

# Community Management on Facebook: How to Solve Problems with Negative Reactions and Comments from Groundswell?

Vladimíra Jurišová and Igor Piatrov

Faculty of Mass Media Communication, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Trnava, Slovakia

[vladimira.jurisova@ucm.sk](mailto:vladimira.jurisova@ucm.sk)

[igor.piatrov@ucm.sk](mailto:igor.piatrov@ucm.sk)

**Abstract:** Social networks, by their very nature, have not only given people from around the world the opportunity to connect but also have allowed for a collective and global exchange of views and thoughts among all users. Such an exchange of views has a significant impact even on commercial players - on brands, for which presence and communication on social networks have become second nature. Through the functionality of individual social networking sites, users are given a wide range of opportunities to express their views on brands quickly and flexibly. Such a groundswell impact may be both positive and negative, but a negative effect poses a real and serious threat. Today the space of social networks is undoubtedly fuller of negative emotions than ever before. In communication, users blur the boundaries of what is acceptable, they prefer criticism in communication, and some thrive on creating and spreading hatred. This kind of behavior and user communication threatens brands on social networks. One negative remark leveled at the brand, and a negative post not resolved with its author, could trigger an avalanche of criticism, and have a devastating impact on the brand. Criticism that indirectly affected the brand may soon spread to all social network users in the country and around the world. The topic can also go beyond social networking websites and reach other mass media. For this reason, it is crucial that brands not only know how to communicate proactively in a social network environment but also know how to respond reactively to negative comments, criticism, and hate. The purpose of this article is to develop easy-to-use and generalized communicative approaches and rules, that are useful not only on Facebook and should make it easy for the brands to manage negative reactions of the audience and communication crisis. Brands that acquire a suitable and quick way to respond to such situations can thus be skillfully able to maintain a good reputation, build a brand and equally important, increase their competitiveness in the market.

**Keywords:** community management, social media, groundswell, Facebook

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## 1. Introduction

It is an almost unquestionable truth to say that consumers are becoming pivotal authors of brand stories by sharing brand experiences via social media, linking consumers and brands (de Vries and Carlson, 2014). Perceived sociability is recognized as an important characteristic of social media brand communities for consumers as it increases their sense of social presence (Carlson et al., 2018) which makes customers believe that they are cared for, valued and helped by the brand and other customers in the online brand community (Hu, et al., 2016). For this reason, there is a logical need for many brands to actively work and care about the communities they bring together around them in the social networking environment. It is vital to keep in mind that customer care relates not only to the current customers but also to the potential ones, who right now consider whether to buy a specific item or not to buy. Customer care on social networks falls within the competence of community management, which means the maintenance and building of a better online customer experience.

A community manager is responsible for the relations with the community – fans, customers, public. The community manager answers comments and messages on social networks, joins groups where he acts on behalf of the brand. The key here, the community manager communicates directly with people and represents the brand, the authority, or a group. Sometimes the brand faces negative comments and discussions on social networks, which should be treated appropriately.

This paper aims to design introductory and common communication methods and rules, which might help to react correctly to negative feedback of the public on social media and might even help brands to overcome communication crises. Those who implement the correct communication approach when receiving negative feedback as soon as possible might keep the brand's good name, build the brand and, finally, increase competitive advantage on the market. The present article focuses primarily on communication practices in the environment of the Facebook social network on the territory of Slovakia, but aims to conceive approaches and

rules whose application will be generalizable, and therefore without the limitation of a specific platform or geographical area.

