

The powers and perils of social media during the lockdown

by

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Social media is one of the most powerful communication platforms in the world today, in fact, it toppled a few governments already. It also played a major role in the successful election campaigns of America's last two presidents, President Barack Obama and President Donald Trump. Social media can also be one of the most effective ways of reaching out to broader markets, engaging with stakeholders and building the reputation and corporate citizenship of companies. Thus, social media represents significant business opportunity, but it may also pose risk when we don't use it in appropriate ways. Social media platforms create communities for sharing knowledge and support employees through direct, informal and formal communication. Instead of using a call centre, for instance, questions about benefits can be discussed by smartphone, participating in discussion threads with specialists and other community members to share knowledge, opinions and questions.

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic worldwide, social media has become an effective channel of communication and engagement with a broad variety of stakeholders all over the world. It is probably the most powerful communication tool in the world today. Social media platforms such as twitter, facebook, Instagram and linked-in makes it possible for companies to communicate key information about developments regarding the Covid-19 virus to masses of people all over the world across time zones within seconds. It also provides an instant feedback channel, although most organisations do not understand that if the communication by the sender is instant and released in seconds, the same applies to the response by the receiver who can now also answer immediately. While many companies have a standard guideline of a 48 hours turnaround time on an email, when it comes to social media, people expect an answer within an hour, hence the need for full-time attention to social media responses, even if these answers are notifications of work being done to provide more comprehensive follow-up on complicated matters requiring investigation.

Having said that, a high level of social media professionalism is needed for official communication from organisational platforms or any individual account of a person who can be identified or associated to a company, in other words, everyone who is employed. These days it is very easy to trace any person to an organisation. Individuals must realise that whether they like it or not, they do represent their companies. In most, if not all CCMA cases in which employees were dismissed for inappropriate or unprofessional social media communication, the Commissioners upheld the dismissals. Therefore, people are really wasting their time to state on their twitter profiles that they are tweeting in their personal capacity. If you can be traced, and we all know that to be the case, there is no such thing as personal capacity when communicating information and opinions to the public. Now during the lockdown and in particular regarding the implementation of the Disaster Management Act regulations, fake news is illegal, and people should be careful not to spread any fake news or inappropriate, unprofessional, misleading or offensive information.

While social media is a powerful tool of communication to spread essential and good information, it is potentially also valuable to expose the truth about things going wrong in society. The brutal and inhumane behaviour by police and defence force staff in townships constitutes human rights abuses

and has been exposed in the media and therefore also serves as vital evidence for investigations and disciplinary action where necessary. In most of these cases, the videos were taken by ordinary members of society or the media and shared on social media within minutes of the atrocities and crimes being committed.

However, while unprofessional communication on social media should be discouraged, it is a reality that more diverse and contrasting opinions will be shared on social media during a worldwide pandemic and lockdowns in particular. There are three reasons for this phenomenon: First, people are staying at home and therefore spend a significant amount of time on social media. Second, we are in a crisis situation, and increased levels of anxiety, and uncertainty will result in more opinions being expressed, and more questions posed than would otherwise be the case. Third, if people are forced to engage in social distancing and not meet with friends, family, colleagues and neighbours, they still need to communicate and be socially connected and what better way of social connection than social media. Ultimately, different opinions are important and valuable in any democracy and society in search of the truth.

Most government departments have done an excellent job over the past 22 days in leveraging social media for the purpose of communication. From the Department of Health, to the South African Police Service, to the Department of Employment and Labour to provincial government departments - social media communication has been excellent with a few exceptions. New regulations were released within minutes after official announcements and presentations to the public, including the full government gazettes shared on social media. In addition, summaries and infographics were provided depicting the main points in visible and attractive formats making it possible for people to immediately comprehend what the issue was all about. Where there was a lack of clarity, comments were sent back to Ministers, and appropriate (and sometimes inappropriate) responses provided within days.

