

Embracing negative comments can help corporations increase consumer trust

January 26 2016

Public trust is incredibly hard won once a corporation has been mired in negative publicity. Volkswagen and Chipotle face huge obstacles in regaining consumers after debacles, but can simply owning up to their transgressions on social media really help? A recent study conducted by researchers at the University of Minnesota and Youngstown State University found that embracing supporting and opposing perspectives to comments by a corporation can enhance its trustworthiness.

Hyejoon Rim (University of Minnesota) and Doori Song (Youngstown State University) published their findings in the *Journal of Communication*. The researchers conducted an experiment with 124 online participants to examine how the public's comments and the sidedness of a company's responses affect the public's attribution of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) motives, perceived negativity of the comments, and attitudes toward a company.

The public's comments were adopted and modified from actual websites where a multinational company's promotional video and campaign information were posted, then manipulated to either positive or negative. The researchers separated responses into two categories: one-sided, where only desirable attributes of the campaign were addressed; and two-sided, where favorable and unfavorable attributes were addressed.

The researchers found potential benefit in using two-sided message strategy (addressing both self-serving and public-serving motives of CSR campaign) to deal with the public's skepticism toward CSR.

Incorporating two-sided messages to respond to negative comments may increase perceived altruism and reduce perceived negativity of reported CSR and comments, and enhance positive public attitudes toward the company.

Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of delivering CSR messages that mitigate suspicion of ulterior motives because when people distrust the sincerity of a company's motives, the message backfires on the company and hurts its reputation.

"Given that the most challenging task in CSR communication lies in enhancing perceived altruism and managing negative public [comments](#) over which the company has limited control, the findings may guide corporate communication managers to leverage CSR communication on [social media](#)," said Rim. "As the study demonstrated, the public may appreciate a [company](#) for being transparent and honest rather than exaggerating its socially responsible practices."

More information: Hyejoon Rim et al. "How Negative Becomes Less Negative": Understanding the Effects of Comment Valence and Response Sidedness in Social Media, *Journal of Communication* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/jcom.12205](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12205)

Provided by International Communication Association

Citation: Embracing negative comments can help corporations increase consumer trust (2016, January 26) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-01-embracing-negative-comments-corporations-consumer.html>

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