

Marketing Thought Leaders

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Social Media Ethics Shades of Gray: GhostTweeting and other Dilemmas

by [Nancy Pekala](#)

Are there shades of gray when it comes to ethical behavior in social media? While companies and brands are still figuring it out, it's becoming increasingly clear that it is an issue that can't be ignored.

In [Incorporating Digital Ethics into your Organization's Social Media Plan](#), part of the AMA's new [Social Media GPS](#) podcast series, Wayne Hurlbert, an SEO consultant and host of Blog Business Success on www.blogtalkradio.com, noted that some social media users struggle with ethics because they view it differently than ethical behavior associated with other traditional media. "It's not different," Hurlbert said "and, in fact, is the key to social media success."

"Sharing matters. Social media isn't about getting. It's about giving more than you get and helping others."

-----Wayne Hurlbert

He added, "Social media ethics, like all ethics, is not just some personal interpretation," Hurlbert said. "That shallow, short-term thinking failed Enron and it failed AIG and it fails in social media too."

Mack Collier, social media consultant, speaker and author of the [Viral Garden](#) blog suggested that one of the reasons why there's such confusion around ethics in social media right now is because the space is still relative new. "Businesses are trying to figure out how to monetize their efforts which is leading to a discovery of where the lines are when it comes to social media. As the space continues to evolve and as monetization becomes clearer, ethical issues should more easily sort themselves out."

Collier added, "One thing companies really need to keep in mind is that social media tools aren't marketing tools; they're content creation and communication tools. A lot of companies are viewing social media as a potential new marketing channel and assuming the same marketing rules apply."



One of the ethical issues that companies are struggling with is the level of transparency they demonstrate in social media channels including the practice of ghostwriting and how they represent themselves on Twitter.

"I don't believe there are shades of gray in social media because all you have is the trust you can create from what you write and say and display via your avatar," Hurlbert suggested. "As a result, if you're pretending to be someone else or pretending to be an organization that you're not, then all trust is lost. People prefer to do business with those who they know, like and trust and if you remove those factors from the social media world by trying to shade it into gray areas, you will not succeed."

He added, "Since social media is all about conversations and building relationships and trust, it's much easier to build a relationship with a real person who has a real face and a real name as opposed to a faceless corporation. It's so much more beneficial to the organization to put real people front and center and have them create real conversations than it is to have a logo where it looks like it's more of a press release or a media statement than an actual person having a real conversation."



Collier agreed that companies should be clear about who is representing them in social media channels. "Companies need to wrap their head around the concept that social media channels are tools customers use primarily to communicate with each other to create and share content. If companies want to use it as a marketing tool, they're going to have to adapt their usage to the audiences they're trying to reach. That's where ethical issues come into play. They need to realize that what you do in a marketing situation isn't always going to completely jive with what you need to do in social media so you need to adapt your usage to the people you're trying to reach and how they're using it."

For example, while some companies claim enlisting ghostwriters to write blog posts or tweets is acceptable because ghostwriters are employed to write other types of business communications, Collier suggests that the expectations of blog readers are that the post is written by the person signing their name to it.

Both Collier and Hurlbert agree that companies shouldn't hide behind their logo on Twitter accounts. "There needs to be an indication that there's a real person behind those Tweets," Collier said. "Ideally, I would like to see a real face. Companies need to think about putting the actual human behind the account and give them at least as much space as the company logo."

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Ghostwriting in social media, and specifically the use of third-party agencies or consultants to draft Tweets or create Facebook page updates, has become an ethical issue many companies are now addressing. From a business standpoint, the decision to employ a third party to manage a company's social media presence needs to be part of a long-term plan. In either case, Collier stressed that ethically, it's advisable for brands and companies to be upfront of its use of third parties owning the social media communication.

"If the Twitter or Facebook page gets popular enough anyway, somebody's going to find out, and if they do it will become a bugaboo you've got to deal with," Collier noted. "It makes much more sense to disclose it upfront."

Hurlbert agreed, adding that "Once the third party's created the conversation, the conversation is now theirs and they are the ones that hold the relationship and you no longer even have a voice in the conversation."

He also suggested that companies who speak through a character in social media channels must be upfront about the proxy voice. "Personas are often confusing and can lose trust," he explained. "Social media is about trust and trust must be earned. Once it's

lost, trust is hard to recover, and in social media there may be no second chance to recover it.”

In order to effectively navigate their way through the new ethical waters of social media, Collier stressed that it is essential companies create a specific social media policy. “Employees need to know whether it’s okay for them to use social media, in what context, who can speak for the company and how problems should be addressed,” he explained.

Hurlbert also suggested a plan should include the goals of a company’s social media initiatives. “Is the goal to create conversation and relationships with customers? If so, that’s a very solid way to build that knowing, trusting and like factor,” he explained. “But if it’s simply to send out your marketing message to anyone and everyone, that’s not really a goal that should be part of the social media process. That’s just being a glorified spammer. “

Instead, Hurlbert said that those empowered to speak on behalf of the company should know their “role is to create conversation and cultivate relationships, provide service to customers and to give more than they get.”

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