



Social Media Comments: A Toxic Waste

Have you ever received toxic comments on social media? You know the type - passionate, angry, mostly misguided, and hurtful comments in response to a social media post. Unfortunately, I have been initiated into the ranks of those who have experienced this ugly phenomenon.

As a volunteer board member for a small nonprofit organization, we recently had to make a difficult, but important decision, to cancel an event which is beloved by the community. The decision was not made easily, but with great respect and consideration given to the community. (You see, I'm getting defensive already...) As one of the administrators of the nonprofit's Facebook page, I posted the cancellation notice as the organization. Because I was the person who drafted all the communications about the cancellation, talked to the press, developed a list of FAQs for the public, and am known by others as being on the board, I personally felt the weight of the negative feedback. Of course, the toxic comments could be interpreted by some as run-of-the-mill or another day in social media. However, I was not prepared for the avalanche of ill-informed, false, and mean-spirited comments.

The news articles that subsequently came out in our local news outlet met with a couple of anonymous comments, and our email newsletter garnered a few strongly worded emails, but nothing like the Facebook post. People publically vented. And no matter how much I wanted to rebut, answer, and clarify, I remembered the golden rule – DO NOT ENGAGE. It seems counterintuitive - you want to clear up any falsehoods, but once you engage, everything you say is blown out of proportion, mixed up and thrown back at you. No response is actually a response. So, I didn't reply.

The toxic brew of comments from this post still trickle in and the repercussions of the event cancellation are still visible via comments on other posts. I am now just documenting the comments for analysis and trying not succumb to "post jitters" when posting something new.

TOXIC COMMENTS: LYNNE'S LESSONS LEARNED

- 1.** If you are a business brand or represent a business or an organization, following the golden rule is imperative. DO NOT ENGAGE in any negative social media or public comments no matter how difficult it is. The feeding frenzy will ultimately wear itself out. Public speaker and author, Brene Brown said it best: “Do not try to win over the haters, you are not a jackass whisperer.”
- 2.** Brene Brown also says, “If you aren’t in the arena also getting your ass kicked, I’m not interested in your feedback.” Look at the authors of the comments. If they participate, donate, support you or your business, brand or organization, then take the time to contact them directly to discuss the issues. If the authors of the comments are people who aren’t in your arena, dismiss them. It’s not worth the time or energy.
- 3.** Stay on message with constituents and customers. Develop a communication plan. Provide talking points to your staff, team or colleagues. Draft FAQs for the public, but stick to the facts and the script. Consistent messaging to your tribe and to the public will help you weather the storm of negativity in a professional manner.
- 4.** Ask a professional for guidance. We had amazing support from a local marketing firm who gave us wise and welcome advice. We followed the advice to the letter as we developed our communication plan.
- 5.** Do not delete the toxic post or the negative comments. Although tempting (and believe me I was tempted), by deleting the comment you give the impression that you have something to hide. Because someone at one point saw the post or the comment. The only reason you should delete a comment is if you have a public policy in place about offensive language, or it is obvious spam.
- 6.** Internally review and evaluate the comments. Capture the comments in a spreadsheet and look for trends. Look for ways you could have communicated better and how you need to handle things moving forward. If you notice definite trends, there may be gaps in the perception of your business or organization that you need to address.

P A U S E for a minute- what are some key takeaways?

I believe things happen for a reason. My experience with toxic comments helped toughen me up because whether we like it or not, this is now the social media norm for both personal and business posts. We live in a world where everyone can comment openly and fervently about any topic. It is how we react to these comments that makes or breaks your business or brand.

At the same time, I have learned a lot about how we should comment on others' posts as well. What we say can and may be used against our brand... Hmm, a good topic for another article...

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