that customers were being cheated by the brand due to the amount of 'air' in each packed of crisps. It was a claim that generated a lot of support amongst consumers, who all felt that they were being misled, and it presented a very real challenge to Ruffles.

Ruffles responded to this beautifully, because they know their product inside-out. With a clear vision of how the product is made, they were able to respond eloquently with a graphic explaining how Ruffles are made and just why the air is needed – to protect the crisps!

The graphic, published on Facebook, demonstrated the journey from factory to mouth. It was used to respond to those people who had complained in a sensitive way.

The brand even took this a step further and produced an enormous bag of Ruffles to evidence just how important the air is! They took it to the streets of Brazil for people to test out.

Be Human



Lots of brands attempt to address a social media crisis in the same way that they would a PR crisis. But, social media doesn't work in the same way as local, national and international media.

Social media is all about human interaction, so be human. Robotic, overly cautious and structured press statements rarely appease social audiences – they're insincere, cagey and rarely address the real nature of the problem. They're also incredibly time-consuming to produce.

People are more likely to believe, trust and even empathise with a human being so come across as a genuine person, not a process of the press office. Sign-offs on your messages, or profiles of your social media team, can be a great way to achieve this.

Of course, have an official 'company line' or policy when dealing with an issue, but try and put an element of personality into your response – it will be much more warmly received.

"Personality is possibly the biggest tool in your armoury when it comes to tackling a social media crisis."



Case in point: Greggs

#FixGreggs

British bakery chain Greggs unexpectedly found itself at the centre of a social media furore after an image started appearing on Google searches that made disparaging comments about the brand's food and supposed clientele.

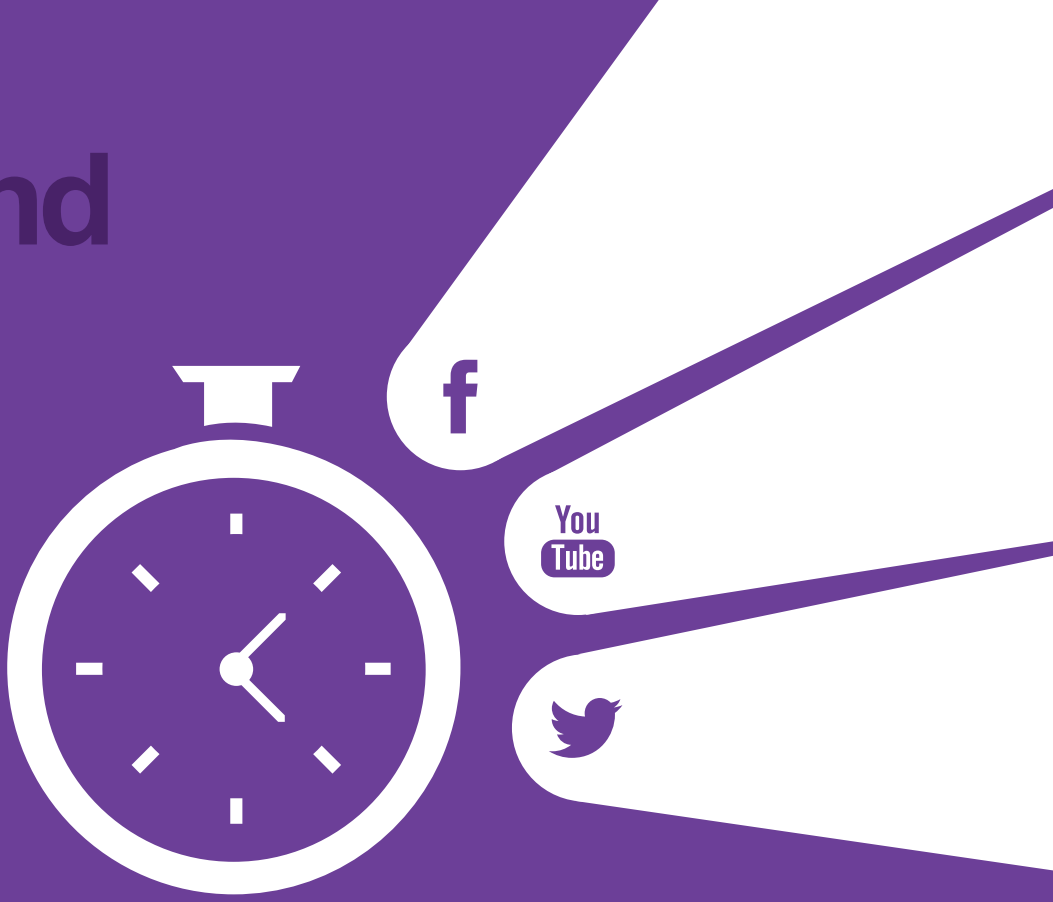
Greggs received a number of tip-offs from people on social media, to which they responded individually with humorous, personal messages. They weren't afraid to laugh at themselves throughout the ordeal, even sharing in a series of jokes.

