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How to Handle Negative Online Comments, Hold a Concise Meeting and Decline an After-work Invite

– Kristin Burnham, CIO

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Everyone has seen it: a seething comment following an article on a popular website or a passive-aggressive tweet bashing a company. While it's tempting to respond with your own two cents in the heat of the moment, resist doing so, says Evan Carmichael, founder of EvanCarmichael.com, an information resource for businesses that covers such topics as reputation management, entrepreneurial advice and business strategy. "Start by understanding that no matter how hard you might try, you can't fully monitor or control these comments," he says. "But you can join in them." Here are three pieces of advice to follow when responding to a negative comment.

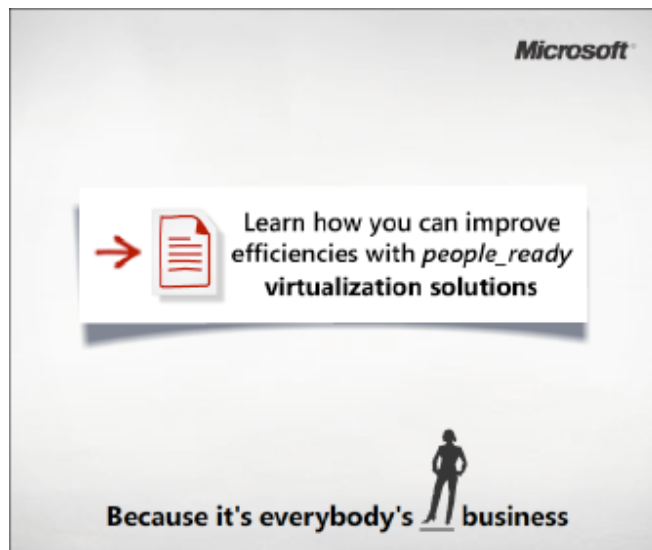
1) Make it Personal. First, understand that most comments are written impulsively and tend to be emotionally driven, advises Carmichael. "In the case of online forums or Twitter, many commenters never expect someone from the company to reply to what they've written." Begin by crafting your response in a friendly tone, and always start by thanking them for their feedback. "What this does is it disarms them," he says.

2) Apologize. Even if you're not at fault for what the commenter is complaining about, take responsibility for it. "You want to act like a customer service representative for your business," Carmichael says. "Tell them that you're sorry that X happened and that they feel the way they do. Explain to them that you can understand why it might make them feel that way." Try not to be "too corporate," Carmichael warns; avoid typical company jargon.

3) Plan a course of action. Ask the commenter for specifics about the situation and how and why that made him unhappy; provide yourself as their resource. Then devise an appropriate plan to solve the problem. "Tell them that you're going to do X, Y and Z to make things better," Carmichael says. "This will show them that you're genuinely interested in their well-being and that you care about [their problem]."

...Hold a Concise Meeting

Start by determining the meeting's objective and whether it can be fulfilled via an alternative method: a memo, one-on-one conversation, phone call or e-mail, says Matthew Cornell, a productivity expert and former NASA engineer. Next, decide which participants are essential; try keeping the list to between five and eight people. Create an agenda with specific items to accomplish, then designate an official timekeeper to ensure that the agenda is adhered to and the meeting stays on-task, says Cornell. Be sure to leave time at the end of the meeting to wrap up, create a plan of action, review decisions and set deadlines. Follow-up after the meeting with a document of meeting minutes so those in attendance can review the decisions that were made.



...Decline an After-work Invite

While it's smart to take time outside of the office to cultivate relationships with coworkers, don't feel that it's necessary to attend every social function you're invited to, says Melissa Leonard, a certified business etiquette consultant. When you decline an invite, keep your response short and sweet but tell the truth. "Sincerely thank them for the invitation and let them know you're not free," she recommends. "If someone asks why, simply say that you have things to take care of at home or that you have a prior engagement." Do try to attend one or two social gatherings, such as drinks after work. Invites that you generally should accept include: holiday parties, farewell dinners and events held by senior management.

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