

Beware the #bashtag



By Louise Marsland

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There's a nasty meme that's increasing as more and more brands and PROs use social media for promotional purposes and give disgruntled consumers the opportunity to lash out, using a '#bashtag'.

Zideate.com defines a 'bashtag' as "the use of an organisation's hashtag in a negative, critical, or abusive fashion". The term has even gone mainstream and is defined by the Collins English Dictionary as "a hashtag that is used for critical and abusive comments".

Social media fatigue has set in as users are increasingly exposed to chirpy brands that intrude on their timelines. If they've had a bad experience with your brand - or simply a bad day - they may be tempted to respond negatively, hijacking your hashtag.

In some cases, the #hashtag set up by the super-keen social media department or PRO is overtaken with negative comments to the extent that the bastardised #bashtag starts trending ahead of the #hashtag that was supposed to give the brand some lovin' - or 'social sunshine' as it is termed nowadays in the twitterverse or on Facebook.

One of the first documented global cases was #McDstories, when McDonald's launched a Twitter campaign in 2012 hoping the (promoted) hashtag would inspire heart-warming stories about Happy Meals. Instead, the haters took over, sharing their #McDHorrorStories. In its reporting on the story, Forbes magazine was credited with coining the term 'bashtag'.

McDonald's, which had actually paid for the hashtag to be promoted on the Twitter homepage, pulled the campaign after two hours, but of course that didn't stop the snark. And in fact, if you search for #McDstories on Twitter, it is still getting traction with negative comments, two years later.

A very recent example, in April this year, was when some bright spark decided to ask the public to share their stories about the New York Police Department at #myNYPD. What followed was a gallery of alleged police brutality - pix and video included! And so it went on... Of course the mainstream media got involved too and it was branded a major PR disaster and a "bashtag backfire".

Avoid ruin

['When hashtags go wrong: The top 5 bashtag disasters'](#) is the title of a recent article on Webmagazin, which includes some very sarcastic and funny user comments.

We live in a world of cynics and comedians online where everyone has their chance at their five minutes of fame and they will take it if you provide the opportunity.

Brands need to understand the psychology of social media, the fact that the illusion of anonymity allows trolls to be braver than they would in plain sight; but also if you try to be too cute or clever when actually, you don't have a brilliant track record, you will open yourself up to ridicule and target practice.

In its tips for avoiding social media reputation ruin, WordStream.com advocates that brands:

1. Should not directly promote your company and bombard users. Focus on your USP and find ways to creatively tie in your products or services with a unique angle.
2. Get personal by reminding your clients and fans that you are human by using social media to put a face to your company by showing off your employees in various guises.
3. Join in the conversation and be acutely aware of the dialogue already happening around your brand. Don't tempt the trolls.
4. Serve your customers: your fans and followers are customers or future customers - make sure they are treated that way. Monitor all the content being posted around your brand and respond where appropriate.

So, marketers and PROs need to take note of 'bashtagging' before they happily ask followers and fans to post brand stories. It's mob rule out there and the mob rules the interwebs.

ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

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