7 steps to prepare for your first (or next) social media crisis

"Be Prepared." This simple phrase has been guiding Boy Scouts for more than a century in their efforts to explore unknown territory, seek adventure, and face challenges. These two words remind Scouts that marching off into the woods is ill-advised without first planning a path, packing appropriate supplies, considering risks, and anticipating challenges. Scouts understand they can't plan for every situation, but know that by thinking ahead and using their training they can arm themselves with the right knowledge to identify and overcome common pitfalls.

In the frontier of the Web, these words can serve as a guide for pharmaceutical communicators seeking to explore the world of social media. New communication channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube offer exciting opportunities to engage with customers, but also bring potential challenges. Just as Boy Scouts prepare themselves for the occasional thunderstorm or wild animal encounter, communicators should plan ahead for situations ranging from disparaging remarks or misinformation to a full-blown social media crisis.

Crisis management in social media begins long before the crisis emerges, and continues after the storm has abated. To be able to respond to a crisis using social media – whether the crisis is social-media-related or not – it's critical to follow the right steps to be prepared. And although every social media plan will need to be tailored to your situation, the following seven steps will get you started thinking about the right resources and strategies for you:

1. Allocate resources

The first step toward developing a social media crisis plan is to dispel the myth that social media is "free." While it is true that many sites do not charge to create an account and participate, the investment in time and energy should not be discounted. Any good social media strategy requires effort and dedication; both require headcount.

While you may not be able to devote a full time resource today, it is important that someone is accountable for developing and executing the plan. If you don't have the resources to spare or need a little extra help getting started, consider partnering with a digital agency that specializes in the pharmaceutical industry to assist with the planning, monitoring, and community management.

2. Listen

Identifying where conversations are taking place is the second step in the process. The growing popularity of social media sites has fueled the creation of a wide range of platforms. Just a quick glance at the Communication Prism, developed by Brian Solis and Jess3, shows the broad range of places where conversations about your brand might be occurring.

Since creating an account on every site and manually monitoring content will spread resources too thin, so it's critical to identify sites where members are already talking about your brand. A keyword-focused "social listening" campaign using a monitoring tool like Radian6 can identify sites where your brand is being discussed, digest what is being said, and provide a high-level sentiment snapshot.

While listening may sound like a passive activity, it can be work-intensive. Monitoring tools provide you with a wide range of information about the ongoing conversations, but you will need to analyze the output carefully to understand sentiment.

Human speech patterns like sarcasm, irony, jargon, and simple typos can influence the accuracy of sentiment reporting. As a result, it’s a good idea to ensure that a human being validates listening reports to account for these nuances prior to sending them off to the CEO.

3. Learn the rules of the road

Once you understand where your products or brands are being discussed, the next step is to understand the functionality and rules of the social sites where you plan to engage. Now would be the time to create an account for each site and thoroughly read the Terms of Service (TOS). The TOS can be a useful tool in situations where offensive or derogatory comments have been made. Site administrators often clearly define what conduct is and is not allowed and are willing to enforce the TOS and remove content that is in violation. Keep in mind, however, that leveraging the TOS is often an option of last resort. It’s best to address feedback from commenters openly and directly.

In some cases, if you control the page, consider creating your own Terms and Conditions to supplement the TOC. This will be useful, for example, if you need to make it clear that specific products cannot be mentioned for regulatory reasons. This then gives you the leverage to remove posts that violate your terms.

Beyond the formal rules, it’s also important to understand the culture of each online community where you plan to engage. Take some time to “listen” and acclimate to the site’s culture first.

4. Choose your voice

Defining who will represent your brand and the tone in which you will respond is the fourth step. Some questions that can help you define your social voice include:

- Will you define a single corporate account to respond to all questions or comments or should each product have its own account?

- Will a specific person represent the account or will messages come from a corporate account?

- What image (also known as an “avatar”) will be associated with the account? Will it be a persons’ photograph or a corporate logo? This simple choice will speak volumes (see below).

