



## **Managing brand reputations in an era of friends, fans and followers**

**By Linda Welter Cohen, APR**

Social networks are influencing brand reputations and revolutionizing how consumers decide what to buy. Wise brand managers should take heed and adapt.

Consumers today are increasingly turning to social networks and expressing their views about companies and their brands, so it's never been more important for companies to know what consumers and their friends, fans and followers are saying about their purchasing decisions.

Consumer buying behavior always has been social. People always have been influenced by what their peers think and buy. However, social networks are unlocking new opportunities to encourage and assist that behavior.

Over the last decade, online reviews have increasingly empowered consumers to talk about their brand experiences. According to [Trendwatching.com](http://Trendwatching.com)'s 11 Crucial Consumer Trends for 2011, brands can expect a dramatic rise this year in the number of consumers who will actively broadcast, comment, share and recommend their brand purchases and experiences to their friends and wider audiences.

It's no surprise then that consumers and brands alike are embracing social networks, communities, tools and applications that allow them to discover recommendations from friends, fans and followers.

Here are just a few statistics from [Trendwatching.com](http://Trendwatching.com):

- More than 500 million users spend more than 700 billion minutes a month on Facebook. (Source: Facebook, April 2011)
- Product recommendations from family (63 percent) and friends (31 percent) are the most trusted. However, 81 percent of U.S. consumers now go online to do additional research. (Source: Cone Inc., June 2010)
- Ninety percent of people trust the recommendations of their Facebook friends. (Source: ExactTarget, August 2010)
- Thirty-one percent of daily Twitter users ask their followers for opinions about products and services. (Source: Edison Research & Arbitron Internet, April 2010)

It's time for companies to offer products, services and campaigns that wow consumers and encourage them to share their experiences in social networks. Business owners and brand managers shouldn't let new technologies, or late adoption of social networks within their organizations, inhibit interacting with consumers online.

Positive company and brand reputations can take years to build, and can be destroyed in minutes. Brand managers must respond to inaccurate information about their organizations, especially given that reputation-damaging information can spread like wildfire online.

Here are some suggestions to engage with consumers online, monitor opinions, and protect and enhance your company and brand reputations:

- Set up email and text alerts on media-monitoring services and social networks where your consumers gather and comment about your brands, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn. This will enable a rapid response when minutes matter.
- Organizations should create social and privacy media policies, not just for their own protection but also for the well-being of the community and consumers they depend on.
- A social media policy serves as a guideline to what's considered meaningful versus harmful to your company's brand or reputation. A simple set of social media guidelines included in the employee handbook and publicized within your organization can help avoid negative sentiments created by your own employees online.
- A privacy policy should not be limited to a company web site but should be updated to include other online locations your organization has created (e.g., forums and exclusive user communities). The policy should specify what information is collected from users while they're on these sites and how it is used.
- When consumers criticize your company or brand online, stop and consider first whether it's worthwhile or even appropriate to respond. If a response is needed, consider whether a private response might be best. If a public response online is needed, remain polite or risk consumer disapproval.
- When making responses online, the most important recipient of the message is not the critic. It's his or her larger audience. Politely correct the inaccurate information or offer to make good if needed. Don't be pulled into a public debate by either the original critic or his or her followers. If all else fails, simply thank the critic for the opinion and let it go. The broader audience is more likely to remember your reaction than the actual problem.

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