

Chapter 2

Transparency and Authenticity



Transparency and authenticity are more than just “buzz words” in business today. They are what a rapidly growing number of consumers expect from the companies with which they do business. Quite frankly, people are sick and tired of big corporate monsters being untouchable and indifferent or aloof. The days of these reclusive, faceless companies are disappearing. People want accurate, timely information. They want full disclosure. They want honesty in business and expect corporations of all sizes to provide transparency and authenticity. They also want to know the human beings behind the website, the logo, the commercials, and the print ads. And it’s not only in business or corporate America that transparency is in demand by the public. It is obviously significant in the political arena, and in our schools where we want to know who

is educating our children and what is being done to keep our children safe. It is in law enforcement and in government agencies. Nonprofit groups are also held accountable as well as community groups and even neighborhood associations.

In fact, not long ago, Google released the number of requests by the FBI for people's online activity. It illustrated how a major social media platform could take the lead in how to be transparent.

Of course, companies will still hold closed-door meetings and keep their trade secrets to themselves—all perfectly legal. After all, they need to maintain a competitive edge. But honesty and openness with customers is the new “sexy” when it comes to doing business.

Today, your personal brand, or business, needs to exhibit the same transparency when it comes to social media. As I see it, transparency and authenticity are the new reality TV. People are bored and tired of the same old scripted messages repeated again and again. They watch reality TV, even if it is not completely authentic, because they see real people with their own successes and their failures, as well as their shortcomings and gifts. It's real, and people form relationships and draw connections with characters.

You are now creating a character in social media that is honest and based on who you really are.

Transparency applies to everything from who you are to what you stand for, and all of that is important for an industry expert, a small business owner, or a Fortune 500 executive. No matter who you are, people want you to be open, honest, and straightforward. You're like the chef at a fine restaurant who comes out of the kitchen and shakes the customer's hands and talks about preparing the food; the athlete who drops the cliché answers and tells it like it is; the executive who fields questions from the podium and gives honest answers about the products, the merger, or the news of the day. You're the expert who says the product, the service, the test site, or the film is not yet ready for the public, and here's why. You are someone who believes in being open, honest, and transparent—within the boundaries of common sense and good taste, of course.

Be Yourself

Oscar Wilde once said, “Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.” And that brings us to the topic of your own personal transparency, which means being open, sincere, and, in essence, yourself. Quite honestly, the easiest character to create and portray should be “you,” right? Comedian Lewis Black might dispute that, as he does in a comedy routine in which he talks about a TV network executive who once wanted to do a show based on his life, but didn’t want to play himself in the show. Black was baffled about someone wanting to replace himself to play himself! Odd as that sounds, most of us are well versed enough to play ourselves, at least on the internet. We have years of experience, and we know what we like, dislike, and care about. We know our strengths, our weaknesses, our goals, and even our favorite foods!

Yet many people are still not comfortable being themselves. Insecurity and years of putting up walls to protect ourselves have left many of us feeling awkward and uncomfortable about revealing who we really are. In fact, a recent study by Hubspot, a social media monitoring service, found that upwards of 40 percent of “active” Twitter users

YOU KNOW YOU HAVE CHARACTER WHEN . . .

You exhibit:

- ◆ Honesty and integrity
- ◆ Likes, dislikes, interests, passions, etc.
- ◆ Goals, desires, and what you want to achieve
- ◆ Expertise
- ◆ Vulnerability and weaknesses, because nobody is perfect

It is important for you to expose your human, vulnerable side (with some limits and cautions; see “Doing It Wrong: Transparency Can Hurt You” on page 34) in order to gain the trust of your audience.

never actually tweet. One reason is that they aren't comfortable being themselves, being naked online, or even semi-naked. Fret not—we were all there at one point. Many of us sat there looking at other people's tweets, thinking, "I don't know what to say. Who will be interested in me or my brand anyway?"