In the end, after creating the hashtag #FixGreggs, the brand turned to a spot of bribery, offering a box full of delicious looking donuts to the people at Google HQ.

The approach succeeded in deflecting attention away from what was a potentially huge reputational knock. The tweets sent out by Greggs belied those of a brand that, internally, must have been in absolute chaos as it tried to overcome this particular challenge. But the approach ultimately won Greggs a lot of support.

Read more about this example at http://bit.ly/1y5Z2WA

Respond swiftly

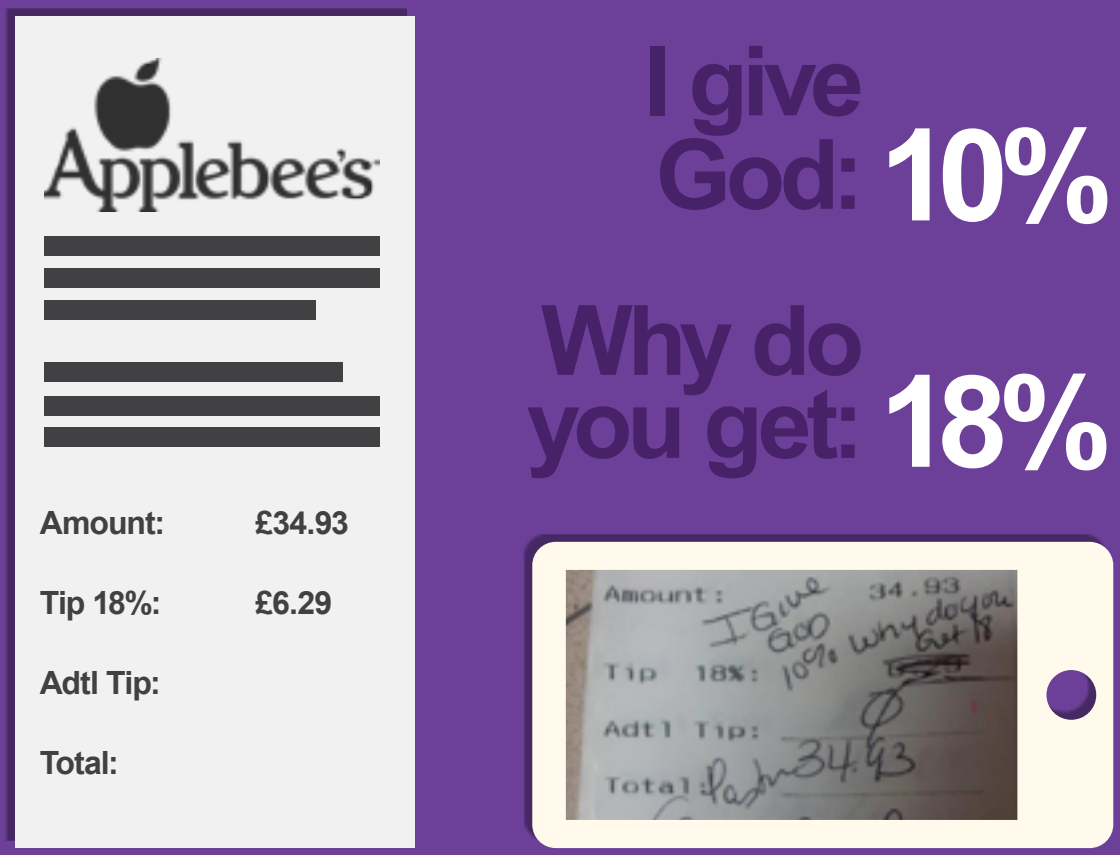


Social media is an instantaneous form of media, so be prepared to respond quickly. Remember that, on average, you have less than two hours to resolve a social media complaint before that customer is lost for good.

This is where planning comes into its own. Make sure that you have your response strategy in place before a crisis happens. Getting various departments around a boardroom table to discuss, debate and agree upon a plan of attack takes time in even the most streamlined of businesses, let alone those with multiple stakeholders and multiple agencies based across different floors, different offices and different time zones.

A fast response also helps to slow the momentum of a crisis. If you can get on top of the problem early, you reduce the risk of a social media furore turning into an unstoppable juggernaut that overwhelms the brand.

"Have your response strategy in place before a crisis, otherwise you will have to hurriedly create one whilst a disaster overwhelms your brand."



Case in point: Applebee's

Don't wait

A local pastor, dining at an Applebee's restaurant in St Louis, Missouri, left a comment on her bill in disagreement at being asked to pay a tip to her waitress (an 18% gratuity was added because the group was so large). The diner wrote on the bill "I give God 10%, why do you get 18%?"

The waitress posted the image on Reddit and was immediately sacked for violating a customer's privacy, which is within the Applebee's corporate policy. And people got mad, really mad, about it.

There were lots of problems with Applebee's response to the whole saga. It was confrontational, inconsistent, robotic and they deleted comments that they didn't agree with (although they denied it when challenged).

However, one of the biggest problems was their timing of the response.

