

Melissa Attree's social media say-so

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If you've ever been online, you'd be blind or living outside the interwebs not to have bumped into Melissa Attree somewhere along the line. A digital brand champion, Attree's a specialist when it comes to online PR, how businesses should use Twitter, and how to make Facebook work for your brand. She gives us the skinny on social media.



Melissa Attree

Anyone who knows Attree - and that's a lot of people - knows she's a communication junkie, especially when it comes to digital media and social networks. She's worked in marketing and business for the past 13 years but has gravitated to helping brands navigate the digital space, a niche she's become particularly good at.

In a world where you can throw a stone out of a window and hit a social media consultant on his or her back, Attree advises on how to look for the right partners when it comes to hiring digital branding experts.

"Requires PR, marketing and business skills"

"To be effective, social media communication requires PR, marketing and business skills. Experts should have a solid understanding of these different disciplines," says Attree. "Smart tech has given us intelligent social media platforms, which we can use to engage with customers and curate communities, but it's ultimately about responsible communication, and *people*. Word of mouth (WOM) has always been the most powerful sales tool; social media gives us the ability to witness real WOM interactions that can influence the way we manage brands."

Over the past few years, brands have been tentatively dipping their toes in the social media stream. Some, such as Old Spice, have created phenomenal viral campaigns because they've engaged in clever conversations with their customers. Others, such as US clothing brand Gap, have been less successful.

Gap invited the world, their sons and daughters into a social conversation on Facebook, and then ignored all its 'fans' when

it came to the reinvention of its logo - one day customers went online and saw that the Gap logo had changed, causing an outcry on Facebook and Twitter.

The lesson here? Exclude your customers from the workings of your brand once you started a social conversation with them - at your peril.

How to use Twitter

Attree says she could talk for days about how to use Twitter. "On first glance it appears to be an easy channel to crack, but in my opinion it is the most difficult to get right. I don't believe all brands need to be *active* on twitter; there's a difference between being active and listening. Please listen."

The problem with brands is that, for so long, advertising has been a broadcast model. Social media is, of course, a conversation, and when it comes to being good in the art of conversation, listening is a crucial skill.

"To be truly effective as a conversation tool, Twitter requires that you listen, interact and anticipate. If you have the capability to service these needs, and it REALLY matches your business objectives, then offer content and feedback that people *really* want to engage with. Give the people what they want, not what you think they need," says Attree.

"The brands that have it the 'easiest' are the ones who play in the lifestyle space; they can foster good relationships and are able to talk about a wide variety of topics (which adds context to the conversation) without detracting from their own brand."

Easier for consumer, more difficult for B2B, hard-core tech

So it's easier for consumer technology brands, but it is more difficult for business-to-business and hard-core technology brands, and here a strong understanding of who your customer is, what's important to them and engaging on that need becomes important.

"Locally, keep an eye out for brands that have the freedom to have real 'human' conversations and impact. I often think that Twitter is an indicator for the larger social media space. So, ironically, as far as I can tell, it means that most of us will converse with 'fluffy, easy to love and chat to' brands and/or 'socially conscious, let's make a difference' causes and initiatives. As in life, everything in-between is usually a grudge/service customer-brand interaction."

Attree believes that, from a customer service perspective, Twitter has a potentially valuable role if brands can service the channel correctly. "For big corporate, this means being able to link it to customer service software and relationship management systems." Attree doesn't think that local businesses are quite there yet.

The bottom line for Twitter, according to Attree?

"Think carefully before you venture onto Twitter. If you are a service-orientated company and you have opened a Twitter account, then I will name and shame you... If you haven't, it's likely that I'll follow the 'usual' channels that over the years you have 'trained' me to use.

"Harsh truth"

"Yes, you can argue that any forward-thinking customer service department should want more honest, immediate feedback. The harsh truth, however, is that right now, from a manpower and systems point of view, most can't handle it. It's a decision each brand needs to take: What percentage of your base does twitter represent? Does it warrant the resources? Don't just open a twitter account because everyone's doing it."

Attree says that the basics of good customer service, PR and marketing have not changed; it is just that there are more channels to use and with that comes greater risk. "For most companies, I do feel it's necessary to have a social media

policy that teaches employees and spokespeople about social media, while defining the parameters when it comes to online communication. This doesn't need to be a huge document, but rather a few rules of engagement to ensure that the company/brand communicates responsibly in the online space."

When it comes to the secret of building brilliant brands online that engage and ferment loyalty, Attree's advice is to use the platforms freely available in a creative way. "Repurpose content to suit different platforms but keep different audiences in mind. Be original but keep it simple, accessible, simple to share and easily digestible."

With the data deluge going through the roof and saturation levels seriously tested, Attree says that information overload now means most online users have the attention span of a gnat.

Lifted the veil on word of mouth

The great thing about social media is that it has lifted the veil on word of mouth. "It allows us to observe, research and engage with consumers who are having authentic, unsolicited discussions. You can't get that kind of insight through traditional media. As a brand custodian it is incredibly powerful; it's the reason I first became interested in the space," says Attree.

So who should handle the social media function in a company? Does it belong to public relations, marketing or the customer affairs department?

"This is the tricky question of the moment. It falls under all three departments, but having an internal social media champion helps, to effectively traffic feedback, maintain momentum and manage the brand's 'voice'. The diverse nature of online conversations demands that marketing, PR and customer service work together."

For companies, this means that social media is demanding the destruction of silo-like organisations, while rewarding those organisations that are better integrated and where internal dialogues and constructive co-operation have been fostered internally.

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Editor, writer and researcher. *Editor of #TheFutureByDesign & The Africa Annual *Published in Africa's Greatest Entrepreneurs *Published in Rolling Stone Magazine, The Guardian (UK), Daily Maverick, Finweek, Mail & Guardian, City Press, Rapport, Moneyweb, Noseweek; Brainstorm Magazine; ITWeb, and MarkLives. *Before becoming a full time writer, de Waal founded brand agency Idea Engineers, and led the Cape Town office of Text 100.

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