## **2. Social media overview**

As we mentioned above, the article focuses primarily on Slovakia and the Facebook social networking site. However, for a better insight into the issue, in addition to local statistics, we also present a global view of the current state of social networking sites. Based on statistics from 2021, the internet connection penetration rate in society has reached almost 60%. From the social media perspective, more than 4.2 billion people were active on social media at the start of the year. Considering the general population number, we are talking about the representation of almost 54% of the population. During the year, the global number of Internet users increased by 7,3 %. The number of social media users increased even more by 13,2 %, which accounts for 500 million new and active social media users. The average time spent on the Internet amounts to 7 hours per day, and social media users spend on average 2 hours 25 minutes on social media. After television, the Internet is the second social media in terms of the time spent. Google is ranked as the #1 most visited website on the Internet, followed by two social media platforms – YouTube and Facebook. What for the most popular social media platforms as per the time-spent per month: Facebook ranks first with an average of 19.5 hours spent per month, followed by WhatsApp with 19.4 hours, the third place belongs to TikTok with 13.3 hours, and finally Instagram with its users spending 10.3 hours using the platform. Among the video-sharing social media, YouTube, no doubt, occupies first place with a monthly average of 23.2 hours per user. Slovak local online environment, social media, and networks usage can be described as follows: there are 4.6 million Internet users in Slovakia, which constitutes 85% Internet penetration. If compared with the previous year, we witness a 2.4% increase, equating to 111 thousand new users. Among the most-visited webpages, Google stands at the top of the list, followed by social media platform Facebook, news website Aktuality, and video-sharing social media YouTube. However, as per some statistics – Similar web is one of the examples – YouTube gets third place if we look at the number of web location visits. As per Alex, YouTube even occupies second place. The number of active social media users in Slovakia reached the point of 4.03 million, which means that 74% of Slovaks actively use social media. With that, the year-by-year growth reached 10.7 %, or 390 thousand new users (Kemp, 2021). Consequently, we discuss the social network in question, Facebook, in more detail, given that it is the largest and most used social network locally. We also take a deeper look at the Instagram social network for the reason that it can be considered as the second most used social network locally, which belongs to the same owner as Facebook, i.e. Meta, and the communication practices that the present paper aims to conceive should be fully applicable to the social network Instagram as well.

### **2.1 Facebook**

As of January 2021, Facebook had 2.7 million users in Slovakia, according to available statistics. The number reveals a potential amount of people influenced by the advertisement activities on the social media platform.

Considering the obligatory registration, we may believe that the above number corresponds directly to the number of active users. A 57.2% penetration rate of Facebook is observed in the Slovak population over 13 years of age. In January 2021, quarter-to-quarter growth in the number of users reached a 3.8% increase, equating to 100 thousand new users. According to all the above-mentioned facts, Facebook is the most popular social media platform worldwide, not just in Slovakia. This social media platform was founded in 2004 at Harvard and initially intended for the students' needs (Kemp, 2021). Later in 2006, the platform became available to a wider audience, meaning that not only university students could use it. And from that very moment, its popularity picked up so intensely that, within the next two years, Facebook had its first 100 million active users (Murár, 2018). This social media has a wide-scale use. Through Facebook, we can build personal relationships, communicate, and share multimedia content. From a marketing and business point of view, it is a unique tool that helps communicate with existing and potential customers using advertisement campaigns or direct organic interaction with the public. Facebook's functions and usage scale develop all the time. Having developed through various stages, this platform deserves to be called a trendsetter. It has multiple features – from group creation, idea or content sharing to a full-scale information media, communication channel where you can chat, call, make video calls, use it as a marketplace for single users, companies, or brands. The sale and purchase of items in social media and networks are currently undergoing dynamic developments (Madleňák, 2020). Retailers, IT and software companies, healthcare, factories, and educational organizations are the most represented on Facebook (Group of authors, 2014). It is crucial for all commercial entities using this social media platform to understand the importance of the connected community in relation to the possibility of a groundswell and the subsequent impact it can have on those businesses. Due to the multi-functionality of the social media platform, there is

room for a groundswell to exist. Groundswell may occur in groups, comments under posts, or as a result of responses under posts in feeds, reviews, or when sharing multimedia content.

