

Does influence come at too high a price?

By [Estelle Nagel](#)

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A few months ago, Elon Musk was held up as the poster child for successful social media management. He attracted a third of a million likes and 90,000 tweets with a few mentions about flamethrowers and zombies, creating a massive buzz online. He used social media to negotiate permission for his Boring Company's tunnelling venture, introduced the Falcon Heavy with aplomb and even sold a few flamethrowers on the side. He has ten times as many followers (22 million) than the brand he is most closely associated with - Tesla has about 2.5 million.



Elon Musk © [Tesla Facebook](#)

Then a group of boys found themselves stuck in a cave in Thailand. Elon Musk offered a solution which was turned down. He then proceeded to call one of the heroic rescuers involved in extracting the children a paedophile, broadcasting the claim to all 22 million of his followers – and the rest of the world. Just like that, public opinion swung the other way.

Personalities can be powerful branding tools

Most recently, he impulsively tweeted that he was considering taking Tesla private, then abruptly took the deal off the table.

“ Am considering taking Tesla private at \$420. Funding secured.— Elon Musk (@elonmusk) [August 7, 2018](#) ”

The Elon Musk conversation cloud, that once praised his genius and innovative thinking is now recasting him as mercurial and unstable, even [calling for him to step away from the brand](#).

Musk is not the only one who found himself embroiled in twitter spats. [MiWay CEO Rene Otto](#) found himself embroiled in a twitter war after commenting on the controversial *Lost Boys of Bird Island* book whereas Adam Catzavelos effectively bankrupted his family's business after a racist video he shot went viral.



K-word user is a social media pariah, but he may escape prosecution

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Personalities can be powerful branding tools. 25% of all social media conversations about electric cars involve Tesla and

Elon Musk, even though they are a much smaller brand than the likes of BMW that leads a mere 10% of the conversation. His personal twitter handle has more followers than Ford, Chrysler and Chevrolet *combined*.

Hitching a personality to your brand

Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg and Cheryl Sandberg all achieved celebrity status and added clout to their companies' social media presence. But once you hitch a personality to your brand, their actions (good or bad) are nearly impossible to uncouple from their business.

Using a personality to tell a brand's story can be effective. Consumers tend to care more about the company and its successes and are more likely to engage with its content. But if you *do* follow that strategy, you run the risk of that personality (and their negative actions) *becoming* the story. Sponsorships can be withdrawn when an influencer or celebrity's image takes a nosedive, but it is much harder to remove an employee, board member or founder.

And does the goodwill that a positive brand representative generates extend beyond the lifetime of that individual? Think of Steve Jobs and the Apple corporation. Although their stocks are doing well, Jobs *was* (for all intents and purposes) Apple. After his passing, the company seems to have been unmoored, their products uninspired, their brand equity diminishing. As competent as management may be, they aren't media darlings.

Thin line separating celebrity and notoriety

There are many companies eager to turn their C-suite into celebrities, leveraging charisma to catapult the brand into the public eye. But there is a thin line separating celebrity and notoriety. Every company representative needs to understand how their online presence can both promote *and* gravely injure their brand.

Rene Otto did not mean to offend Afrikaners when he was commenting on a topical book he had read; Elon Musk probably didn't think his casual tweet would be seen as deceiving shareholders. If you are going the route of building personal brands within your organisation, you have to invest in sensitivity and communications training and set clear rules and guidelines for personal posting.

Your thought leaders think that there is a distinction between their private and professional opinions; social media does not. It's time for companies to rethink who and how their employees can talk about their jobs – there is a lot to gain, but a lot to lose.

ABOUT ESTELLE NAGEL

Estelle has spent more than a decade working with some of the biggest names in tech, both in South Africa and abroad. She's accomplished as a copywriter, public relations professional, corporate communications expert and crisis manager.
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