So how do you—Character A—present yourself so you can build an audience and engage Characters B, C, D, etc.? What will you tweet to get an audience's attention? What will make them follow you? How will your online character engage someone else? By creating a character based on who you are, what you do, and what you are passionate about.

How to Be Transparent

For a business, there is much more to transparency than providing your annual report or putting the ingredients on your packaging. People want to connect; they don't want that automated phone system, but the human being instead. It's about being engaging, sharing passions, and talking about your brand as it relates to real people.

There are many ways in which to exhibit transparency.

Share Your Successes

Share your successes, such as closing a big deal, winning an award, or getting a major accolade, by showing your humility and enthusiasm, not by tooting your own horn or bragging. Showing that it really means something to you to win an award is a very honest reaction. People get excited when they win something, and it is human to share it (see Figure 2-1 on page 23).

Street Roots, publishers of a biweekly street newspaper in Portland, Oregon, sold by homeless vendors, shared its latest initiative on its Facebook page. Positive initiatives, not unlike winning an award in your community, should be shared. They let followers and fans know you are proud of your achievements while also reminding them of your brand (see Figure 2-2, page 23).



Figure 2–1 *Education at Work, a Cincinnati, Ohio, nonprofit that provides jobs and training to college students, announces a new partnership with Vantiv Inc., a payment-processing service, via Google+.*

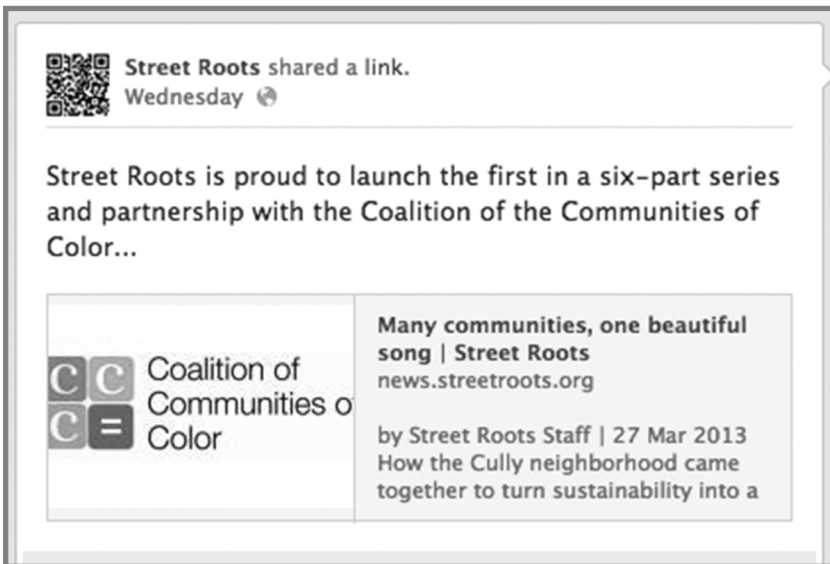


Figure 2–2 *Sharing a positive initiative.*

Share Your Passions

Talk about the community food drive you ran, the Little League team you sponsor, or the greener mode of transportation people are using to get to and from the office. New Belgium Brewery in Colorado is gung-ho about having their employees bicycle to work every day to keep the air quality just a little cleaner—and gives them free bikes for doing so. They love talking about making the world a little greener through sustainable practices, from recycling to using rainwater in their brewery. Perhaps you and your employees get your hands dirty working for Habitat for Humanity or in some other community effort. Share this with people.

Many businesses today are involved in nonbusiness activities. Companies of all sizes stepped up to provide relief after Superstorm Sandy rocked the Northeast in October 2012, with devastating floods causing billions of dollars of damages. Companies provided volunteers and raised money. Talking about the role your business played in relieving the effects of such a tragedy is more than just good PR; it shows a genuine concern for others.

Let people know about your interests and hobbies as well. Just like in the real world, it's a great way to start a conversation—and to let people know the person behind the brand. I let people know what music I like to listen to, what I get excited about, the football team I root for (the Tampa Bay Buccaneers). I try to build a relationship with my audience by trying to be authentic and mixing who I am with what I know about my business.

