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Ethical Guidelines for Social Media

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Using social media as a part of a public relations campaign is commonplace. Twitter, Facebook, Linked-In, Second Life, My Space and numerous other social network sites are used to maintain relationships with publics, to share rapidly breaking information, to gather opinions, and to endorse products or organizations. However, ethical missteps are common and there are few, if any, ethical guidelines to govern the arena of social media. Although general ethical principles still apply, social media combines many fast moving forms of communication and more specific guidance is needed.

The use of social network sites is not the only problem presented in social media. Anyone can have a blog and call himself or herself a journalist without the faintest idea of journalistic standards, news value, objectivity, or good reporting practices. Many blogs have an enormous readership, but their degree of credibility is extremely variable, and few have posted ethics statements. To further complicate matters, when are blogs personal speech versus speech that represents the views of an organization? What about employee rights? Some organizations, such as McDonald's, manage employee bloggers (whose job includes blogging about McDonald's) closely and monitor what they can and cannot say. Does that impinge upon the First Amendment rights of the blogger? Absolutely. However, one must consider if the blogger could be construed as a representative of the organization, or speaks on behalf of the organization. The responsibility is on the blogger to identify clearly whether he/she is speaking as a private individual or as a representative of that organization. The opinions on General Motors "Fast Lane" blog clearly represent General Motors. However, if GM's CEO decided to write a personal blog about other topics, hosted on WordPress for example, he should clearly state that his opinions do not represent those of General Motors. Even if you believe there is little chance for misunderstanding, it is always best to err on the side of clarity. Further, bloggers should make every effort to verify information before acting on it, as propagating rumors has severely harmed the credibility of many bloggers.

Looking at some of the best and worst case examples can provide us with best practices in order to begin building ethical guidelines for use in social media.

The Worst: "Wal-Marting Across America" Flog. Flog means fake blog, a term that did not exist until Edelman Public Relations created a blog for Wal-Mart, supposedly run by a mom-and-pop who were on an RV trip across the United States. They stopped for the night in Wal-Mart parking lots, and chronicled their interactions with happy Wal-Mart employees on the Internet each day. The problem is that the two travelers were not who they said they were – they were not related, and were actually a freelance writer and a photojournalist. This case is rife with deception. Edelman should have known better, as deceiving publics is something students learn

not to do in their first public relations class. Why did Edelman – a pioneer in social media public relations – not know better than to engage in such deception? (Richard Edelman, to his credit, faced the PR media and admitted their error, noting that there would be mistakes made as the social media were introduced into the public relations bag of tricks.) The new forms of communication channels that have arisen with social media do not change the fact that deception is still a morally corrupt practice.

The Bad: Ketchum(?) Public Relations FedEx Tweet. The tweet was actually sent from “@keyinfluencer” who is a Ketchum executive, arriving in Memphis to present at a large client, FedEx. His tweet upon flying to FedEx headquarters was arguably personal opinion, but said: “True confession but I’m in one of those towns where I scratch my head and say ‘I would die if I had to live here.’” Of course, FedEx intercepted the tweet, was offended, and publicly decried the agency, the account executive, and the incident. The man thought he was offering personal opinion, but clearly did not consider the client’s view that he was representing Ketchum. The rebuttal from FedEx, in the form of an open letter, questioned if Ketchum was worth their fee if these folks were supposed to be the experts in public relations. Ouch.

Though Twitter began as a simple “what are you doing?” status update, it is not as innocuous as it might seem. Courts have ruled that libel can take place via publication on Twitter. Now that the Library of Congress is archiving all Twitter transmissions, there is little doubt that one should consider it indelible, published public speech. Other cases of deception involving Twitter include celebrity and product endorsements that do not indicate or disclose that they are a paid endorsement. For example, Kim Kardashian’s \$10,000-per-tweet endorsement of Carl’s Jr.[®] fast food leaves the uninitiated believing the thin celebrity is constantly wolfing down bacon cheeseburgers and chili cheese fries. It was only recently disclosed that Kardashian tweets for cash. In order to avoid deception, product placement or celebrity endorsement should be disclosed in a transparent manner. Paid tweeters should indicate that they are paid to tweet.

The Good: Customer loyalty programs on Twitter or Facebook. There are numerous good examples of fan pages and customer loyalty programs using either Facebook or Twitter. Ethically, the majority of these programs do disclose that they are run by the organization sponsoring the product or service. They normally provide promotion codes or discount codes to the followers of tweets or their fans. There is no violation of ethical principles in an honest and transparent exchange relationship such as those in this category. Further, they do reward followers, members, or fans for their loyalty with financial incentives, serving to help maintain a long-term relationship with interested publics. As long as no spam is involved, the practice is good public relations because the organization has a duty and responsibility to treat its publics fairly, provide accurate information, and to maintain reversibility (that is, to treat publics how you would wish to be treated).

The Best: Starbucks’s “my Starbucks idea” Facebook page. Starbucks[®] was among the first to take social media to an innovative level by using it to actively conduct research and generate feedback from publics. The idea is ethically sound because it gives a forum for discussion, debates, complaints, or new ideas which are open for anyone to join. Therefore, Starbucks maintains the deontological duty of dignity and respect for its publics by allowing them to have a voice in the operations, management, and policies of the organization. The intention behind such

a fan page must be genuine; in other words, someone in the organization must really be listening, monitoring the feedback, and considering the ideas of publics. Such a page cannot be “just for show” and still be ethical. The deontological standard of a good intention or morally good will requires that the organization use the page to consider ideas that are meritorious and being open to changes within the organization, rather than simply trying to force their ideas onto publics. Starbucks uses the page as a dialogue with publics in an ethical manner because it seems to genuinely be open to change, value its publics, maintaining their dignity and respect, and use the space with good intent.

We can learn much from these good cases and from those involving ethical transgressions or deception. With these examples in mind, the following ethical guidelines are suggested to help guide the use of social media.

Ethical guidelines for using social media:

1. Be prudent: Potentially libelous, slanderous, or defamatory statements should not be made.
2. If it is deceptive, do not do it.
3. If an initiative warrants secrecy, that is a red flag that something needs ethical examination.
4. Paid speech should be transparently identified as such by “(Endorsement)” or similar.
5. Personal, individual speech and opinion, versus speech as a representative of the organization, should be clearly identified.
6. Use a rational analysis examining the message from all sides. How would it look to other publics, and how could it potentially be misconstrued?
7. Does the message maintain your responsibility to do what is right?
8. Is it reversible -- How would you feel on the receiving end of the message? Is it still ethical then?
9. Does the communication maintain the dignity and respect of the involved publics?
10. Is your intention morally good with the communication?
11. Emphasize clarity in your communication, even if you think the source or sponsorship is clear...make it clearer.
12. Emphasize transparency in how the message came about. Disclose.
13. Verify sources and data. Rumor mongering destroys your credibility – do not traffic in rumor and speculation.
14. Consistency of messages across time is good because it allows publics to know and understand you, and you can meet their expectations. Consistency builds trust.
15. Encourage the good.

Finally, we must consider the sociological concept of *anomie* when communicating in the technological world. Emile Durkheim coined the term and described anomie as a state of disconnectedness, social isolation, or the lack of a social ethic. By the very paradox of its nature, social media can both connect a person to distant contacts and make him or her feel isolated from those nearby. Durkheim connected the idea to ethics by considering the extent to which moral norms are socially constructed. In order to maintain our best, most ethical selves, social media should be used to encourage the good, to laud the praiseworthy, and to encourage that which we most value about ourselves and in our organizations.