

Social Media Response Guide

(Originally by Colin Harris at Smofcon 31, added to by Elizabeth McCarty in 2014 and revised by Elizabeth McCarty in 2018)

The Challenge

The challenge we face is to decide how to respond when an incident blows up online. This could be on almost any topic - in the last couple of years we've seen online storms relating to harassment, diversity, access, gender, and racism (among others). These are of course all important issues which need a response; the question is, how should you react when the Internet is acting like a dog with a bone, latching on to one specific point (which may not be factually correct, or the whole story) and spreading that point wider and wider, louder and louder?

1. Early Warning

The fundamental reality about these storms is that they are unexpected and fast-growing - and the wider they have spread, the harder it will be for ANY response to be heard (more likely it will be drowned out by the expanding ripples of repeats of the original story, by now on their fifth, sixth or tenth relay). The first goal is to spot them early, while they can be dealt with and this means quickly - even an hour can turn a local conversation into a runaway. So aim to have a social media team which is well connected to plenty of key bloggers and feeds, and also has alerts set up to monitor your hashtags and mentions. Ideally have people in different timezones if possible and with different platform skill sets or experience in monitoring multiple platforms with software (Hootsuite for example).

2. Quick Decisions

The next challenge is to make a quick decision on the response. Our organizations are not very good at this - we are not used to command and control structures, and we're often scattered around time zones and with a variety of work commitments. Where a government or corporate would call an immediate crisis meeting, we're playing tag trying to get the right people to talk to each other about options.... **THIS DOESN'T WORK.**

While we're thinking about what to do, the noise level and bubble is still expanding. So be clear in advance about who has authority to decide on an initial response - this should be at least two people, if not three, each of whom is ready to make a decision. It is imperative that every organization create, keep and maintain a Social Media Crisis Plan. This plan should outline what the steps are for your social media team, who can respond, and how and whom to escalate something to. This plan should always be kept updated with phone numbers and emergency contacts.

3. Respond or Ignore?

Now that the issue has reached someone in authority, the first decision is simple: respond, or not. While it's always tempting to respond, sometimes one just has to ride out the storm. Where is the conversation going? Are there facts to be corrected? Will a response pour water on the flames, or gasoline? Is there a need to persuade people?

The key considerations here are generally (1) will the issue blow itself out on its own or is it gathering speed? (2) is the storm going to result in damage to the event or its reputation if allowed to continue? (3) can a response be made which will improve things/redirect the debate?

4. The Holding Response - We'll get back to you!

A holding response is often very effective where the situation is complex or the convention needs time to work out its position. Stay silent, and the online community may feel their concerns are not being heard. Act quickly, and it can slow things down and buy time.

A good holding response makes it clear that the concerns have been heard, and gives a specific timescale for a fuller answer - this really needs to be no more than 24 hours or people will become very restless.

A holding response also starts to put the convention back in charge of the situation. If you stay silent and then respond later, it may be perceived that you didn't want to face the issue, and were being forced into it, which will further color perceptions.

5. Clear, Factual, Forward Looking

Having made a holding response, investigated, checked the facts, and decided that a longer answer is needed, it's now time to issue a formal statement. What is important here is to be clear, focus on facts, and above all be forward looking. That is, concentrate on what you plan to do next, and when you will do it by. Do not get drawn into the more emotional part of the debate no matter how intense the online discussion has become; it will only end badly.

6. Be Humble

We all put a huge amount of effort into running conventions and we all like to be well thought of. It can be very hard to see something you've devoted so much energy and time to being maligned or insulted. Being misrepresented or accused of something you didn't do is an unpleasant experience and our basic spirit of fairness makes us naturally defensive.

Therefore it is very easy to fall into the trap of explaining how the issue happened, how your intentions were misunderstood, how you did the best you could, etc.

THIS DOESN'T WORK.

When people are baying for blood, starting a response with anything that sounds defensive or vaguely apologetic simply draws more anger. What people are looking for is a sincere apology or an acceptance that there is a problem - so defuse the situation and give that to them. It's far more difficult to stay antagonistic in the face of a humble response - and as things calm down, there will still be chances to put your side of the story out there.

7. Boosting the Signal

When the furore has gone really wide, it can be hard to get your response heard - it's frustrating if you've put out the right statement and all you're getting is more people coming in fifth-hand to dogpile on you.

Signal boosting is very helpful here. If you have good relations with someone with a high profile who has been involved in the discussion, contact them privately, talk to them about the reality, and ask them to point to your statement.

8. Stay Strong, Stay Alert

If all has gone well, and you have committed to the right actions, then things should gradually calm down. Of course, it depends on the issue: if there's been a genuine incident of concern (e.g. a serious harassment incident) then debate will go on. But if things are handled well, the emphasis will move from an attack on the convention for its inaction or failings, to an acceptance that the convention has behaved or responded appropriately and a discussion on the wider issue as it affects fandom.

Summary

The key recommendations in this article are simple to understand but hard to do well:

- Time really is of the essence; the faster you react, decide, and communicate, the easier it is to manage the conversation.
- Recognize that you're dealing with an expanding bubble of righteous indignation - which after a few steps draws in people who may know nothing about the actual incident beyond what they have read in a couple of tweets or posts. This hive mind is not rational nor sympathetic to your pain.
- Let go of the emotion; be humble; be willing to apologize sometimes even if you have not done anything wrong.

A word about being harassed online by commentators and your staff.

In fact, it is the worst part of anyone's job who handles Social Media, thinking they have to take abuse from someone because "it is their job". Well, it is not. We need to make sure everyone who handles social media knows that the 'commentator' is not always right. Anyone who deals with the public should know to be polite and nice but that doesn't mean accepting abuse as being ok.

You have to educate your staff and tell them that being harassed is not part of the job. The commentator is not always right and they are not expected to take abusive online as part of their job description. We tell staff members that being nice is your job, but when someone makes you feel uncomfortable, there is a limit to your niceness. Never be afraid or worried to escalate someone to your AH or your DH or the Chairperson. If that isn't possible or if you are the chair, do not let the discussion devolve into name calling. If someone is threatening you or your staff, make use of the social media channels reporting options, do not feed the trolls, do not engage in arguing back and forth, ignore the abusive person and/or block them. If you do block them, you need to keep on hand proof of the abuse to justify the block (screenshots help). You cannot block people because you don't like what they say or disagree with their view - only because they have become abusive and threatening to you and your staff.