An airline’s social media contest backfires. How should the company respond? by Jana Seijts

When the Twitterverse Turns on You

Charlene Thompson reached for her phone on the nightstand. It was still before 6:00 AM, so the iPhone’s glow was the only light in the room. Her husband, James, turned over and groaned.

“That’s a horrible habit,” he said. “You should always have coffee before checking your in-box.”

“This is important, honey,” she whispered. “I need to see what’s happening with the contest.”

Charlene was the head of public relations for Canadian Jet. Yesterday, with the help of the company’s PR firm, Wrigley & Walters, the airline had launched its first Twitter contest: The person who posted the most creative tweet using the hashtag #CanJetLuxury would win two round-trip tickets to any of the company’s destinations.

For Charlene, who had led the airline’s communications for 15 years, this campaign was critical. Six months before, a third of Canadian Jet’s fleet had been grounded for a week owing to some engine safety concerns, causing a slew of cancellations and delays. There had also been some negative press about the airline’s approach to labor relations following a threatened strike by the ground crews. The team at Wrigley & Walters had designed the campaign to restore Canadian Jet’s image as a preferred carrier.

“Shoot. This isn’t good,” Charlene said as she scrolled through an endless string of tweets.


“Just the opposite. But not in a good way.” She read a few of the tweets: “Getting to my destination without the engine catching fire #CanJetLuxury; ‘Being stranded 3,000 miles from my family for two days straight #CanJetLuxury’;” by Jana Seijts and Paul Bigus.

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JetLuxury is getting away with not paying employees fairly.”

“Ouch,” James said.

This is completely backfiring, Charlene thought as she got out of bed.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I need to call Jerry.”

7:30 AM

Jerry Schneider, Canadian Jet’s CEO, was tapping his fingers on his desk while he and Charlene waited for the others to arrive. He hadn’t said much yet, but Charlene could tell that he was feeling the stress, too.

“If you cancel, you may alienate the people who sent in genuine entries.”

Tim Powell, Charlene’s director of social media, showed up with Andrea Kemp, the company’s account manager from Wrigley & Walters. Both looked flustered.

“Sorry,” Tim said. “We had trouble getting Andrea’s pass.”

Andrea shook Jerry’s hand and started speaking before she sat down.

“OK, so we knew this was a risk going in, right? People love to complain on the internet, especially when they can essentially be anonymous like this.” Charlene knew Andrea’s fast talking wasn’t a sign of nerves. She was the sort of person who was energized by a crisis. And she was right—throughout the planning process, she’d reminded Charlene and her team that critics could use social media campaigns like this one to bash the company. JPMorgan Chase had been a recent victim of hashtag backlash after launching a Twitter Q&A, she had told them, and she had sent around a Forbes.com article about how one of McDonald’s campaigns had resulted in a “hashtag.” She reminded them now of those cases.

“Knowing we’re in good company isn’t much comfort,” Jerry said. He asked Tim for an update.

“They’re still coming in: 200 more tweets with the CanJetLuxury hashtag since 6:00 AM. The majority are fine—good, even—but there are some doozies.”

Jerry rolled his eyes. “I don’t even want to hear any more.”

“And we’ve started trending, which isn’t great, given the circumstances,” said Tim.

“How do we stop trending?” Jerry asked. The CEO was three decades removed from the millennials, and although he’d been best to keep up with social media, he wasn’t as savvy as Tim or Charlene.

“We could change the hashtag and get people to start using a new one,” Tim suggested. “Other companies have done that.”

“And it’s worked,” Andrea noted. “By focusing people on the new hashtag, you draw attention away from the one that was causing problems, and people are less inclined to throw in their own witty insults. It could take a few days for the old hashtag to peter out, though.”

“So we could save the contest and let this whole mess blow over?” Jerry asked. “Or we could just end the contest altogether,” Charlene offered.

“Yes, you might remember that’s what JPMorgan did,” Andrea said. “When people hijacked the hashtag to tweet about ‘capitalist pigs,’ they canceled the Q&A.”

“And they came off looking like the arrogant jerks everyone was claiming them to be,” Tim said.

Andrea nodded. “Let’s not jump the gun here. Most of these tweets are positive. They say some lovely things about customers’ experiences with Canadian Jet. If you cancel, you may alienate the people who sent in genuine entries and are hoping for those round-trip tickets. It may be better to ignore the bashes and focus on the good publicity you’re getting.”

“And when the press starts calling?” Charlene asked. She worried it was just a matter of time before she would have to start fielding questions.

“You take the high road and say how pleased you are with the positive responses,” Andrea suggested.

“So far I’m not loving any of these options,” Jerry said.

Tim cleared his throat. “We could apologize. It’s worked for us in the past.”

Three years back, one of the operations VP’s had come up with the idea to make buttons with “We’re sorry” in big black letters and have flight attendants, pilots, and airport staff wear them whenever a flight was delayed or canceled, even if it wasn’t the airline’s fault. Customer response to the tactic had been overwhelmingly positive. The buttons had even helped win the airline an industry customer service award.

“But what exactly are you apologizing for here?” Andrea asked. “You just launched a contest. You didn’t exploit political events like Kenneth Cole did or pull a Home Depot and send out a picture that people thought was racist. It makes sense that those companies said they were sorry, but you haven’t done anything wrong.”

“That’s not what these people think,” Charlene said, pointing to her iPad. She read a few of the latest tweets. “Arriving a day late to your daughter’s wedding #CanJetLuxury; ‘Screwing your workforce #CanJetLuxury.”

