

SOCIAL MEDIA IMAGE-MAKING

Assoc. Prof. Diana Popova PhD

Burgas Free University

Abstract: *The issue of image-making on social media is receiving considerable attention these days due to the advent of the do-it-yourself PR2.0 and PR3.0. The purpose of this paper is to raise readers' awareness of the benefits and the downsides of social media as the ubiquitous space for self-expression and influencing audiences. Addressed are the stages of social media marketing plan and the steps to be taken to avoid significant image-making faux pas online.*

Key words: *Social media, identity, profile, image, image-making*

Why social media matters to image-making

Whether we like it or not, social media is here to stay until some other trendier, more functional or attractive communication channel has been invented. And while it is here we should beware of its dark side and make the most of its light side. The focus of this paper is twofold – to identify the benefits of image-making on social media and to reiterate the pitfalls of being on social media oblivious of ethics, morals, responsibilities, netiquette, and even spelling.

Social media matters very much today because it brings about added social influence to personal and corporate endeavors. People's buying behaviour and preferences, friendships and loyalties, staff recruitment and retention, actions and attitudes are impacted, among other factors, by the personal, community and business images exhibited on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, LinkedIn, and the other more or less popular social networking sites.

We should not forget at any time that social media is not for friends and acquaintances only and that the projection of the negative aspects of our personality online can have an adverse effect on our academic progress, job search, relations with colleagues, and private and professional partners. If we use social media in a knowledgeable way, we can benefit from the opportunity that it presents to create the all important strong first impression after it has been carefully thought out and properly staged. We can be our best or worst image-makers. It all depends on how we 'dwell' in social media.

The proper image can enhance business productivity, popularity, traffic and sales. Online images can produce an immediate effect on users, employers or partners because people still have faith in the maxim „Seeing is believing” albeit they know that there is a lot of manipulation (intentional or unintentional) in virtual communication. In image-making the goal is always to influence the receiver in a particular way and to benefit from the resulting behaviour and emotions.

Identity, Profile and Image

Given the confusion concerning the concepts of identity, profile and image, for the purpose of greater clarity, they are defined below in view of the way they are used by the author of this paper.

Identity is somebody's personality or the personality of a company. It is what a person or a company unquestionably is and relates to their inherent and essential characteristics. An identity can be concealed or disguised but it remains the same despite the efforts of image-makers unless the person or the company chooses to work on their characteristics and become better versions of themselves.

Profile means the „picture” of the person or the company that is sent to the audiences. Corporate or personal profile is created entirely by the company or the person and may differ from or match their image as it is perceived by the stakeholders.

Image relates to the way a person or a company is perceived by the audiences and the impact it makes on them and their decisions regarding their choices or allegiances. As perceptions, „images can be natural or constructed” [5].

To be perceived in the desired way the person himself or an image-maker works on the image. As early as 1961 in his book „The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America” Daniel Boorstin says: „An image is synthetic. It is planned: created especially to serve a purpose, to make a certain kind of impression.” A person's image is „a visible public personality as distinguished from an inward private character.” [1:185]. Boorstin goes on to say that the image can be manipulated and engineered in such a way as to become „the public portrait” which always diverges from the original to a smaller or a larger extent. To him it is „a pseudo-ideal”. Today, more than 50 years later this understanding of image is, perhaps, even more valid. There are, of course, images which truthfully reflect the real identity of a person or an organization. In these cases there is nothing that needs to be hidden, distorted, made up, coiffured, or exaggerated in order to be liked by the audiences. However, in the majority of cases images are created, sustained, brushed up, and meticulously projected by their prototypes or by the image-makers because a positive image is almost always the goal.

Technology today offers unprecedented opportunities for image-making which did not exist when Boorstin, a man with foresight, wrote his seminal book about image. Social media is empowering its users in a unique way by providing them with large scale profile integration but is also presenting them with the challenge to manage properly their digital personalities.

The Positive Self-Image

The end of the 20th and the first couple of decades of the 21st century have witnessed unique phenomena such as ‘do-it-yourself’ journalism, ‘do-it-yourself’ PR and, more specifically, ‘do-it-yourself’ image-making. Social media is the perfect platform for self-expression, sharing and making yourself visible to the public in the desired way. The lack of strict censorship, rules and editing provide the freedom that can be either used or abused.

Image-making on social media can be in the hands of the individual, who becomes his/her self-promoter, or of a professional image-maker when corporate image or that of a

celebrity or a politician is the goal. In both instances the steps to creating and sustaining a powerful and engaging image are the same.

The best starting point for projecting a positive image on social media is the positive self-image. If it is lacking, it should be developed consciously like a skill. People who have low self-esteem cannot expect to launch an impressive online image. By working inside out positive thinking can be attained. There are a lot of strategies leading to positive thoughts and self-appreciation such as avoiding negative exaggerations about the self; accepting that as a human being you are not perfect or flawless; not blaming yourself for other people's mistakes; focusing on the brighter side of people and events, and on what you can do rather than on what you can't do; and being ready to forgive and forget. These are but a few of the ways which can tip the scales toward positive thinking and the resulting positive self-image. The truth is that if you have and project a positive self-image, online users are more likely to perceive you as a positive, competent and worthy person.

Marketing your Image on Social Media

As a fairly recent phenomenon in the history of mass communication social media is not fully and appropriately understood and/or employed in image-making. And, perhaps, will never be as its development will always be ahead of the businesses' preparation and staffing to make the most of what it has to offer in terms of channels and applications. However, this should not be an excuse for approaching the issue of image-making on social media randomly, sporadically and without envisaging possible if not concrete gains.

