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Social Media Reality Demands Management Attention

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Virtually everyone has a camera phone these days, making it easy for bored or disgruntled employees to film what they perceive to be humorous pranks and disseminate the video for the world to see in a matter of a few minutes or even seconds. Unfortunately, what one person considers a harmless prank can cause a disastrous amount of damage for brand owners, wiping out the benefit of millions of dollars in brand advertising and years of goodwill.

Probably the most well-known example of a viral video causing a substantial brand crisis is the Domino's incident. Two North Carolina Domino's Pizza® employees decided to video themselves doing unsanitary and distasteful acts to the food they were preparing. The employees uploaded the video to YouTube, and soon the video had been viewed over one million times.

Domino's managed to get the video removed from YouTube, but considerable damage was already done. Domino's launched a response to the video assuring consumers that the employees' behavior was an isolated incident, that the employees had been terminated and that the store had been sanitized, but they could not erase consumers' memories of that video. Despite having it removed from YouTube, even today the video is available at other sites, so the damage continues indefinitely.

Implementing a social media policy is crucial to preventing brand-damaging viral videos. Of course, the policy and the consequences of violating the policy must also be clearly communicated in order for it to be effective and enforceable. At a minimum, a good social media policy should include:

- A prohibition on all uses of social media which are disrespectful, inflammatory, offensive, dishonest or damaging to the company's business interests. In particular, content and posts should not include slurs, personal insults, obscenity or anything likely to tarnish the image of the brand, the store and the company.
- A requirement that employees be honest regarding their identity and refrain from the use of aliases and pseudonyms. Further, if an employee has a vested interest in a topic of discussion, it should be disclosed.
- A requirement that an employee use a disclaimer when an employee is expressing his or her views through social media and has identified him/herself as an employee of the store or the company. Such a disclaimer might read, "The views expressed herein are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of my store, its owner or the company."
- A prohibition on all uses of social media which disclose proprietary or confidential information belonging to the store, the store owner, the company or anyone else. Such information would include company trade secrets, customer identities, company financial details and business performance, planned acquisitions and future product launches.
- A prohibition on all social media uses of the brand owner's trademarks and logos, as well as those of brand owner's customers, absent written approval from the brand owner.
- The policy should be communicated in writing to every employee immediately upon hire, and it should be re-emphasized periodically so that the provisions stay fresh in employees' minds.

Of course, a social media policy may not prevent every employee from creating damaging videos or other social media content, and you would be wise to prepare for the worst in case it should ever occur. As an initial step, you might consider signing up for a monitoring service designed to alert you to social media content involving your company, thereby allowing you to discover a problem at its earliest stage. There are several companies that offer this type of service for a charge, or you can sign up for a free service such as Google Alerts that provides email updates of the latest relevant Google results on the search terms of your choice.

Consider putting a team together that is tasked with responding to disparaging uses of social media that threaten to go, or have already gone, viral. Such a team should generally be comprised of employees from corporate communications (specifically people well-versed in social media), senior management, and people in the legal and marketing departments. If possible, take the proactive step of establishing a corporate blog and accounts with the big social media players such as Twitter and YouTube. Doing so now will save time later when you need to respond quickly in order to mitigate potential damage to your brand and, of course, if the damaging content is distributed via social media, the response should be delivered through both traditional and social media so that it reaches as many viewers of the damaging content as possible.