People gravitate to those with whom they share interests. If, for example, you are looking for a lawyer, are you more likely to choose one who shares that she is a dog or cat lover or is into sailing, or one who only talks legalese?

Talk About Your Corporate Culture

This is a great way to win your followers' trust. They learn how your company conducts business and how you treat your employees. It is a

way of reminding followers of the age-old saying “We do business with people we like and trust.” How can you like people and trust them if you don’t know who they are or what they stand for?

Let potential followers and customers see the human side of business and appreciate the candor. Talk about the funny things that happen in the office such as the Super Bowl bet the CEO lost to an office temp. Discuss group outings or activities such as how the company softball team got clobbered, or how the sales department managed to capsized their canoe on the company fishing trip. Do you have casual days? Do you bring your kids to work on occasion? Do you have free medical screenings? What is it like working in your business? Even a one-person operation has stories to tell about their work atmosphere that are very real and engaging.

Let People Know You Aren’t Perfect

Transparency is not all about your successes. From recalls of anything from aspirin to automobiles, to airlines losing luggage, things go wrong in every industry. Those companies that try to hide it or act like it didn’t happen are the ones that lose customers in a major way once the truth gets out . . . and it almost always does.

Being honest, transparent, humble, and admitting you screwed up is what transparency is also about. It’s in vogue today to step up and acknowledge that changing the age-old formula in your popular soft drink was a big mistake or that the newer, faster processor was a dud. Being honest and authentic means talking about your failures and showing humility when you ship something to the wrong place, get called out for a code violation, or find yourself in the news for a billboard others found offensive.

Apologizing and talking about your errors makes people relate to you and creates empathy. Some companies have figured out that transparency means telling it like it is. For example, Jet Blue and Virgin Air respond to customer complaints, make jokes about their errors, and correct mistakes in public to show people that they are transparent and working to make their businesses better.

JET BLUE'S SOCIAL MEDIA STORY

Jet Blue adopted social media early on to connect and communicate with customers, with founder and CEO David Deeleman using YouTube as early as 2007 to apologize for the cancellation of 1,200 flights when an ice storm unexpectedly hit the New York metropolitan area and the company was unprepared to manage the crisis.

The company then adopted blogging, Twitter, and YouTube as its main social channels for communication and issuing *mea culpas*.

On Feb. 14, 2011, a Jet Blue plane sat on the tarmac of a snowy Connecticut runway for more than seven hours. Passengers had no access to food, water, or working bathroom facilities, nor were they offered an explanation as to why they were waiting for such a long time before taking off. At least one angry passenger tweeted from the plane during the entire ordeal, which, including flight time, lasted 11½ hours. Jet Blue's apologetic response to customers and the public again came in the form of a personal statement of responsibility, this time by the company's COO, posted to YouTube and to the company blog.

The company routinely responds individually to angry customers via Twitter and has continued to offer communication via social channels. Utilizing humor and keeping their customers informed, Jet Blue has successfully leveraged social media to keep customers happy, as shown in Figure 2-3.

Jet Blue has also engaged followers in conversations about mutual topics of interest. Flier Louie Baur, for example, tweeted back and forth with Jet Blue about their mutual love of ninjas, building a bond between the company and the client. Such personal bonds can create tremendous brand loyalty.

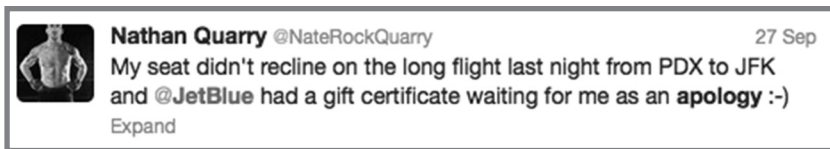


Figure 2-3 *Social Media evidence that Jet Blue recovered from previous bad PR events through its clever and consistent use of social media.*

THE KITCHENAID® DEBACLE

During the 2012 election debates, a member of the social media team at KitchenAid “accidentally” tweeted a disparaging remark about President Barack Obama’s grandmother, who had passed away just a few days earlier.



