

**A Reimagination of BMW's Social Media Policy in the Face of Controversy**



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HFT 3594: Entertainment Brand Relations & Publicity

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April 28, 2023

## **Executive Summary**

BMW was faced with controversy after CEO, Jim O'Donnell, made comments doubting the future of electric vehicles in his company, which quickly spread through the media. A solution to repair the issue at hand and prevent further ones from occurring is to reevaluate BMW's social media policy. This involves analyzing the nature of social media in relation to corporations as well as steps to take in improving the brand image through platform usage. Through tactical social media strategizing and brand image reparation, BMW can continue to thrive as a leader in driving luxury.

## **Situational Analysis**

Social media plays a complex role in the management of a corporation's public image. Its purpose is to serve as a means of communication with the consumer audience as well as a controlled form of public relations and self-promotion. Posts made by a company, such as BMW, are controlled because they come directly from the source with no outside influence. However, comments from followers and online reviews are uncontrolled PR because BMW has less influence in what users are saying on their personal accounts. Social media is defined as "forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content" ("Definition of social media", 2023). Companies today create digital brand images for themselves, and consistency is key to keep the overall image relevant and understandable. This opportunity must come with a set of responsibilities and guidelines to follow in order to maintain a consistent and recognizable brand image (Bensen, 2021). These predetermined rules for social media employees focus on terms of tone, aesthetic, company voice. For example, Rare Beauty's Instagram has a consistent feed of

product posts, influencer product testing, and short video clips all within a cohesive pink/red color scheme (Instagram, n.d.). BMW's social media accounts should post content that matches their logo's color scheme of royal blue, black, and white to create a visually appealing platform for their perspective audience.

There are also rules about employee usage of company accounts that may go as far to suggest employees evaluate what they personally post online about their company, all in effort to protect the brand image. Upon hiring, Disney employees are required to sign an agreement stating that they will refrain from sharing company secrets online and will be aware of what opinions they share about the Disney company online. The policy also entails proper usage of company computers when operating and use of Disney-specific email accounts only. This is to protect the internal information of the company and prevent outsiders from breaching the networks within Disney (The Walt Disney Company, 2016). A similar regulation should be in place to protect BMW secrets and regulate outside information that employees are spreading.

BMW faced controversy in 2011 after CEO, Jim O'Donnell, commented on the company's involvement with electric cars in the future. He mentioned that electric cars likely would not work for most of the population because of the short range and efficiency of them, especially in competition with gas-powered cars (Grodecki, et al., 2011). These comments spread quickly online, affecting BMW's electric car community fanatics. The best decision moving forward for BMW is to create a quick response that honestly acknowledges the mistakes in O'Donnell's comments, while reminding the audience of the valued family that they are to BMW.

### **Goals & Objectives**

A public relations plan for BMW's digital presence in the wake of CEO O'Donnell's comments would incorporate the following: a direct response to the electric automotive

community in the form of an apology, and a general response via social media to the public on social media. The goal of this apology response is to get ahead of the issue before it turns into turmoil that spreads across external media outlets. According to the case study, “BMW adheres to the philosophy that every notable story which gains traction in the social media space must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis” (Grodecki, et al., 2011). The crisis management team for socials responded first to BMW’s Activate the Future blog rather than external media sources in order to keep the issues under control in their own hands. In terms of BMW’s social media policy, they aim to have a unified voice on the internet and incorporate outside public relations assistance when necessary. BMW responded to this case in said voice to spread their message quickly with intention. It is important for any public relations release to be direct to the point and aimed towards the intended target audience. Otherwise, additional confusion and murmurings on the internet may arise. BMW has a solid foundation with their social media policy in responding to rumors or issues online with crisis response management. However, the internet is a tricky place to be a part of and if need be, BMW should adjust their social media policy to relate to issues before they arise. A quick efficient response to the complication is always of the utmost important, especially when executed in a respectful and honest manner (“BMW NA Social Media Guidelines”, n.d.).

To prevent this discussion from happening in the first place, BMW’s CEO could have refrained from speaking doubtfully about the electric car business. Since the sector of the car industry is growing and has a good amount of opportunity financially and environmentally, it does not seem reliable to hear a CEO doubt their own product. It’s unrealistic to have a CEO screen their every comment through an HR or communications department prior to speaking, but this mistake on O’Donnell’s behalf is a learning lesson in the face of the digital age.

### Strategies, Tactics, Activities

An ideal public relations plan behind a company such as BMW would be to involve full social media teams solely dedicated to the operation and executing of the platforms. In addition, a separate crisis management team that is specifically informed on how to delegate controversies towards the company and abiding by the social media policy of BMW. Since social media is constantly evolving, additional requirements may be added to the social media policy over time to adjust with the present nature of the internet. BMW has stated that they hire external PR professionals to work with the company when issues arise, but they can also be used for good publicity efforts (Grodecki, et al., 2011).



Figure 2: BMW promotional Twitter post for new electric vehicle, the BMW iX. Uses Gen-Z slang, “Boomer”, referring to older generations that are less open to change (Massey, 2021).