The company issued a response at about 3pm on the day after the story broke that the waitress in question had been fired. That, in itself, was too long. But to make matters worse, Applebee's started posting again – at 2:53am. That's right, in the middle of the night, somebody on the Applebee's social media team was still trying to fight the fire. They continued commenting until beyond 5:00am, replying to individual posts.

The Applebee's disaster tells a story of no planning, no control, no preparation and a painfully slow response. It was a mess of a recovery.

Know when to shut up

Perhaps the biggest skill in social media is knowing when not to say anything.

There are some people for whom nothing that you can possibly say will appease. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't try, but know when you need to pull out of a battle that you're not going to win.

Make a judgement on how likely your comment is going to aid your cause. If it isn't likely to do so, think hard about whether you need to make it at all.

"Have an objective process to determine how beneficial your activity is likely to be in the recovery process.

"Saying too much will often only add fuel to the fire."



Case in point: McDonalds

Move on quickly

McDonalds, along with fast food rival KFC, found themselves at the centre of a social media crisis in China after a TV expose found that a local company was supplying rotten and out of date meat to the fast food chains.

During the sting, a local reporter went undercover at the supplier, where a number of food and health standards were being breached.

McDonald's was quick to issue a statement, simply confirming that they had suspended supplies from the company in question and affirming its commitment to customer safety. It was a simple statement and it was all that McDonalds said on the matter, raising some concern from some quarters that the response would do little to win around consumers.

However, the response was actually a really good example of knowing that a statement is enough, despite lots of people in China being naturally concerned. There was not much the companies could do in this instance and responding wouldn't have been beneficial to their reputation.

The lesson here is apologise, shut up, move on, don't do it again.

Put your crisis management plan into place before a crisis

Have a plan

Make sure that you have a crisis management in place and circulate this to the relevant stakeholders in the business.