Figure 2-4 *The tweet that set off a backlash of negative responses*

The numerous responses to KitchenAid’s inappropriate tweet included comments about not registering for KitchenAid products; throwing out those products; telling KitchenAid to stick to mixers and stay out of politics; and the basic reminders that insensitive, inappropriate jokes do not go over well with current, or potential, customers.

KitchenAid responded quickly, taking full responsibility for their social media team’s poor and careless action. Cynthia Soledad, head of the KitchenAid brand, tweeted that that they would “personally like to apologize to President Barack Obama, his family, and everyone on Twitter for the offensive tweet sent earlier.” She also sent an email to various online media sites, including Mashable and The Huffington Post, expressing regret and apologizing for the incident (see Figure 2-5, page 28).

In contrast, other companies make it impossible to reach anyone when something goes wrong or a customer is in need of assistance. As

During the debate last night, a member of our Twitter team mistakenly posted an offensive tweet from the KitchenAid handle instead of a personal handle. The tasteless joke in no way represents our values at KitchenAid, and that person won't be tweeting for us anymore. That said, I lead the KitchenAid brand, and I take responsibility for the whole team. I am deeply sorry to President Obama, his family, and the Twitter community for this careless error. Thanks for hearing me out. –Cynthia Soledad, senior director, KitchenAid

Figure 2–5 *KitchenAid’s apology.*

a result, they generate numerous negative postings all over social media and on websites, which, in time, can significantly hurt sales.

The Art of Vulnerability

Being vulnerable is more than just saying, “Oops, we screwed up.” It’s opening up a little about you, letting us know that behind the smoke and mirrors is the real Wizard of Oz and he’s just an ordinary guy, like the rest of us.

People fear vulnerability because they are scared that showing any signs of weakness will spoil their mystique or their competitive edge. And yet, today, being naked and vulnerable is becoming a strength. It can break down the wall between you, your brand, your logo, and your followers. BUT you need to do so correctly.

Vulnerability is not about telling dark secrets, but about sharing the human struggles and concerns of life. Let people know what you are looking to learn more about or discuss the challenges you may have overcome or are hoping to overcome in the future. Acknowledge that you are baffled by some of the latest technology or that you are not yet where you’d like to be at the gym. If you are successful in your field, talk about how your business emerged from your garage, your brother-in-law’s basement, or some other humble starting point. Talk about the early struggles, within reason, of course. People can relate to building something from nothing, and especially to the trial and error process.

Look for others who are vulnerable and let them know that you’ve been there and done that. “Like” the post on Facebook or LinkedIn

about not knowing how to use your iPhone when you first got it or respond to the tweet from someone who doesn't understand what hashtags are or how to use them.

But even better than simple, everyday vulnerabilities are those that pertain directly to what it is that you do. If you monitor hashtags and keywords related to your expertise, then you have a real opportunity to be the knight in shining armor or Wonder Woman to the rescue. Demonstrating your knowledge and willingness to be helpful can go a long way in winning over fans and brand champions.

Of course, vulnerability can only go so far. There's a fine line between being vulnerable and letting the horses out of the barn. Go slowly, and like a classic stripper, get naked a little at a time. Bottom line is vulnerability equals being real and authentic.

FIVE WAYS TO TALK BUSINESS WITHOUT BEING PUSHY OR PITCHY

1. *Ask general questions.* Asking questions opens the door to learning more about the other person. It's an old sales technique, but is effective because the more you learn, the easier it is to determine how your product or service can (or can't) help them.
2. *Solve problems.* You build tremendous credibility if you, as an expert, can simply help people solve a problem related to your product or services.
3. *Discuss mutual (brand-related) interests.* If you are in the food industry, talk restaurants or recipes; if you are a contractor, talk about homes or offices. The more you connect on a general basis, the easier it will be to discuss what you do.
4. *Use anecdotes and stories.* If you have an entertaining anecdote that relates to your business or industry, by all means, share it to draw people in.
5. *Show photos of things you love.* If they also like what they see, they may come to you to find out how to achieve such a beautiful garden or where to get such a great power tool.