Like most other things in life, social media has advantages and disadvantages. We can use it to learn from one another and to keep people informed, or we can use it to spread inaccurate information, fake news, or to embarrass and humiliate other people. The reality is that the inappropriate use of social media is a source of self-embarrassment and self-destruction. But taking people with you on the journey to destruction is irresponsible and unacceptable. There is only one person responsible for your personal brand and that is yourself. Communicating with respect and dignity is key in all social media interactions. Furthermore, empathy is of paramount importance in social media communication when there is so much anxiety, stress, suffering, poverty, inequality, pain, infections and deaths.

During this time of lockdown, it is important to only trust reliable sources such as the World Health Organization, The Presidency, Department of Health, the Department of Employment and Labour, other government departments and provincial governments. The dedicated special government website www.sacoronavirus.co.za is a good central source of information about Covid-19. The National Institute for Communicable Diseases is also an excellent source of reliable social media information. Also bear in mind that there are individuals running these social media sites. They are also humans who will make the odd mistake like all of us, but if you observe the quality and quantity of information from all these sources over the past month, it is clear that their intentions were only good and their main aim was to share the correct official communication in the right way. Where people made some mistakes, most of them had the decency, insight and professionalism to apologise for their behaviour and most reasonable people will forgive them for an honest apology. We should expect more human errors during times of uncertainty, stress and anxiety, especially during a lockdown, but as good citizens we should all be mindful to use social media in a responsible way.

The President of South Africa, President @CyrilRamaphosa and The Minister of Health @DrZweliMkhize have been great communicators on social media during the lockdown period. You can have confidence to follow them on twitter and other social media platforms to get regular

information. That is the power of social media. The President and the Health Minister are communicating to all of us every day and you are directly connected to them via social media. We are connected on a daily basis and we know that we get the right information from the right sources. Some of the other Ministers, Premiers and MECs have attempted to follow their example with mixed success. Clearly, we also need an e-learning course on the correct and professional use of social media, in particular during times of crisis communication from a disaster management perspective.

As expected, thought leaders and community activists were also very visible on social media during the lockdown. Many of them have played an excellent role to challenge the status quo, to lead us in progressive thinking and to ask the right questions. But very importantly, social media was used to remind us to be disciplined and stay at home, to wash our hands, clean surfaces and to use sanitisers. Top academic thought leaders like Professors @ThuliMadonsela3 from @StellenboschUni and @pierredevos from @uct_news were as always excellent on twitter. They are a daily source of inspiration, leadership, hope, critical thinking and real insight about what really matters in society during such difficult times. They have proved time and time again that academic leadership and excellence is not limited to textbooks and research articles, but to provide relevant science and thought leadership to society, and to share their ideas and insights to masses of people who can use them to make society a better place.

When it comes to the private sector, there are some excellent thought leaders like @MichaelJordaan from @rainsouthafrica who are showing good social media leadership. Like all leaders, private sector leaders should become more visible on social media during these times of uncertainty. We need them to provide hope and direction, and also to display their own vulnerability. None of us are immune to the virus and we are all in this together. In fact, the vulnerability that we also face binds us together and makes us all equal during our collective focus on survival, health, safety, connectivity and sustainability.

Today I want to provide some guidelines for organisations in leveraging the opportunity of social media during the lockdown:

- Assess, plan and integrate your social media and content strategy into your digital and overall business strategy.
- Adapt your social media strategy to the current crisis and develop a specific Covid-19 social media communication plan.
- CEOs should do a regular, preferably a weekly podcast or short video for their staff and other stakeholders, in addition to daily social media posts.
- Prioritise social media as one of the most important forms of communication during the lockdown.
- Decide on the right type of platform for the type of communication. For instance, photos work better on Instagram and discussion forums on Linked-in, but align, tailor, reinforce and integrate across platforms where necessary.
- Think carefully on how to balance good and bad news, for example achievements versus infections or business challenges and underperformance. Balance the seriousness of the situation with an appropriate sense of humour where appropriate. A higher level of human touch is needed during a time of crisis, but should continue after the lockdown to create a more caring world.
- Invite senior and middle managers to become more actively involved in social media, but allocate a small team of specialists for the purpose of official communication such as announcements and contingency plans.
- Empower all your social media change agents in your organisation. They can multiply the impact of your marketing and public relations departments, but use them purposefully as a