## 2.2 Instagram

Instagram is another platform present on the local market where groundswell may be present. In the light of available statistics and the specifics of this social media platform, Instagram is the second most spread social media platform that, in terms of features, is very close to Facebook, for example, by the obligatory registration to have full-content access. In Slovakia, Instagram has over 1.4 million users, equating to 29.6% population penetration if we consider the Slovak population over 13 years old. In January 2021, quarter-to-quarter growth stood at 7.7%, equating to 100 thousand new users (Kemp, 2021). In comparison with Facebook, we witness a more dynamic change in the number of new users. Instagram was created in 2010 when it was available for iOS systems from Apple. Two years later, in 2012 has launched another version that worked well even on Androids developed by Google. If going further into comparison, Instagram functionality is somewhat less wide-ranging. Instagram is a significantly more visually based platform. It is a visual mass media that enables the creation, edition, distribution, and sharing of audio-visual static – as photography, or dynamic content, for example, video content. Instagram's visual focus explains its popularity among businesses. The brands are selling items that can be presented in an attractive way using all the visual tools as the main idea of Instagram is the demonstration, not communication. Instagram is owned by Facebook, which is why the platform experiences constant development of its features, but at the same time, it maintains its very nature and visual character. In terms of future potential for groundswell, Instagram has multiple functionalities. You cannot leave sentimental emojis as a reaction on the posts, only 'I like it'. However, you can leave your comments under the posts. Instagram Stories is one of the most significant features. It supports groundswell even more by using stickers or vote buttons, where users can leave their comments, answer quizzes, or send their questions directly to the commercial profile owners.

## 3. The importance of community management on social media

A sudden loss of reputation on social media can become the worst nightmare for every business. Facebook and Instagram are full of critiques from customers, who sometimes unreasonably and even maliciously blame the brands.

In the world of modern words, such people are called *haters*, from the English verb *to hate*. In no case, however, the company needs to stay silent when it receives constructive or not constructive feedback. Macko (2020) believes that *'if you let the hatred go unnoticed, it might later build up and create a communication crisis'*.

For such cases, companies and brands should have a ready-to-use communication crisis manual and an employee responsible for social media communication issues. Community management here is a way of maintaining and building relations with the followers in the online environment. In practice, we refer to management, answering, and coping with conversations in comments and direct messages. The community manager always steps in when a communication crisis unfolds under a random Facebook post with a few negative comments. As we all know, a regular customer will share his negative experience with at least twice bigger group of people as he would do in case of a positive purchase experience. That is why community management activities are essential.

The fundamental aspect that every company and every community manager should keep in mind is that the brand by itself does not have an ego. The company should not be influenced by emotions because, by nature, it is only a brand. It cannot be insulted or be arrogant and unpleasant in reaction to critiques. Under all circumstances, the brand should maintain a professional approach, have reasonable arguments, and keep polite communication. In such cases, the person's ego (owner, social media manager, community manager, employee) may result in an issue (Macko, 2020).

## 4. Coping with negative comments on social media

As we have already pointed out, among all social media advantages, there is one risk factor that might impact a brand's name and reputation. One of the social media principles is freedom in content, idea, and view sharing (Martovič, 2020). This fact creates premises for brands to come across positive and negative comments from social media users. According to the White House Of Consumer Affairs (2019), dissatisfied customer tells twice as many people about their negative experience than happy customers do about their positive experience. Based

on this, the brand might come across negative feedback on social media more often. The Groundswell effect is typical for social media and can arise from a negative context. Its repercussions for the brands might be devastating and far-reaching. We would argue that all brands try to avoid this situation. As social media allow not just one-way information sharing but offer interactive both-way communication (Murár, 2019), brands should know how to act and react to negative-user comments. The paper aims to design a common strategy that would help the brands to cope with negative feedback and comments from social media users to save reputation. The strategy consists of four steps, and each of the steps we would pay detailed attention to:

- Identification of the user type,
- Situational analysis,
- Stepping into the conversation,
- Closure of the discussion.

#### 4.1 Identification of the user type

In case of receiving a negative comment, the brand should, first of all, define the user type. According to Macko (2020), there are five of them. They include the silent majority, the wider public, brand ambassadors, haters, and Internet trolls. The classification may be completed based on two following variables - the interest in the brand and active or passive discussion status. For better illustrations, we include user classification in table 1.

