

Media Works

Tweeting Your Brand: Proceed With Caution

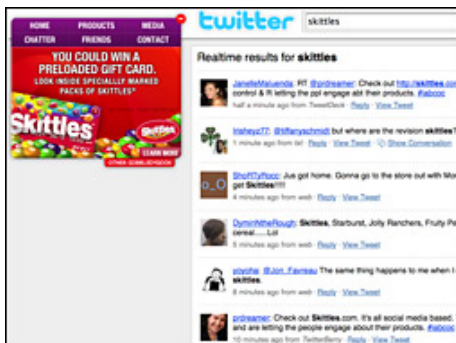
Viewpoint: Razorfish's Steven Cisowski

By: Steven Cisowski



If you haven't been living under a rock lately, you've probably heard a lot about Twitter, the free micro-blogging utility that allows members to share short messages, or tweets. Twitter has suddenly become the digital arena for people to observe and engage in pop culture. Demi Moore saves lives on her Twitter page, and Lindsay Lohan publicly breaks up with significant others on hers. It's also a place where brands can interact with consumers directly, to either reinforce strong relationships with their loyal bases or attract new followings.

Beyond any presence of self-branded messaging, Twitter largely remains an ad-free environment. However, it was only a matter of time before the service began to show promise for marketers. In early April, women's network Glam Media developed Tinker, a tool in which users can aggregate posts on Twitter and Facebook feeds around certain keywords or events, such as "Oscars" or "SuperBowl," providing unique opportunities for advertisers. Google, on the other hand, has figured out another way to leverage Twitter for its advertising offerings. The search company has worked with the service to allow advertisers with Twitter pages to list their five most recent tweets in banner ads across its AdSense network.



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The first advertiser to use that tool was TurboTax, which is attempting to increase its awareness in the social-media universe and increase followers to its branded Twitter page. The effort appears to be twofold: to add new customers and to provide a more personal level of service to those customers. For example, users post questions or complaints, and a TurboTax representative responds directly on the company's Twitter page to address the concern.

For TurboTax, Twitter functions as a free vehicle for a brand to leverage enhanced public relations through digital media. By functioning as an open, social environment, Twitter can provide brands with an online meeting place for consumers in a way that MySpace and Facebook often cannot. Twitter is not responsible for the outcomes of these communication lines, so companies must wisely decide how they should use the service to achieve its digital objectives.

In a bold move this past March, the Mars candy brand Skittles decided to give control of its home page to consumers. The brand's home page, Skittles.com, was relaunched so that it no longer reflected the website of a typical consumer-package-goods brand. Rather, Skittles.com became a directory that sent visitors to user-generated-content sites where they could add to the interactive discussion of the brand. The Skittles.com home page directed viewers to Wikipedia's entry on Skittles; the "Media" section took users to the brand's YouTube channel; "Chatter" led to the Skittles Twitter page; and "Friends" brought viewers to the official Skittles Facebook page. Skittles.com's navigator, a permanent fixture on all pages, was located on the upper-right corner of the screen and acted as the user's remote control around the Skittles universe. This social-media run by Skittles is often described by analysts in the industry as the "siteless site" test.

Regardless of how innovative the approach might appear, Mars quickly discovered that not everyone would respond favorably to the invitation for feedback. Many Twitter users felt they were being pandered to and, quite frankly, were insulted that the brand assumed the public would have nothing but positive feedback.

Many users skeptical and critical of the program posted negative comments on the page, sarcastic in tone and damaging to the brand's public-relations efforts. In response, the Skittles.com page soon ceased to drive users to the branded Twitter page but instead directed them to the Twitter search-results page for the term "Skittles," which often showed myriad unrelated and incoherent tweets that did not necessarily enhance the brand.

This campaign seems to point out two pertinent ways brands can interact with social media, particular with Twitter. First, brands must be open to the fact that if they give all the control to users, they must be prepared for negativity. In fact, it may even be wise to automatically assume that a lot of the feedback from a social-media perspective may be negative.

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Secondly, the public seems very disenchanted with advertising in social media, so much so that users will complain about it at length for very feeble reasons. Keeping in mind that Twitter users have the choice to either follow or not follow a certain page, advertisers must realize that if given the chance, the public will seize the opportunity to talk negatively about a brand if the intention is to promote rather than to provide a substantial offering to its customers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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