source of strength, visibility and reinforcement of your corporate communication. Some personal brands are more valuable than company brands, in particular when they have more followers than their companies on social media. Assign one or two social media champions per department to leverage the power of social media.

- Ensure that the people managing your social media accounts are professionally trained or coached on the correct and professional use of social media.
- Make your social media policy visible on your website.
- Think creatively on how you can reach out to the different stakeholders of your organisation.
- Monitor your social media engagement and provide feedback and take action where necessary.

While the above guidelines are useful from an organisational perspective, social media is one of the most important tools for employees, their family members and other people to stay connected during the lockdown. Therefore, let me share a few tips for the general use of social media during the lockdown:

- Decide on how important your own personal brand is and plan your social media posts accordingly.
- Think before you post on social media, you can say what you think, but realise that different people will interpret your message differently, therefore keep it decent, respectful and appropriate, and within the spirit of the disaster management regulations.
- Stay connected with the outside world. While we are locked down at home, we are all connected with the external world. Knowledge and connection is power if used correctly.
- Comply with your company's social media policy and values, remember that all employees can be traced to their companies, and that there are limits to the notion of "personal capacity."
- Show that you care for other people during this difficult time.
- Connect with friends, family members and colleagues via social media.
- Learn to park confusing information, you don't need to respond to everything you read or hear.
- Use social media to have a positive impact on society.
- If you get upset about some social media messages, think it through, and either ignore it or respond later rather than reacting in an aggressive, disrespectful or inappropriate way.
- Don't share all your personal feelings and frustrations with the world, be selective and first decide on whether you are really making a contribution.
- If you can't handle criticism and different opinions, don't engage on social media. Learn to value different opinions and perspectives, it makes you a better person.
- Learn to use a new social media platform during the lockdown.
- Follow credible sources of information as suggested above. Use your judgement and distinguish between good and bad sources of information.
- Be careful of Internet and social media addiction. The key word is balance.
- Sensitive or confidential information is not intended for social media.
- Read more during this time, but form your own opinions based on good knowledge.
- Don't share any fake news. If something sounds strange, wait a day or two before you respond or share the information. Rather be cautious than sorry.
- Monitor your social media engagement and make the necessary changes and improvements.

In conclusion, leverage the power of social media, but also consider the perils of social media. While we don't want to suppress freedom of speech, we need to ensure that social media provides connectivity, good information and social support during the lockdown. We are physically locked down, and social distancing does not mean that we are socially isolated. That is the reason why I prefer

the term physical distancing and not social distancing. There is indeed power in social media. Suddenly employees and people without any power in traditional corporate and government hierarchies have more power than top managers in business and government. Some employees have more social media followers than their managers, which means that employees have more influence than some of their managers. Social media provides all us with an opportunity to become social influencers, in other words people who can make a contribution to make the world a better place.

Let us optimise social media during and after the lockdown. Like all other good things amplified during the lockdown, such as services being delivered by government, and a new focus on hygiene, social media will continue after the lockdown and it will be used more than before. Yes, use facebook, but don't lose face in the process. Use twitter, but don't get blocked. Link up with people on linked-in. Use Instagram to post beautiful and appropriate photos and images that will inspire people during the lockdown. While we are trying to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus, let us spread the truth and good news, and not fake news. Social media is one of the best ways to be a good family member, a good friend, a good employee, a good neighbour and ultimately a good citizen, and you are achieving all of this goodness by being safe at home.

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