**Table 1:** Social media user classification

	Active in the discussion	Passive in the discussion
Interested in the brand	Ambassador, hater	Silent majority
Not interested in the brand	Troll	Wider public

Source: Ponyhouse.sk, 2019

The silent majority is the most numerous group of social media users. Such users know the brand or even use it, do not take part in the discussions but follow the comments and debates between other users. Later, based on their point of view, they may take a stand on ambassadors' or haters' side. The other passive group is represented by the wider public not interested in the brand. Such users can yet come across the discussion, see the reaction and answers from the brand, and that experience may influence their future decision on whether to buy a particular item. It is significant to mention that even if both groups – the silent majority and the wider public – are passive in the discussion, the communication leaves an impression on the users. In the discussions and comments, the brand can have an open confrontation with participating-in-discussion users, haters, brand ambassadors, or Internet trolls. Ambassadors and haters are two opposites of the user types, who willingly step into discussions, use the brand, or show their interest. The ambassadors, however, are on the side of the brand, they like it, stand for the brand, and defend the brand before haters. Haters could be a potential source of critique and negative comments, they might know the brand, have their own, in most cases negative, experience with the brand, and see no obstacles in sharing their thought and opinions in the discussion. Or they even do not like the brand itself and want to spread their hatred. The other active group of users is called Internet trolls. Unlike ambassadors and haters, they do not use the brand, do not even have an interest in the brand, and might not even know the brand. Trolls are users who share irrelevant and disruptive content intending to demolish the discussion and provoke others to negative comments and reactions (Dammann, 2019). They don't want to share their opinion but rather commence a negative, to challenge all the work done by the brand.

The biggest challenge before stepping into the discussion and replying to a negative comment is a differentiation between the comments of a hater and an Internet troll. Here we need to focus on the details and carefully work out our answers. The first marker that might help you make the right decision is focusing on the level of reality in the comment. Hater, familiar with the brand, refers to a non-imaginary issue. On the other side, a troll is not interested in the issue and whether it is realistic enough. Once we come across negative comments with a not existing or an absurd issue, most likely we face Internet troll. The next marker can be the communication style. Trolls mostly use sarcasm while haters ask passive-aggressive questions. Of course, sometimes it is hard to distinguish between hater and troll but try analyzing the situation and classifying the user, as this determines our way of handling the discussion.

#### 4.2 Situational analysis

After the user class identification, we should proceed to situational analysis that we have slightly discussed while looking at the user types on social media. In this step, we should focus on the content side of the shared comment. The brand should evaluate what is present in the comment, whether it is a real issue from the hater

who has a negative experience with the brand, or it is an unfounded comment from a hater who does not like the brand, or a non-existing issue and an empty disruptive comment from the troll who is trying to commence a debate. Do not forget that the hater might have a real negative experience from the past, and from that moment, his issue is credible, and the answer to his comment should be credible. Moreover, a hater who does not like the brand can point out an existing problem with no intention of receiving a problem-solving comment. He might not even want a solution, it might not change his point of view, but the issue persists. Troll, however, writes about fake problems. Based on this, we may have three scenarios: truth is on the brand's side, a negative comment is invalid, truth is on the user's side, and negative comment is valid, or neither is correct, and no one knows where the truth is. To decide, we should set aside our ego and evaluate the comment realistically and critically.

#### 4.3 Stepping into the conversation

Here comes the most crucial part: stepping into the conversation and reacting to critiques. We should not forget several significant points. First, stick to the communication manual to have all the answers consistent from a voice tone perspective. Secondly, as we have already noted, the brand does not have its ego, which is why it cannot be influenced by emotions, insulted, be aggressive, or attack the critics. On the other hand, social media humanize the brand, give it a human face, as while using social media, an abstract brand can interact with its customers. And equally to people, the brands can be wrong. The most crucial thing is to understand that the negative comment is witnessed by all five user types, who are waiting for the brand's reaction. The brand does not answer one particular person who leaves the comment, but all the parties interested. The brand's intention should focus on changing the hater into a satisfied customer using an answer that suits everyone.

After situational analysis, the brand is ready to react. The ideal scenario is when the truth is on the side of the brand, and negative comment is not valid. In this situation, it should be enough to show the truth adequately. There is no need for explicit explanations that the user is wrong and what he is saying is not true not to create a sense of humiliation in front of the public. It is good to provide an easy answer or an argument. Moreover, a very nice technique is to use a sense of humor, targeting it, of course, away from the user. This strategy could show the public that the brand does not have hard feelings but healthy confidence and a positive attitude.