Include Your Expertise

Of course, you are still an expert, a personal brand and/or representing a company, so you do need to talk about what you know and impart some information along the way. You need to play a dual role, being personable and honest while also talking shop. But don't get overeager when it comes to talking business. Social media users can spot a sales pitch before you finish your tweet or your post. And like the guy trying to sell you real estate investments at a party or social gathering, you'll be shunned quickly.

Subtlety is the name of the game when it comes to talking business in social media. Your objective is to engage others in conversations about your area of strength and show that you know what you are talking about. Showing knowledge and expertise is how they come to respect you rather than saying "buy this product," or "use my service." The trick is getting them to want to use your services or champion your brand without asking.

Transparent Profiles

If you really want to let people know a little more about you, it's very important, on all platforms, to carefully and honestly fill out your profile.

Don't hide behind a title, a business name, or a user name, but instead let potential followers know who you really are. You can always link to your business website if they want to know more about the business, but the profile is about you.

On Twitter, your bio must be brief, so you need to edit carefully. On other platforms you have more room to expand, but don't overdo it. Be brief and to the point about who you are and what you do professionally. Then include a little personal information, such as father of three, married, dog lover, Little League coach, jazz vocalist, or skiing enthusiast. You want to go beyond your job and title so that people see your human side. It's also a good idea to include your location. This way people not only have an idea of your whereabouts

but it's a good starting point for connecting. Someone looking at your profile may have visited your region recently, may know someone living there, or it may be someplace they've always wanted to visit.

Your photo is important, too. It should be a clear headshot with a smile. Some people try to be too clever and have an offbeat photo that

YOUR PROFILE PICTURE

As you spend more time on social media platforms, you are bound to see many “don'ts” when it comes to profile photos. Here are 10 of my favorites:

1. Don't use a prom photo or anything that resembles one.
2. Don't use an old photo; it's not a dating website. If your profile says that you graduated college in 1989 and your picture makes you look like you're still 22 years old, people will become suspicious.
3. Don't use an obvious vacation photo. That Hawaiian shirt or hula skirt may be well received by friends and family on your personal Facebook page, but not for building a following when it comes to business.
4. Don't use a group photo. It's a profile picture, not a police lineup.
5. Photos of your pet can work, but at least be in the photo with them. Don't pose Fluffy the iguana by himself.
6. Don't go for artsy or “cute.” One guy's profile photo was of a teddy bear in a military uniform. Not sure what the message was, but it certainly wasn't transparency.
7. Don't use ANY photo taken in the bedroom.
8. Don't use a photo from the last formal occasion you attended. This is about being who you are on a day-to-day basis, so unless you're a maitre d', wearing a tuxedo looks odd.
9. Don't do the “looking over the shoulder” pose.
10. Don't wear clothes that were last fashionable before social media existed.

doesn't fairly represent who they are. One gentleman on LinkedIn has a photo of himself wearing a top hat and glancing over his shoulder. He looks more like a gangster from an old movie than someone you would want to engage with.

It's a Two-Way Street

One of the biggest drawbacks of traditional media is that in most instances, you cannot respond. It's a one-way street with the producers, writers, and editors giving you their programming, their articles, and their messages. Businesses show you a commercial or the print ad or billboard, and your only way to respond is to yell at the TV set at a product you hate.

Social media is a two-way street in which customers, potential customers, fans, and critics can all interact with you. Remember, you are a form of media. Social media lets people talk to you and respond to whatever you put out there. It also lets you respond by telling them what you are doing to improve your product or service so they will believe in you and trust you.

