

How Dippin' Dots Turned a Frosty Crisis with Press Secretary Sean Spicer into Social Media Gold

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Since 2010, Sean Spicer, White House Press Secretary has held a public grudge against Dippin' Dots, originally known to many as “the ice cream of the future.” He has disparaged the company on social media with his tweets over the years, and was angry when they ran out of his favorite flavor (vanilla) at the Nationals game in 2015.

Over the weekend, an article by the AV Club dug up the old tweets – and the internet followed suit. Before long, Sean Spicer and Dippin' Dots were both trending across social media, and customers and the media at large wanted to know how the company would respond.

Here's the story of what happened behind the scenes, and what your brand can learn from this experience. After all, every brand in the digital age will face – or has already faced – an experience similar to Dippin' Dots. Since it's not a matter of IF, but, WHEN, the key is knowing how to leverage that opportunity to turn critics into champions and win over customers (...and the internet), one tweet at a time.

My company, The Marketing Zen Group, is the social media agency of record for Dippin' Dots. Over the weekend, we listened and watched as old tweets became a new point of contention on social media. Before the workday even began Monday morning, we had a call with the internal team at Dippin' Dots and another partner agency. A strategy was created and deployed by noon the same day. The strategy entailed posting an open letter from the CEO, Scott Fischer to Sean Spicer. It was posted on the company website and a series of social media posts were crafted to help share the link.

It worked. By the end of the day, that strategy resulted in over a dozen tier 1 media articles from CNN to NPR to the Washington Post, and well over ten million views. As of writing this piece, less than 24 hours after that initial call, Sean Spicer and Dippin' Dots are both trending topics on Facebook. By any stretch of the imagination, this is what we in the industry would call a successful campaign and what others may call "going viral."

Here are the best practices distilled from this campaign that we led -

Leadership in the Digital Age is Built Around Transparency and Trust

It is my sincerest belief that the companies which are succeeding today on social media, and in the modern business landscape at large, are companies whose leadership understands the social media ecosystem. Leaders who understand that today's marketing isn't based on leveraging “social media tools” but by embracing the fact that we now live in a social media era – where people are the media.

Scott Fischer, the CEO of Dippin' Dots and his executive team wanted to openly address the issue in a way which was transparent and stayed true to their brand values – fun, community, and camaraderie. They wanted the letter to convey the true spirit of the business and brand – an all-American ice cream manufacturer who is in the business of bringing people together.

An interviewer on NPR asked me today if we were worried about the brand getting caught in the crosshairs of what could be a political maelstrom. And, as I told the reporter, yes, it was a consideration. When working on a campaign like this, it would be foolish not to take into consideration all the sides of an equation. However, what became absolutely clear – and paramount over all other concerns - was that the consumers were looking to the company to respond.

No Response Is a Response

Silence is truly not an option for brands in the digital age. It is akin to putting oneself on mute during a conference call and thinking the call has been paused. The call goes on – minus one voice. In this case, it was crucial that the company respond to customers and the media.

When companies ignore their critics, they do so at their own peril. No matter how contentious an issue, a company in today's environment is judged more on their response than the initial negative review itself. In this case, it wasn't simply about appeasing an unhappy customer, but more about responding to the consumer base about what was being said about the brand at large.

Divisiveness Isn't the Only Technique in the Playbook

Often we see brands who politicize themselves one way or the other to attract attention. Divisiveness is certainly one way to gain social media traction, but in the case of a brand which serves a truly diverse audience, this isn't always the best strategy in the playbook.

In the case of Dippin' Dots, the goal was to extend the hand of friendship – an olive branch of sorts – to help quell and direct the situation in a positive way. In a world which seems exceedingly political, we wanted to showcase that ice cream doesn't have to be. And, isn't sharing your favorite treat the oldest trick in the book to making friends? Which is exactly why Scott closed the letter by asking Sean Spicer to let Dippin' Dots host an ice cream social at the White House.

Emotions Activate Actions

The most successful social media campaigns activate a key emotion or emotions. Sometimes that emotion is empathy (a picture of a Syrian child without shoes surrounded by rubble), sometimes that emotion is a sense of community (thousands of people running the Boston Marathon), and sometimes that emotion is much more lighthearted and fun (an open letter from a CEO of an ice cream company promising to never run out

the flavors a particular customer enjoys). The emotion has to fit the brand and the campaign goals. In this case, a lighthearted and non-offensive funny approach, hit the mark. It got the shares...and a response.

Less than 12 hours after the campaign, Sean Spicer retweeted Dippin' Dots and responded with a "...How about we do something for those who have served our nation & 1st responders?"

Today, Dippin' Dots serves a symbol of every company looking to understand leverage the social media ecosystem. The payoff is huge, and the greatest risk lies not in making an error but in not recognizing and taking advantage of every opportunity.