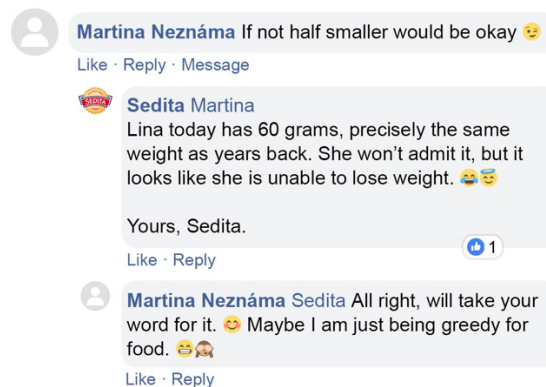


Figure 1: Explanation blended with humor

Source: Facebook.com, 2022

The opposite comes when the brand comprehends its fault and admits that the truth is on the side of the user. It is essential then to accept the mistake because, as we have pointed out earlier, behind the brand stand people, people can make mistakes, the brand can make mistakes as well. In this case, the reply should be very straightforward, should contain the words of empathy and understanding, and along with that, the solution to the problem. In addition, thank the user for letting you know about an issue. Another important rule, the brand should react as soon as possible. If you need more time to review internally, it is crucial not to let the user wait for too long. Ensure him that you are working on the request, and you will notify him once you have an answer. It is unacceptable to respond in a neutral tone, though. Do not let the users feel your uninterest in the issue resolution. A well-known case that shows how far the escalation can go is the communication of the commercial chain Billa, who towards all unsatisfied customers used a cliché-answer meaning 'We are investigating the issue

now.<sup>1</sup> But users saw no results of such communication. The hate went further and further, leaked from the Internet environment, and was caught by mass media. One comment on social media in combination with not-handled community management presents a serious threat to brands' reputation.



Figure 2: Answering using 'cliché'

Source: personal source, 2022

The very last situation type is less common. Here we talk about the case when the truth is on nobody's side or when it is partly on the user's or brand's side, and it is hard to prove. Such situations occur during complex discussions that tackle world topics and are not limited to the brand. As an example, we may mention global warming because of which a hater may accuse the brand, which he believes increases carbon footprint during the manufacturing process. The truth can be relative - both the user and the brand could be right. The brand may argue that it occupies the very last position on the list, but the user may answer that notwithstanding the volume, emissions are harmful, and the brand does not take enough effort to get better, etc. In every case, we are dealing with the war of words in which each side tries to offer more intricate arguments and win the war, which may result in endless discussion. Due to that reason, it is good to end the conversation as soon as possible using a neutral tone of voice and ideally win the war of words. As an example, let us demonstrate the conversation of the Slovak producer of sweets frequently blamed for the use of palm oil. Previous experience has shown endless conversations with customers as each comment from the brand was followed with a new one from the customers. However, in a subsequent reply, besides using the most powerful arguments, the community manager has added a 'conversation closing phrase', which led to the closure of the discussion.

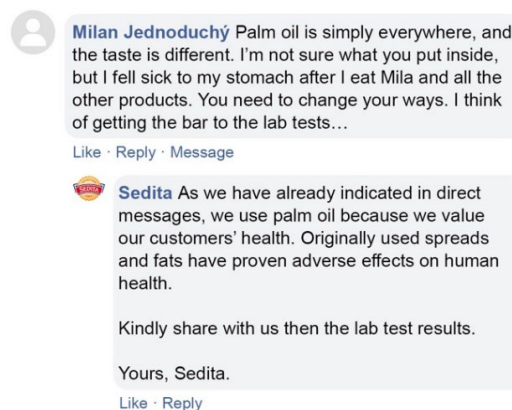


Figure 3: Argumentation with the discussion closure

Source: Facebook.com, 2022

#### 4.4 Closure of the discussion

The last step of the negative comment approach is still tied to the engagement into the discussion in a certain way and to the response itself. We believe that the closure of the dialogue is still a meaningful part of the answer,

