

Social Media Marketing in Times of Tragedy



By Marsha Friedman

If you're using social media for marketing, what should you say following a tragedy like the deadly blasts at the Boston Marathon on April 15?

The horrific elementary school shootings in Newtown, Conn.?

The October storm that took lives and devastated communities across the Northeast?

Sometimes, nothing at all.

The age of digital marketing brings with it new challenges, including how to respond during a national tragedy. Remember, as recently as Sept. 11, 2001, we had no MySpace, much less Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. Except for email, no vehicle for delivering instantaneous marketing messages existed. After 9/11, one of the most painful days in American memory, most of us had time to pause, reflect and put on hold print, radio and TV marketing campaigns that might be viewed as inappropriate or offensive.

In recent months, there has been lively debate on this topic in the marketing community, including how and when to tie – or not to tie – a marketing message into the news of the day, a widely used strategy.

Gaffes can occur with the most innocent of intentions in any media content, marketing or not. Earlier in April, a new episode of the musical comedy "Glee" upset and angered parents in Newtown, Conn., because the plot featured a student bringing a gun to school, where it accidentally discharges.

"A lot of people were upset about it and that I feel horrible about," Jane Lynch, one of the stars, told Access Hollywood Live days later. "If we added to anybody's pain, that's just certainly not what any of us wanted. ... We're always rather topical and rather current."

Usually, however, simply applying your own sense of decency and good taste can help you avoid a blunder. Consider American Apparel's notorious "Hurricane Sandy Sale – in case you're bored during the storm," advertised as tens of thousands of people endured freezing temperatures without power. Most of us wouldn't have even considered such a ploy!

Here are a couple more suggestions for do's and don'ts:

- If you use automated posts scheduled through a site such as HootSuite, turn them off immediately. If people don't find them insensitive and uncaring or silly, they'll likely conclude your messages come from a robot – not a real person – which is just as bad.

- Can you be helpful? Hours after the blasts in Boston, with cell phone service out in the city and family and friends desperately trying to connect with loved ones, Google.org launched "Person Finder: Boston Marathon Explosions." There, individuals and organizations could share information about the status of marathon participants and spectators for those trying to find them.

If your community has suffered a tragic event, perhaps you have helpful information to share. Here in Florida, which is affected by hurricanes, people use social media to help evacuees and their pets find shelter, and to alert others to danger, such as downed power lines. Depending on your area of expertise, you may be able to provide more general information or commentary. For instance, an educator can share tips for answering children's questions about the event. Philanthropists might comment on those selflessly step up to help.

- Of course, social media is also about reactions and, for many, that's a sincere expression of sympathy for and unity with those affected.

If you want to post something and you're unsure about what to say, take a look at what businesses and other brands are sharing, and how online users are reacting. You may decide to just say nothing for a day or two, or whatever time seems reasonable given the nature of the event.

Sometimes, saying nothing at all speaks volumes.

About Marsha Friedman

Marsha Friedman is a 23-year veteran of the public relations industry. She is the CEO of EMSI Public Relations (www.emsincorporated.com), a national firm that provides PR strategy and publicity services to corporations, entertainers, authors and professional firms. Marsha is the author of *Celebritize Yourself* and she can also be heard weekly on her Blog Talk Radio Show, *EMSI's PR Insider* every Thursday at 3:00 PM EST. Follow her on Twitter: @marshafriedman.