- Will the account actively engage in non-product conversations and contribute to the community or simply remain quiet and respond only when appropriate?

While each of these decisions must be defined by your organization to meet your specific style and needs, best practices demonstrate customers prefer to interact socially with other human beings and trust those accounts that aren’t just a “corporate soapbox” for sharing press releases.

5. Develop a response plan

Once you have an initial awareness of the conversations that are occurring and understand the rules of the various social sites, the next step is to develop a set of scenarios that provide guidance when a response is required. The simplest way to start is to divide comments into categories like Positive, Neutral, and Negative. Each category should have its own response workflow and a series of appropriate messages that could be tailored and delivered quickly.

For example, positive messages may warrant a simple “thank you” that lets the user know their input has been received, such as:

“Thank you for your comment. We always enjoy hearing feedback from people like you who use our products.”

Neutral messages are often categorized that way because they don’t provide a statement of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. It might be a neutral message such as:

“Giving the new GoMeals iPad App a try. I’m curious to see how it compares to other health-related apps I’ve tried.”

Just because the comment is neutral, doesn’t mean it doesn’t warrant a response. A short message often affirms that the message was heard and offers the customer an ongoing dialog about the product:

“Glad to hear you’re giving the GoMeals app a try. Let us know if you have any questions we can assist with.”

Negative comments, on the other hand, require more analysis. Your response plan should consider whether the customer is simply venting, has posted inaccurate information, or is seeking a remedy to a problem. Some customers simply want to express dissatisfaction and engaging them may fuel the fire, turning a simple tweet or comment into a full-out attack. Other customers may be seeking an immediate reaction and will continue commenting until they receive an answer from the company or a sympathetic response from the rest of their community.

By addressing the complaint directly and quickly, you demonstrate you are available to your customers and interested in assisting, as well as avoiding the mob-mentality that can occur when no response is provided.

Pharma requires the special category of “regulatory-sensitive." Posts that fall into this category require special analysis to determine whether they qualify as adverse events, contain off-label comments, make an inappropriate claim, or raise other regulatory concerns. Pharma communicators need to understand how to leverage monitoring tools to identify regulatory-sensitive comments and address them appropriately using existing protocols.

6. Engage the community

Part of building the reputation of your social identity is to continually participate in the conversation, even when a crisis isn’t occurring. Customers want to know that you’re not just there to respond to complaints, but are interested in acknowledging their positive input, sharing knowledge, and engaging in an ongoing dialog. This also builds trust and credibility with your constituents in advance of a crisis.

Once you have created your accounts and have a response workflow in place, feel free to wade into the shallow end by sharing links to relevant information, engaging in conversations with other members, and helping guide the conversation by sharing resources. The key is to develop a reputation as a company that is interested in two-way dialog, not just one-way marketing. This, indeed, has been one of the single biggest challenges for the highly-regulated pharmaceutical industry.

7. When the time comes, respond according to plan

Vigilance is a critical component to identifying a crisis in the making. Regardless of how it comes about, once a crisis has begun, it’s important to remain calm, avoid overreacting, and follow the response plan that you put together. During a crisis, some might be tempted to “fire comments back” to a user, but rarely do these types of exchanges fare well for the company. Instead, what may end up happening is the community comes to the defense of the “little guy,” regardless of whether the statements made were right or wrong. Just ask Nestle how that behavior worked out for them.

The key is to stick to the plan, follow the workflow, and assess each response before posting. If all else fails, fall back on those sage words of wisdom given to us by Disney’s Thumper:

“If you can’t say something nice, don’t say nothing at all”

These seven steps will help ensure your first forays into social media crisis management are successful. Finally, keep in mind that, in many cases, existing response protocols created by public affairs and customer service can be integrated into your social media approach. In addition, leaders in the pharmaceutical industry such as Sanofi-Aventis have shared their experiences and learnings and can help guide you.

Be prepared – and best of luck on your journey!

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