which is why we have made out of this step a stand-alone part. In an ideal scenario, the brand should close the dialogue leaving an impression that everything was sorted out, not to leave space for further criticism. It is nice to think about what the user, excluding troll users, wants to achieve by the complaint. Most likely, it can be a sense of satisfaction from the promise of getting things to work better or from simple admission of the mistake made by the brand. We need to plan on how to satisfy the customer and, at the same time, end the discussion using the answer that suits everyone – the user, the brand, the interested parties. In many cases, it is enough to thank for the expressed complaint, especially when the complaint is reasonable. By doing that, the brand shows that it can accept critiques and values the feedback. In addition, the brand should refrain from asking additional questions in the reply as this may appear to be counterproductive, leading to further criticism and revealing errors. The time-proven technique is to add a fictional closure of the debate in the very last sentence of your comment to make it the last thing the user reads. It can be some gratitude for the trust to date, expression of the belief that the user would stay with the brand notwithstanding all the aforesaid issues. The time-proven technique is to add a fictional closure of the debate in the very last sentence of your comment to make it the last thing the user reads. It can be some gratitude for the trust to date, expression of the belief that the user would stay with the brand notwithstanding all the aforesaid issues. If we are not dealing with current customers, we can express a positive thought and wish them all the best. The effort to end the discussion may go through all the debates starting from thanks at the beginning to the choice of the strongest argument at the very end of the conversation. As an example, consider the Absolut campaign, which featured a dark-skinned Slovak lady as the brand's spokesperson. Due to a relatively large amount of hate, the feedback to the campaign became viral.

The brand, however, confronted all the comments exquisitely well, stood up a stable position, used thoughtful arguments, and did insult no one. Of course, the brand did not write the words of gratitude for the racism, but in most cases, the brand expressed the argument and demonstrated that, in case the user changes his mind, he is more than welcome to be a customer. With that, the conversation was over, the conflict was solved. The user had nothing to add.



**Figure 4:** Closure of the discussion

Source: Facebook.com, 2022

The extreme situation, when the proposed technique is pointless, or you simply need to break certain rules, may happen. The indisputable rule says, 'that no comment should be left unanswered, including the praiseful as well as the critical one. The complaint, however, may be written by a troll. Such a comment won't make sense and may not have been noticed or supported by the public. In that case, do not reply, do not feed the troll. By answering pointless comments, you open useless conversations leading to nowhere. At the same time, never give up the dialogue once it is already running. That is valid even if it seems to the brand that all the arguments were exhausted, the discussion had fictitious closure, or it goes in circles and leads nowhere. The last may occur when no one is right or when you deal with trolls or haters who are not interested in your answers but rather in the discussion and spread of hatred. One more rule: do not delete the comments. In the first place, the deleted comment may still emerge on someone's screenshots or in the browser search done by some skillful IT users. There can be nothing worse than the complaint resurfacing in short order showing how the brand avoided confrontation and criticism from followers. And this would validate the legitimacy of the critiques even more. In case the comment incorporates unacceptable phrases such as swearing, expressions of racism, religion, or something similar, it is alright to delete it because, in this case, the brand has a legitimate reason. For such matters, it is good to have a developed communication manual or even the discussion rules to use whenever the arguments and guidance are required.

## 5. Conclusion

Negative comments and critiques represent a genuine part of the Internet environment. Unlike positive remarks, negative feedback and its management in negative connotation are challenging for every brand. Some brands

still are unaware of how to manage negative feedback and criticism. Fear of critiques may have a destructive and far-reaching effect on the brand. That is why it is important to spread knowledge in this doubtful field. Once the company has a strictly defined strategy, brand identity, communication style, and a manual on how to cope with communication crises, it can overcome the majority of unwelcome cases in a social media environment with a minimum negative effect on its reputation. Having a communication manual should be driven primarily by the understanding that negative comments are visible to all five types of users. And everybody is waiting on how the brand will respond. The brand does not answer only to those who write the feedback but to everyone, in other words, to the majority of users. The answers may represent a brand's power but, at the same time, can show weakness and lead to unintentional risks.

## Acknowledgment

The research paper was supported by the Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and the Slovak Academy of Sciences (VEGA, No. 1/0458/21) under the project entitled "Management of the "groundswell" concept by business entities in promotion of environmentally-friendly products in times of technology interference".

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