

Case Study

Consultant Drops F-Bomb, Chrysler Drops Consultant

Beware the perils of social media—especially if you're an employee.

That's the mantra that everyone who works for anyone else today must keep in mind, as the temptations of the thumb, launching that Facebook response or tweet, perpetually loom.

Case in point: The sad saga of an employee of New Media Strategies (NMS), ironically a social media advisory firm, who accidentally dropped the dreaded f-bomb in a tweet from client Chrysler's Twitter account. The employee was exasperated with the navigating habits of Detroit drivers, so he tweeted, "I find it ironic that Detroit is known as the motor city and yet no one here knows how to f-ing drive!"

Why the employee was tweeting at the wheel was unknown. But what was known was that the consulting firm employee thought he was tweeting from a private Twitter account. He wasn't. Rather, the New Media staffer was logged into the @ChryslerAutos account.

As the world was soon to learn.

Ghost Tweeting

How, you might ask, did the consulting firm employee have access to the Chrysler Twitter account? The answer is that Chrysler, like many organizations and celebrities, hires others to write tweets throughout the day. This so-called ghost tweeting appears to come directly from the sender but, like other public relations vehicles such as speeches and testimony, is actually anonymously authored by public relations professionals.

After the expletive went out, it was quickly deleted. But with social media, once you press "send," you're stuck. The original expletive tweet was retweeted by several Chrysler followers and spread to blogs. Chrysler was duly embarrassed about the remarks about its headquarters city.

Said a Chrysler spokesperson, "Even if it had gone out under their private account, we would have had issues with it as indirectly referenced a Chrysler ad and violated the company's policy about texting while driving."

The fact that NMS chose to fire the employee for the tweeting lapse was scant consolation to the Chrysler client. The day after the tweet went out, Chrysler relieved NMS of its consulting duties, with Chrysler tersely announcing that "NMS's contract will not be renewed for the balance of 2011."

The CEO of NMS issued a statement that the agency "regrets this unfortunate incident. It certainly doesn't accurately reflect the overall high-quality work we have produced for Chrysler. We respect their decision and will work with them to ensure an effective transition of this business going forward."

But evidently the NMS CEO himself had incurred the wrath of his Chrysler clients for talking about the company's two-minute Super Bowl ad, headlined "Imported from Detroit" and starring Detroit native Eminem, the Friday before the game on a national TV news program; Chrysler had earlier sworn staff and agencies to secrecy about Eminem's use until kickoff (Figure 11-10).



FIGURE 11-10 Will the real Slim Tweety please shut up!

Chrysler spokesperson and outspoken Detroit native Eminem was positively deferential compared to the company's tweet-happy former social media agency. (Photo: Detroit Free Press/MCT/Newscom)

For its part, Chrysler was unsympathetic to its former agency's apology.

One Chrysler staffer, in the wake of the flare-up, wrote on the automaker's blog, "The tweet denigrated drivers in Detroit and used the fully spelled-out F-word. It was obviously meant to be posted on the person's personal Twitter account and not the Chrysler Brand account where it appeared. So why were we so sensitive? That commercial featuring the Chrysler 200, Eminem, and the City of Detroit wasn't just an act of salesmanship. The company is committed to promoting Detroit and its hard-working people."

Public Relations v. Marketing

Underscoring the Chrysler f-bomb incident was the battle shaping up between the public relations and marketing departments as to who should be in charge of corporate social media.

In many companies, the two departments fight over social media turf and budget, just as public relations used to fight with human resources over the internal communication function. At Chrysler, social media interface was complicated, with the marketing department in charge of social media accounts that were "consumer facing," and the communication (public relations) department in charge of separate Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr accounts that were meant to be "media facing."

The mixed responsibility of the social media function added to Chrysler's dilemma in responding in a coordinated manner to the errant tweet.

At other car companies, Jaguar and Land Rover, for example, a small internal communication group is responsible for social media postings. Social media, according to Jaguar-Land Rover's communication director, just makes sense.

"Communications is better trained and oriented to deal with the real-time and back-and-forth nature of social media," she explained.

Despite internal finger-pointing, it likely would have made little difference had social media been the province of public relations or marketing. The vulgar tweet went public with a slip of a consultant's thumb.

In that one instantaneous action, the consultant lost his job and his agency lost a client—a cautionary tale for any employee.*

*For further information, see "Chrysler Splits with New Media Strategies Over F-Bomb Tweet," *Advertising Age*, March 10, 2011; Stuart Elliott, "When the Marketing Reach of Social Media Backfires," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2011; and David Kiley, "What Lurks Behind Chrysler's F-Bomb Social-Media Turf War," *Advertising Age*, March 14, 2011, pp. 1–20.

Questions

1. How do you feel Chrysler handled the tweet controversy?
2. What new internal client rules would you enforce were you the CEO of NMS?
3. Should social media report to marketing or public relations? Why?
4. What are the larger lessons here for any public relations professional?

From the Top

An Interview with Craig Rothenberg



Craig Rothenberg is vice president, Corporate Communication, with responsibility for organizational communication at Johnson & Johnson. Mr. Rothenberg is a driving force behind the Academy for Communication Excellence and Leadership, a first-of-its-kind program designed to further the professional and career development for communication professionals across the company. Mr. Rothenberg is on the faculty at the New York University School of Continuing and Professional Studies Master's Degree Program in Public Relations.

How would you assess the level of trust between management and employees?

Employees' trust in management is critical. Managers need to be credible and believable, so building trust is a critical task for communicators. Communication is one of the best levers for building trust in an organization. Communicating at a regular cadence and with the information that employees need to do their jobs efficiently and effectively is invaluable (and costs little!). You also build

trust by listening—really listening—to employees. When companies do that, they foster a culture of trust, and that almost always correlates to the alignment of your workforce and better business outcomes.

What do employees want to know from management?

First, they want to know what's happening across the business. Updates—good and bad—to let employees know how the business is tracking and what's expected of them, and a regular cadence or rhythm are critical.

Second, employees want to have reasons to believe in the future, and know that there are clear plans and strategies in place to get the company to that future.

Third, employees want to know that the company's fundamental mission and purpose is unchanged from what it was when they first joined.

Are print publications still effective in dealing with employees?

In some cases they still are. While we have generally moved away from print publications, for some segments of our workforce, print is still the best way to reach them. That's mostly true for employees who work in a manufacturing or operations environment, where people do not have ready access to computers, and we need to rely on printed collateral and newsletters to share information.

Not surprisingly, much of our communications today is driven out to our employees electronically, and also through the many portals that connect our employees around the world.

How has the Internet affected employee communications?

Like everything else in business *and in life*, technology—not just the Internet—plays a major role in employee communications. With respect to the Internet specifically, we