Outside of apology statements at BMW, the company could greatly benefit in the public eye from creating a celebrity endorsement campaign. The automotive industry has to get very

creative with their advertisements in order to stand out from competitors, and to strike when PR is at its most useful. The Super Bowl is a suitable time for BMW to air a new celebrity-endorsed car campaign because of the influential audience that the famous face brings in conjunction with the well-established car brand. An advertisement campaign of this height could overshadow any comments from O'Donnell on electric vehicles if the internet shares it. It could also be posted on BMW's Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter pages with a unique hashtag, which has been successful in the past with the company.



*Figure 1: Supermodel Gigi Hadid's collaboration with BMW, including #EYESONGIGI trending hashtag (Eyes On Gigi, 2017).*

For example, Matthew McConaughey has graced many Lincoln car commercials in which he is driving and talking in his iconic voice. His presence has helped reignite Lincoln's ranking in the automotive industry, while spreading across social media and television ("The Lincolnaissance", 2017). A great promotional opportunity for BMW would be between Dwayne

Johnson and Kevin Hart. Both are highly influential faces in the global entertainment industry and have proven they make quite an entertaining duo from their various films together. Perhaps Dwayne and Kevin are at one's house together and Kevin needs to leave, taking one of his many BMW cars. Dwayne decides to leave shortly after Kevin and grabs a key from the rack before finding which car it belongs to. Long story short, a Goldilocks-type situation ensues where Dwayne has to test each of Kevin's BMW cars until he finds one that perfectly accommodates his large stature. The appeal of celebrities in car advertisements lies in the story and charisma of the ad (Kirby, et al., 2022). A comedic ad such as the one I proposed could target male and female segments from age 18-35, but has the ability to reach anyone with access to the internet as a built in plus.

### **Key Messages**

To improve BMW's social media policy, the social media team could be assigned specific roles in tackling controversies as they come their way. It could be useful to have people hired to specifically monitor the conversations or trending topics surrounding the company and stay on top of the news. In addition, engaging with audiences to make the company feel more "human". Followers of BMW enjoy seeing original content, new model releases, and local opportunities for automotive fans in their respective areas (Council, 2020). A unique challenge that BMW is being faced with is news of self-driving or electric cars malfunctioning or crashing and harming drivers. The electric car space is still new so the media coverage of these events may cause people to not choose electric or self-driving vehicles. News of these events spread very quickly through social media such as Twitter and the national news, then can be spun out of context on uncontrolled websites like Twitter (Zilber, 2022). In the PR plan that I am discussing, a crisis management team along with a legal team would certainly need to be involved to deal

with a case such as this one. Those teams can utilize social media after decisions have been settled and cover the events by noting that the car make and model has been recalled or that there is nothing to worry about. This situation is far more serious than CEO comments since the automotive industry is selling the sense of safety to its customers, and if that promise is broken then reputations are tarnished.

In comparison with BMW to a smaller company, the stakes are much higher for a major corporation like BMW. The BMW name is at the top of the list in the industry and a good brand image is very important for all aspects of business: appealing to customers, car sales, stock market shares, maintaining an audience for new releases, and keeping trust that the cars are safe. The morality of the response to the situation should not be any different depending on the size of the company. Honesty and authenticity are of the highest importance. BMW likely has more access to a greater network of professionals in the media management space than a small business would. Their employees are trained to respond to crisis on social media in a fast manner and prevent the news from getting out of control in the hands of the public. However, a small business may have the availability to be more direct and personal in their response to any social media crisis, such as DMing a follower in response to their negative comment (Ahmad, 2023). I would suggest that Tom Kowaleski speak about his company as if he is talking to the entire brand as a whole. Even though what he said was not written on social media, it was verbal, a similar policy should be put in place for CEO/board member comments that are said publicly and then reiterated on social media. People are familiar with the generic apology note online after a crisis happens in the media, therefore it could be beneficial to include the subject in the apology with some sincerity to it. Social media is changing so rapidly and the responses to things are even quicker, therefore a team of media professionals should be on watch for controversy and



understand the company's values in their responses to the public (Hirsch, 2021). BMW certainly has access to the right people in implementing a successful social media policy. They are a large company, therefore they have more expendable resources at their hand to which they can facilitate in their media sector of the business. Their current social media policy is solid and just vague enough to cover all bases when confronted with an issue.

### **Conclusion**

The deliberate and honest intentions of the social media plan I discussed would mitigate risk by monitoring for potential issues in the social media space and being prepared if something were to get out of hand in the public. Honesty and confidence in the response can repair any damage made to the company during crisis, allowing for less customers to lose loyalty in the company all together. The official public relations policy should be consistent and professional across all social media platforms for BMW. Social media is a facet of BMW's brand image. The people hired to operate BMW social media are aware of the responsibility and the fact that they are a representative of the company. Proper maintenance of the accounts and communication efforts are important to maintain a relevant and consistent reputation. Positive word-of-mouth from customers is a great way to build a loyal audience, especially in the car world. People trust word of mouth suggestions, especially when deciding what car to purchase. Cars are special because a BMW i8 driving down the street is publicity in itself, nothing else extra needed. People see a BMW while in traffic and might think it's cool, then consider upgrading their car to it or not even realize the model is electric. Negative publicity really thrives on the internet, but word-of-mouth can spread just as well if closely monitored and acknowledged by the BMW company. These considerations are valuable to BMW as a company moving forward.

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