With just a few keystrokes you can acknowledge that you screwed up the customer's order and send him a free case of the product. You can explain company decisions and thinking behind the new recipes, or the construction of the latest software program or power mower. You can even ask for feedback on your ideas in advance. Rather than holding elaborate focus groups, you can use social media to say, "We're thinking of selling organic tomato sauce, what do you guys think about that?" You can get some amazing feedback. Rather than just making a business decision, your customers can now be part of the conversation and part of the decision. And let's face it, when people are involved in the process, they are far more interested in the results.

For example, Sam Adams does crowdsourcing via social media to create new beers. "The Crowd Craft Project" allowed Sam Adams' consumers to give feedback on the company's latest offering, commenting on a number of categories to describe the beer, such as color and body. The most popular categories as selected by Facebook

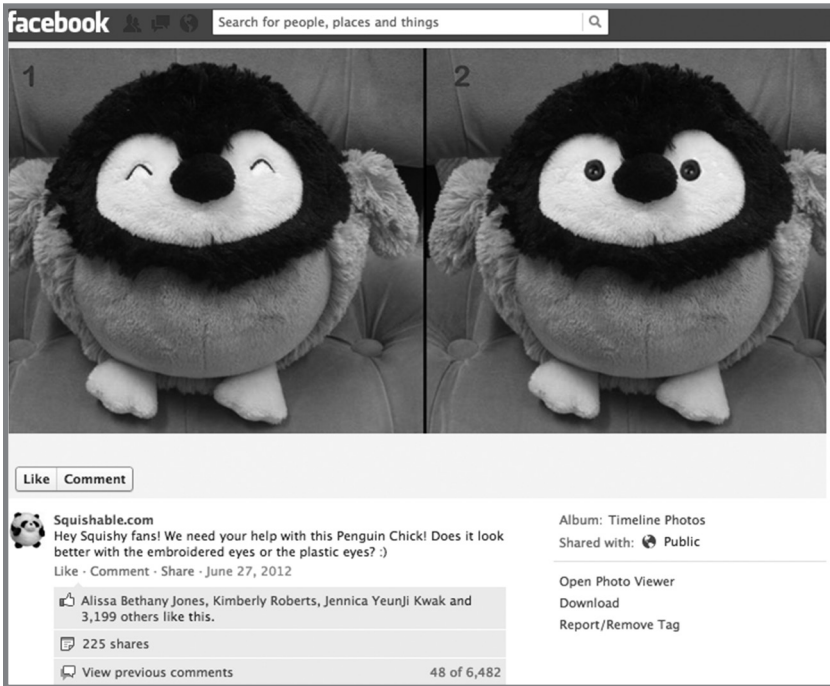


Figure 2–6 Using social media to get product development feedback direct from customers.

fans were then used by the company’s brewers to develop the new beer, which debuted in March 2013 during the annual South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas. It was then served in a number of Austin bars and at the company’s brewery before being released more broadly.

In Figure 2–6, Squishable.com asked Facebook fans which stuffed animal design they should run with.

For those wondering and staying up nights waiting for the results, Penguin Chick No. 1, on the left, won out—and sold out.

Retweeting customer tweets is also a great idea. This way, you can post some of the many tweets your business gets—both positive and negative. Tweeting only accolades and testimonials that proclaim how wonderful your product or service is can begin to sound a bit too scripted. Consumers today are savvy and they know that nothing is 100 percent terrific. By being honest and tweeting naked about both

HOW TO RETWEET A NEGATIVE RESPONSE

UberTroll: Hey @uberorganicsauce Gotta say I tried your new organic sauce and it sucked.

UberOrganicSauce: Thanks for reaching out to us @UberTroll We'd love to know what you didn't like about it or how we can make it even better for you.

UberOrganicSauce: @UberTroll we'd be happy to send you a discount coupon if you'd like to try it again or one of our other products.

While you may or may never appease a truly dissatisfied customer, making the effort to do so illustrates your company's desire to satisfy even your harshest critics.

the positive and negative comments, you show people that you are not intimidated by negative feedback and that you are acknowledging, and responding to, them in an honest manner. By accentuating the positives but acknowledging the negatives and being upfront and honest, you will generate far more respect from your followers.