Identify a series of social media policies and procedures, which should identify who is responsible for dealing with issues. This isn't just going to be the "social media team" – it should cover all departments that could be called into action in the event of a crisis. This includes everyone from the customer service teams to the CEO. This plan should also include provisions for managing a crisis 'out of hours'. Remember that social media is not a 9-5 medium so have a plan in place for a crisis that breaks out of office hours.

Set out a stringent set of policies and procedures for various scenarios. For instance, how are you going to deal with specific customer queries? How are you going to ensure that staff maintain a consistent message whilst under a deluge of tweets? How are you going to manage expectations?

Be aware of the problem

Be alert to the threats to your brand on social media. This doesn't mean monitoring just your owned channels, such as your own Twitter or Facebook page, but general discussion across social media.

There are lots of social media monitoring tools available to help brands keep on top of how and where they are being discussed on social media. Monitoring could be as simple as setting up a series of Google Alerts, extending up to specialist enterprise-level monitoring tools such as Brandwatch or Trackur.

Use these tools to monitor direct mentions of your brand or your specific products. A social media crisis is most likely to centre around the brand itself, so it is essential to monitor these keywords constantly.

In addition, consider what secondary key terms could be linked to your brand. For example, the names of prominent people within your organisation, which could potentially be mentioned amidst a social media crisis.

Also consider monitoring competitor terms or any terms that are related generally to your industry.

Assess the severity of the problem

Not every mention is going to trigger a crisis procedure, so have an objective process for assessing the severity of any given incident. Some cases may be addressed with a simple apology or some assistance from customer services. More serious cases may require escalation to the legal team or a call to the CEO.

Have a process for determining the severity of a comment. Assess whether the comment needs a resolution or simply a sincere apology, determine whether the issue has the potential to snowball and cause material damage to the brand's reputation or revenue and learn to identify 'troll' activity. This form of objective assessment will help to ensure that your response is measured and effective.

Be human

Above all, be human in your approach. The best examples of social media crisis management all have this one element in common with each other.

