

First to Know, First to Act

Why PR-Savvy Companies
Want to Stay Ahead of the
Ever-Expanding Social
Information Landscape



In February 2018, the fast-food chicken chain KFC ran out of chicken. Because of a supply chain glitch, KFC was unable to get chicken to many of its United Kingdom restaurants. But it became more than a logistics problem when fans took to social media to voice their discontent, with some even reaching out to police via social media channels when the chain was forced to close many stores temporarily.

Thanks to the careful use of strategic social data surfacing tools, KFC was able to respond quickly and appropriately: “The chicken crossed the road, just not to our restaurants,” tweeted

the official account, several days before any news coverage of the story went out.

In today’s lightning-swift social landscape, a brand that listens to the same media outlet, celebrity, and corporate authorities as everyone else will find itself playing an endless game of catch-up. To stay ahead of high-impact events and critical breaking news that affects your customers, you must be able to control the flow of information from a much broader, less formal range of sources – from citizen journalists and up-and-coming influencers to industry expert chatter and emerging stories.

“Brands can no longer simply monitor news feeds to stay ahead of breaking news and trends,” says Neil Steinberg, vice president of Dataminr, which equips a wide range of organizations with up-to-the-minute information about breaking events. “Many of the sources that end up being the tipping point for major brand crises have a small social following.”

Why do the most PR-savvy brands in the world protect their brands by being the first to know? And how have they adjusted their approach to PR as a result? Here’s what they’ve figured out:

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First to Know is First to Own the Story

Global brands understand the critical importance of keeping close tabs on developing situations and being the first to respond to a crisis. In a time when the click of a button can widely disseminate information with the potential to impact a brand's reputation, staying ahead of the story is the first step in managing the public reaction. But being first to know is about more than responding to crises. Consider the following significant brand outcomes that come with staying ahead of the story:



1

Advanced, relevant information creates new and earlier opportunities to engage

Whether you're responding to a developing crisis or simply identifying a trend that aligns with your brand's values, having the tools to identify new opportunities before your competitors is a significant competitive advantage.

A skillful example of tapping into new opportunities to engage is how Wendy's burger chain

approached the 2018 Super Bowl blackout. When a brief equipment failure caused several seconds of dead air after a commercial break, Wendy's – long-time proponent of "fresh, never frozen," – tweeted, "Y'all freeze that live feed?" The rapid reaction to a shared experience impossible to plan in advance – garnered more than 24,000 favorites and 5,500 retweets.

"Brands have the ability to access new information and bubbling crisis situations that could affect them or their competitors," Steinberg says. "And if there's a topical conversation that's important to a brand on a local or even national level, the brand is able to identify that as soon as possible—and engage."



2

Alternative news sources deliver a creative advantage

One of the most valuable benefits of having access to real-time information is that it allows a brand to keep a finger on the pulse of their target customer and identify more creative opportunities for engaging with their audience.

For example, take Adidas' #MyNeoShoot campaign. The brand worked with Selena Gomez to spread the word about the contest to be featured in advertisements for the new design, but the focus of the ad was on crowd-

sourcing models for the brand's new line. The campaign generated 71,000 mentions of the hashtag across Twitter and Instagram and increased its sales by 24.2% over the course of a year—growth the brand could have missed out on if they hadn't tapped into their customer's desire to be a part of the creative process.

"Being able to look at situations from all angles is much more difficult than it was 10 or 20 years ago when sources were limited

and the news cycle was slower, especially when it comes to looking out for everyday opportunities that a brand just wouldn't know to look out for, like trending stories and hashtags," says Steinberg. "It's now critical for companies to be able to break through the social media noise to find specifically pertinent information."



3

Responding quickly enables brands to strategically respond and rectify the situation

The KFC scenario is one of many examples of how individual social media users are often responsible for breaking news before traditional media outlets do, and how viral social updates can rapidly amplify the negative reaction of triggering events. What might begin as a simple supply chain issue in the case of KFC can escalate into a public issue in a matter of minutes if you don't take action to shape the narrative – which is exactly what KFC did.

Consider Pepsi's attempt to re-imagine protesting with an idyllic ad featuring Kendall

Jenner handing a Pepsi to a police officer at a protest. Within hours, there was a social media backlash comparing screenshots of the ad to screenshots of real-life protests, all tagged #Pepsi. At first, Pepsi tried to defend the clip with a statement that the ad, "captures the spirit and actions of those people that jump in to every moment" – and then hastily apologized and removed the ads from rollout. The negative response to this statement could have been prevented with more in-depth research and more insightful evaluation of responses to the ad.



Building a Better Response System

In a world where news is disseminated through millions of social updates every minute, being armed with the means to cut through the clutter and respond with short notice is a bare minimum for brand communicators. That's why PR and communications teams equip themselves with tools that alert them to stories at the first moment something significant happens so they can manage the crises at the earliest possible stage.

"Proactive brands can frame a story rather than being on the defensive," says Carin Warner, president of Warner Communications, an integrated marketing communications service agency. "For example, we represent one client that does email encryption. Every time there's a news story that involves email hacking, we want to be the first to position our client as an expert resource. To be able to do that effectively, we have to be way out in front."

These tools are different from social listening platforms. Rather than flooding you with information on a given topic, they use AI and machine learning innovation to detect, classify, and determine the significance of public data in real-time. They also benefit from access to relevant data to build the technology on top of social networks like Twitter to access the public-facing dataset promptly and efficiently.



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“The advanced artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithm allows some tools to filter news from noise and pull out the most relevant pieces of information as it pertains to a particular category or a particular interest of a brand,” says A.J. McHugh, client engagement manager for Dataminr. “By using this kind of proprietary software, a brand is able to dial in on the most significant information faster than it would if it were to wait for the national or mainstream media to report on it, alerting them to events that have not yet been captured or reported by wider outlets.”



Giving Your Communications Team the Tools They Need to Act

In the face of steadily evolving communications technology, it should be no surprise that the simple social listening tools brands have used for decades have run their course. But just because the ability to keep up with relevant information across all platforms is much harder than it was ten years ago, it doesn't mean you should let new opportunities or threats to your brand's reputation take you by surprise.

In a digital landscape that changes every second, the first to know about relevant developments and the first to protect their brand will always have the upper hand. Tap into the tools available to help your organization respond first, faster, and better than your competitors.





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