

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

PR Week (US)

February 1, 2014

Sacco tweet scandal a lesson for young PR professionals

BYLINE: Frank Washkuch

SECTION: OPINION; PRWeek Column

LENGTH: 420 words

I'd bet most journalists or PR pros had no idea who Justine Sacco was before December 20, 2013, just before an infamous tweet made her briefly the most famous PR person on the planet.

We all know the story by now. Sacco, then a senior corporate communications director at IAC, tweeted, "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white" just before boarding a plane to Johannesburg. When she landed, she had lost her job and her reputation was in tatters. Sacco was the subject of blogs, tweets, articles, and memes ranging in tone from the scolding to the scalding. If Andy Warhol had predicted that everyone would be infamous for 15 minutes, she could have been his prime example.

Yet it isn't that surprising that Sacco went from on-the-rise PR pro with an ill-humored Twitter feed to Internet villain in just a few hours. The old-media standards of who is and is not a public figure have changed markedly since the dawn of social media, especially on Twitter.

The old rules that singled out politicians, business executives, athletes, and celebrities as fair game for coverage have expanded to everyone who represents a company - and especially PR pros listed on media contact pages and press releases or referred to as a company spokesperson. Disclaimers that one's views on a public Twitter account do not reflect those of his or her employer don't matter. Put simply, you are all public figures now.

I hope the Sacco scandal doesn't force PR executives to order young, up-and-coming communications pros to change their Twitter settings to private or quit tweeting altogether. That would make the platform much less interesting, and it would rob inexperienced communicators of the opportunity to contribute to a conversation and act as a responsible adult in a sometimes contentious environment. It would be a loss, both for companies and the reporters who cover them.

Even as it fired her, IAC noted that Sacco is "an individual who we have otherwise known to be a decent person at the core." Translation: sometimes people say dumb things in an attempt at humor. When people say stupid or bigoted things online - and Sacco's comment was both - the audience tends to be much less forgiving.

Twitter is a double-edged sword. It gives a young worker bee a soapbox nearly equal to that of an executive or a celebrity. But when they catch foot-in-mouth disease just like Sacco did, it judges them with the same ruthlessness.

Sacco tweet scandal a lesson for young PR professionals PR Week (US) February 1,
2014

Frank Washkuch is news editor of PRWeek. He can be contacted at
frank.washkuch@prweek.com

LOAD-DATE: February 3, 2014

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Magazine

JOURNAL-CODE: PRWeek US

Copyright 2014 Haymarket Media.
All Rights Reserved