There is not much room for innovation in the stages of a social media marketing plan and no matter what they are called they are basically the following:

Stage 1: Choice of social media

Not all social media are appropriate and effective for every individual or every business and for every situation. Aiming to be on all social media can be a waste of time and may not lead to the desired effect. The choice of social media is determined by a number of considerations.

- Targeted audiences – The people you want to reach and impress prefer particular social media which can be determined by age, social and educational background, and professional interests.
- Staff (for businesses) and/or free time (for individuals) – You should have the resources to maintain actively your presence on social media.
- Statistics – Statistics do change but they are still a good indicator of the demographics of the people who use social media.
- Privacy and accessibility – Some social media create an internet presence which makes you more visible and easily accessible by the audiences whereas others allow you to manage your privacy.

Stage 2: Initial profile outline

Filling out the personal or corporate profile completely and updating it with written and visual information is the initial evidence for professionalism, consistency, and serious intentions. The images you choose to include on different social media should be similar so that they are easily associated with the same entity. Avoiding confusing and ambiguous information is an advantage which sets you apart from other users and is a testimony of trustworthiness.

Stage 3: Deciding on posting strategy

This involves making decisions about the what, when, why and how of posting. Content is always very important and regards relevance, volume, and type of postings – text, pictures or videos. The time of posting is important because different social media users tend to be online at particular times. Posting materials while an event is in process, immediately after it is over or after a certain period of time also deserves consideration. Postings will be efficient if there is a specific reason for them to be on social media and this relates to the question of why. The how of posting is often neglected and often interesting and important information can go unnoticed because of that. The format, spelling and grammar come into play here.

Stage 4: Sustaining the desired image

Sustaining the desired image involves a lot of action. Your postings should be relevant to the social network you have chosen. Providing useful information to your followers that can help them resolve problems will give you considerable leverage in supporting a positive image. Thus you can become a social influence and be appreciated not just for the interesting pictures, videos or witty comments you post. If you understand well the needs and interests of the online community, you can inspire them to participate in laudable social campaigns. Thus you can become a social influencer.

Stage 5: Analysis of impact on audiences

For the majority of people it is important to know how their online persona is perceived by the audiences on virtual networks. While institutions and companies usually have budget allocated for measuring and analyzing the impact on social media audiences of their image, most users do not. The way to deal with the lack of funds for a sound analysis of the impact on online audiences can be counteracted to some extent by carefully managing your own presence in the virtual world. Another way of putting it is to foresee and prevent possible faux pas.

Stage 6: Making improvements: Do's and Don'ts

- Avoid negative content and try to create only positive content.
You hear such advice all the time and yet, social media abound in content which harms the users' images. Sometimes a hasty or inconsiderate reaction on the web can create havoc because as Formichetti puts it „The dark side of social media is that, within seconds, anything can be blown out of proportion and taken out of context. And it's very difficult not to get swept up in it all” [3].
- Decide what your image will be – more professional or more personal and select the right media. Some social media allow both for formal and informal outreach and are used by individuals and corporate entities alike. Other social media are more specifically oriented in one of the two directions – personal and less formal, and formal and professional.
- Do not respond to everything about you on social media. Doing so detracts you from more important issues you should deal with regarding your image impact factor. The American author and public speaker Timothy Ferriss rightly observes that users of social media commit “social media suicide' all the time by one of two ways. Firstly by responding to all criticism, meaning you're never going to find time to complete important milestones of your own, and by responding to things that don't warrant a response” [2].

- Strive to publish only distinctive, high quality content to avoid sinking in a sea of mediocrity.
- Before posting a comment, study the blog or online group for several days to get to know the main issues and the kind of people who contribute to make sure your postings will be relevant.
- Do not get involved with online groups dealing with sensitive matter such as religion and politics, or unlawful acts and banned movements.
- Do not ignore the issue of privacy – yours and that of your followers. Avoid the unhealthy “exhibitionism” characterized by irresponsible posting of any picture or information that you think will make you liked or allow you to benefit one way or another. Do not neglect spelling and grammar. They can boost your image in the long run even if you, the teenager or the young person, do not realize it. And remember the anecdotal saying that correct punctuation can save a life – „Spare him, not kill him” or “Spare him not, kill him”.
- Think ahead and try to predict if in the foreseeable future you will be happy with the trail you have left online.

Conclusion

It is impossible to conclude a topic which is so vast, popular and which is experiencing changes at this very moment. Image-making on social media cannot be encompassed in a single paper. What can be claimed with some degree of certainty is that if properly managed online image can help you achieve the goals you have set – win over more customers or political supporters, motivate people to participate in a noble cause, turn you into a sought after employee or partner, or just collect more ‘likes’ from among your peers.

Whichever of the above goals you have set for yourself, the simple rules outlined in this paper may help you take advantage of the ‘light side’ of social media and avoid becoming online something other than you wish to be. It is important to remember that the way people perceive you in the virtual world should not differ from the way they perceive you in the real world. Eventually the two worlds meet and then the smaller the difference between your image online and offline the better.

Bibliography:

1. Boorstin, D. 1992, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Vintage Books, A division of Random House, Inc. New York.
2. Ferriss, T http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/social_media.html, accessed 1.11.2015.
3. Formichetti, N. http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/social_media.html, accessed 24.10.2015.
4. Turney, M. 2000, „Images can be natural or constructed perceptions”, <http://www.nku.edu/~turney/prclass/readings/image.html>, accessed 21.10.2015.