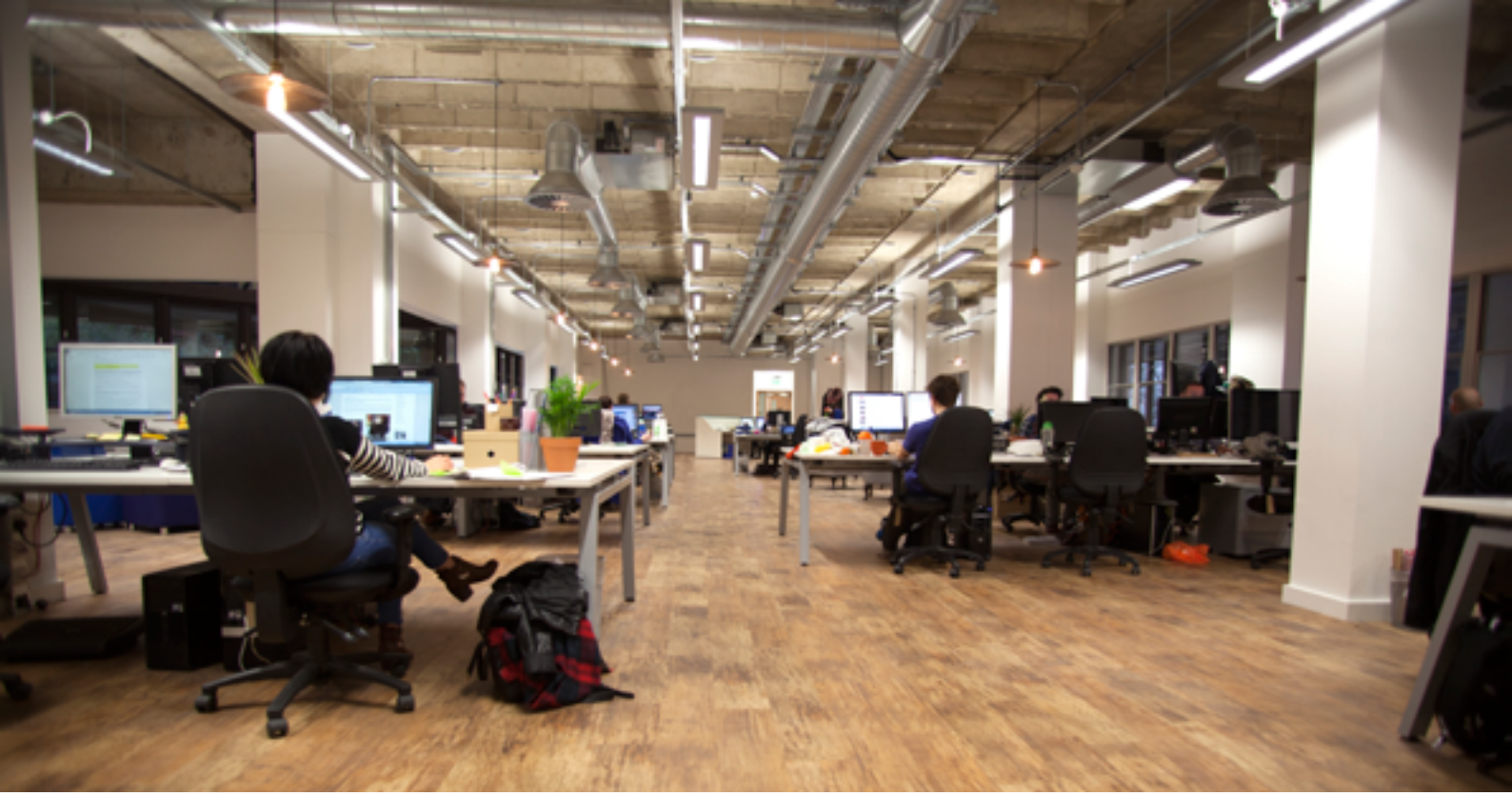
Human beings are attentive, empathetic, insightful and they have a sense of humour – brands are rarely all of these things. Humans also have the ability to go the extra mile to resolve a problem, something that a rigid company policy often prevents.

Yes, human beings have their flaws, but so do most brands. The difference is that your audiences will tend to forgive your fellow humans.



Want to talk about your strategy? See how we can help to optimise your brand's social media strategy, build a crisis prevention plan and ensure that you get more from social media.

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About Stickyeyes

Stickyeyes is an independent, full service digital marketing agency that combines world-class creative thinking with innovative insights to deliver success to some of the world's biggest brands.

Established in the 1990's, before Google even existed, we have more than 120 staff in Leeds and London, providing services including Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), Paid Search (PPC), Content Marketing, Social Media, Online PR, Blogger Engagement, Insight & Digital Consultancy and Design & Development.

We service international businesses in 17 countries, cover 22 languages in-house and count some of the world's best-known brands amongst our clients, including GlaxoSmithKline, Hertz, Hilton, ghd, Ladbrokes and Staples.

Recently named by RAR as one of the top 10 most recommended agencies in the UK and in the top 15 Elite Agencies in The Drum Digital Census, we've also won a number of other major industry accolades in recognition of our digital excellence. These include Best Social Media Campaign, Best Use of Search in Gaming, Best use of PR and the Grand Prix Award for our work with GSK-owned Maximuscle.

Download all of out intelligence reports and whitepapers at stickyeyes.com/intelligence





About the Author

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Heather is an award-winning digital strategist, speaker and published writer in the fields of creative digital communications, specialising in online PR, social media, content marketing and blogger engagement.

Heather has been instrumental in implementing multi-channel marketing communications for global brands, being named as one of the Top 30 Women Under 30 in Digital by The Drum Magazine. She is also active speaker at some of the biggest events in the digital industry including, Econsultancy, SES London, Figaro Digital, iOn Search and IMRG.

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Michael has worked on a number of award-winning projects for leading international brands and has been published in several major publications, including Econsultancy, Marketing Magazine, Brand Republic and The Drum.

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