Doing It Wrong: Transparency Can Hurt You

Yes, you want to be open and honest, but there are limits. Publicly bashing someone, taking strong stands on highly controversial issues that are unrelated to your business—such as politics or religion, or dropping f-bombs or other inappropriate words or phrases—is not what transparency is really about and can hurt you. You're not trying to shock people or offend them in hopes of getting a rise out of them. Instead, you are trying to build a relationship as adults. If you wouldn't say something around your mother, then don't say it in social media.

Transparency does not mean you can post or tweet anything about anyone. You need to be very cautious about infringing on the rights of other people as well as being aware of potential copyright violations—say,

by posting photos of other people. YouTube is constantly removing sports highlights that someone posts from a source such as ESPN without having permission to do so.

Every day, Twitter receives numerous allegations and complaints of unauthorized use of a copyrighted images or tweets containing links to allegedly infringing materials. While they cannot police all of these possible infringements, they do their best, as does YouTube, Facebook, and other social media platforms, to catch offenders. Twitter has trademark policies available if you aren't sure about the rights to use a photo, link, or logo.

You can state the truth about what other people are doing, but you must make sure you are accurate and then think about potential fallout. Tackling hot issues can be tricky, because you may win over loyal followers, but also lose objectors. Before you take on a topical issue, determine whether you believe you have more to gain than lose.

Transparency also does not mean providing an ongoing account of your every activity during the day. Friends may do this on Facebook, but for brand building, you need to provide enough honesty without becoming tedious and self-absorbed. If you put honest, real messages out there, and let people absorb them, you can continue to build your brand. If you overdo it, you can lose them due to information overload. We'll return to this idea later.

Another important aspect of the media is accuracy. You must consider the accuracy of your statements. Yes, you can always apologize for an error if you say something that is incorrect, not unlike when a newspaper prints a retraction. But if errors and inaccurate information become commonplace, you can seriously damage your brand's or business's reputation. With that in mind, take a moment and look up the information before you post or tweet something.

Consistency Counts

Let's face it, if someone says one thing one day and something completely different the next, unless they are a politician, you will be confused and taken aback. Consistency is important in social media,

especially when it comes to how you present yourself or taking a stand on something important. That's why it is important to be honest. If you say you are a Buffalo Bills fan one month and then decide you're a Dolphins fan the next, chances are you won't lose too many followers, outside of Buffalo, that is. But if you advocate one position on Twitter but take a very different stance on Facebook, people will catch on. Social media followers typically interact with one another on other platforms.

All of this goes back to being honest about what you do, how your business operates, and what you stand for, lest you lose credibility, which will be extremely hard to rebuild. For example, if Piers Morgan suddenly became a hard-edged news reporter, or Chef Ramsey—who loves to scream and shout—became a quiet, nice guy, we'd be a bit taken aback by their new characters. Paul Rubens took a major hit in popularity to his beloved children's character, Pee-Wee Herman, when he was found pleasuring himself in an adult movie theater. It took Rubens quite a while to make a comeback. There are many examples of people in the public eye whose lack of consistency cost them fans and followers. While most are able to regain their following's trust, if inconsistency in the character you project becomes a regular occurrence, you may not win people back.

Negativity and Positivity

There are two ways to approach social media. You can see the “virtual glass” as being half empty or half full. Plenty of people enjoy complaining or trashing others on social media platforms, especially on Twitter. For me, this doesn't work. In fact, negativity is a pet peeve of mine. I don't think it is an attractive quality that draws people to you.

Sure, we all agreed that we despised Bin Laden and that the economy is struggling; the news will tell us that and other negative stories. However, on social media you have the opportunity to empower, inspire, and motivate people. I have fans and followers who will ask me advice on a job interview and I'll give them positive reinforcement. I also put up motivational quotes or something amusing and people will thank me for brightening their day. Isn't it more likely that when someone

