

Don't skewer your clients on #AskTwitter



By Louise Marsland

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There is this trend for spin doctors to put clients centre stage in an interactive real-time 'town hall' type of meet-up on Twitter. You might as well put them in stocks in the town square and throw rotten veggies at them...

On paper in a comfy boardroom, tastefully decorated with prints from @Home, I can see how it might seem attractive. Actually, not really. Given the mob mentality of Twitter, how can anyone think it would be a good idea to promote anyone on a stage in the most hostile part of town, with questions shouted from darkened doorways, so you can't see who is talking?

If your client has a clean slate and a personality to go with it, maybe. It is an opportunity for politicians and celebrities, especially, to show they are human beings like the rest of us. Mostly, the #AskWhoever hashtag trends and breathy gleeful articles are written and we all have a good laugh at the subject hung out to dry.

Not even the President of the United States, or #POTUS as he goes by as an acronym, is exempt from the unseemly glee that comes with having an open line suddenly on a global stage to a famous politician, celebrity or company CEO.



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You can almost hear the whispered "Let's get them!" before the subject in question gets bombarded with questions verging on insulting, hysterically funny and just plain rude. Very rarely does anyone stick to the subject and soon you're trending in the Twittersverse. Globally. Just #AskPOTUS, #AskMmusi, and #AskELJames recently, among many others!

It's great fodder for satirists, journalists, cartoonists and comedians, but not always so great for the client or brand being promoted. Unless you are trying to make a politician or celeb seem more like you and me - but then you have to get into the

spirit of things and tap into the popular culture memes and answer with wit and timing. You cannot take yourself too seriously, that's the key to a modicum of success in these uncharted waters.

Last week, the US President took to Twitter to discuss healthcare reform. What he got were questions about his preferences for guacamole recipes... [He doesn't like peas in it, either](#). That tweet was a hit, given the uproar caused by the *New York Times* recipe section earlier on the same day about [adding peas to guacamole](#). The internet thinks that's a culinary crime. So does the President of the United States, apparently.



President Obama 
@POTUS

respect the nyt, but not buying
peas in guac. onions, garlic, hot
peppers. classic.

JustinGreen∞ @JGreenDC

#AskPOTUS Do you agree with the
@nytimes about putting peas in
guacamole? If yes, why?

And it was too good an opportunity for the masses who wanted to know if he liked Minions; how he felt when Zayn left One Direction; if he consults with Taylor Swift (given her power in the music industry and apparently business, too); and when he'll be releasing the alien/UFO info he has (actually, I'd be interested to know the answer to that one, too). There were some [serious questions](#) amongst the fun, but that's not why we 'tuned' in. It was for the trolls.

And who can forget the #AskMmusi hashtag, when newly-elected Democratic Alliance leader, Mmusi Maimane, wanted to give South Africans a chance to get to know him? Well, he needed a sense of humour for the [questions](#) concerning local soapie plots to control of the office aircon remote, his accent, and the Disney *Frozen* reference 'Do you wanna build a snowman'... And #AskMmusi is still being tagged on to tweets in various threads related to all kinds of memes and rhetorical questions by South African Twitter.

Both #AskPOTUS and #AskMmusi gave the politicians the opportunity to show they had a sense of humour and weren't afraid to tackle some of the sillier questions, as well as the serious ones. However, for author EL James of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, Twitter slaughtered her this past week for her abysmal writing skills and plot lines that seemingly promote violence against women.

She may, inexplicably, be a bestselling novelist, but her publicists should have foreseen the potential for her to be trolled by activists and others who reject her brand of tabloid fiction and misogyny. [Mashable](#) had the best round up of tweets that included digs at her overuse of adjectives and English language skills...

Poet and writer Oscar Wilde did say that: "There is only one thing worse than being talked about and that is NOT being talked about." And maybe today's reality show obsessed, Insta-celebrity culture promotes that.

Like that tattered old saying that 'all publicity is good publicity', meaning that there is no such thing as bad publicity. Maybe for porn stars. If you're trying to build a credible brand, not so much.

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