

# PRWeek

OP-ED

## In digital dialogue, every word counts

By the time you reach the end of this sentence you will know, down to the last space, what 140 characters looks like; including this period.

A recent Ketchum experience with Twitter reminds us that each word online – each character – counts.

A colleague of ours was traveling to the hometown of one of Ketchum's long-standing clients when he fired off a Tweet in response to a personally offensive encounter (not involving our client). The Tweet didn't mention a specific place, but it came across as critical of our client's city. It demonstrated a lack of judgment, and, while unintentional, it caused offense. The employee apologized to the client, as did Ketchum; the client accepted the apologies and considers it case closed.

With perspective, this episode is instructive in that it underscores the dramatic way social media is changing the rules of the game, provides deeper insight into this dynamic space, and reminds us why PR must embrace the digital world.

While Ketchum has been recognized for using social media, to ensure it's even better at it, the firm has incorporated fresh insights, such as these into employee training:

■ **The private is becoming public.** The line between personal and professional communication is disappearing, so think of every blog, Tweet, and social networking page as an indelible fingerprint. Professional work as a communicator can be

### PR pros must continue to innovate with and through social media

impacted by personal comments – so appreciate the convergence of the worlds in which we live.

■ **Context still matters.** However, the brevity of online communication, combined with the speed we are expected to engage, means there is little chance to provide context. Think about how words will look if they stand alone and consider if they should be offered through a different medium.

■ **Remember there are 360 degrees of connections.** Before posting

online, consider the impact – not just to “friends and family,” but stakeholders, too. If dialogue is intended for a specific audience, consider who else is listening.

■ **The stakes are higher than ever.** Information is being exchanged at a blinding speed. This raises the possibility that just one post can create a wide conversation – or drive social action – sometimes before the facts have been checked.

■ **We're all accountable.** The president is the US' most famous handheld device user. Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA) might be the first to Tweet from the Senate floor. Both have acknowledged that their online activity invites additional scrutiny and requires accountability. Communicators, too, should treat every Tweet like it's in the public domain, because it is.

This is the present and future of communications. Ketchum's experience created a “digital dialogue.” It also reminded us that every word online counts and that, despite the risks, PR pros must innovate with and through social media. Failure to do so will invite irrelevancy. ■

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