“Enough,” groaned Jerry, holding his head in his hands. The room was silent.

“I’m willing to take a stab at an apology,” Charlene said. “I’m not sure exactly what it’s going to say, but give me an hour.”

8:30 AM

Charlene stared at the blank Word document on her screen. She typed: On behalf of Canadian Jet, I’d like to apologize for the feelings that this contest brought up. She hit Delete. We at Canadian Jet are sorry for disappointing our customers. We’re committed to— “That doesn’t work, either,” she said out loud to her computer, pressing the backspace key. She tried a more direct approach: We’re sorry that our...
planes sometimes break, that you think we treat our employees unfairly, and that you don’t like our contest.

Her assistant poked her head in the door. “I’ve got Carrie Schultz on the line.” This ought to be fun, Charlene thought as she picked up the phone.

Carrie, a blogger for PR News, explained that she was working on a piece about social media gaffes and wondered if Charlene wanted to comment on the crisis in progress.

“I wouldn’t call it a ‘crisis.’ A handful of people poking fun at your business doesn’t constitute a crisis.”

“Are you willing to explain on the record why you’re ignoring the responses? You keep sending out tweets as if everything is going smoothly.”

Charlene quickly pulled up the airline’s Twitter feed and saw that a tweet had gone out at 8:00 AM: “Keep the responses coming. At this rate, it’s going to take years to judge this contest!” She put her phone on mute and yelled to her assistant to get Tim.

She could hear him running down the hallway. He looked ashen reading the tweet on her screen. She pointed to the receiver and mouthed, “Carrie Schultz.”

She took the phone off mute. “We’re not ready to comment just yet, Carrie.”

“You’d better get ready,” she responded. “You’re trending, you know.”

9:00 AM
“Never mind arrogant. We look completely tone-deaf at this point,” said Jerry, his face red.

Tim was about to say something when Andrea cut in. “I’m sorry. This is our agency’s fault. We wrote the tweets yesterday and scheduled them to go out throughout the day. We were trying to save some time.”

“Jerry, we’ve turned off the automatic tweets,” Charlene assured him. “But still—we’ve got to figure out what we’re doing. And fast.”

“What about the apology?” Tim asked.

“Andrea was right,” Charlene sighed.

“It’s hard to know exactly what we’re apologizing for. The only thing I can think to say is, ‘Sorry we’ve disappointed you in various ways over the past 10 years.’”

“What’s wrong with that?” Tim asked. Charlene looked over at him to see if he was joking. He wasn’t smiling.

“We look like chumps, that’s what,” Jerry said, his voice rising.

“So, are we pulling it?” Tim asked. They all looked at Jerry.

“What else have we got for this year?”

“This is our biggest social media campaign,” Charlene replied. “We’ve planned a few other things, but nothing on this scale.” She tried not to look at Andrea. Her agency was as much on the line as Canadian Jet.

“This is not a lost cause,” Andrea said, still utterly composed. “It’s been less than 24 hours. I’m telling you, this thing may die down as quickly as it heated up.”

“I understand why you want to save this, Andrea. But we need to be cautious here,” Charlene said. “Canadian Jet can’t suffer another PR problem.”

Jerry sat down heavily in his chair. “I know we normally take your firm’s advice on these things, Andrea. You’re the experts here, but you’re also the ones who got us into this mess.” He turned to Charlene. “As our spokesperson, I’d like you to make the call.”

Should Canadian Jet cancel the contest?
See commentaries on the next page.

Why hire me? Because I’m passionate about detergent brighteners.”
The Experts Respond

Cynthia Soledad is the senior director of the KitchenAid brand and shared marketing services at Whirlpool Corporation.

CHARLENE AND her team need to end the contest gracefully before doing any additional damage to the Canadian Jet brand. They should honor their promise and select a winner from the many genuine entries—but with little fanfare. Sure, some people might be upset that the contest has ended early, but given the tenor of the online discussion, there is likely to be more harm if the campaign continues.

It’s not just their customers they need to worry about. The media is already catching wind of what’s happening. Once the team pulls any promotional dollars it has put behind the hashtag, the number of comments should decrease. But more reporters may pick up the story. Charlene and her team need to demonstrate that they’re in control of the situation and try to be sure that Canadian Jet’s response to the negative consumer reaction is included in every piece. They should provide a statement to any media outlet that expresses interest, focusing on the positive tweets and perhaps giving an example or two of someone who used the hashtag in the way Canadian Jet wanted. The statement could also acknowledge that the contest is drawing to a close and that the company is still learning how best to connect with customers through social media and will take to heart the lessons from this experience.

Charlene and her team must act quickly, because the number of people seeing the brand-damaging tweets could grow exponentially in a very short time. We had a crisis at KitchenAid just over a year ago, when a member of our social media team inadvertently tweeted from the KitchenAid account rather than from a personal one. We removed the tweet a minute later, but it had already been screen-captured and shared. We found that the sooner you respond, the more credible you are with consumers and the media.

It sounds like Charlene, with the help of the company’s PR agency, tried to assess the risk involved in the hashtag contest but fell short. First, they should have tested the Twitter waters. Using social media monitoring tools that look at the volume and general sentiment of comments posted about a brand, Charlene and her team would easily have been able to gauge the “net sentiment” about Canadian Jet and predict whether jokes and complaints would outweigh positive comments. Second, they should have thought twice about whether a Twitter contest was the right vehicle for rehabilitating the company’s image. The best way to connect with customers on social media is to provide something of value. Contests and sweepstakes are valuable only to the winner and the brand. The team might have used Twitter instead to provide better online service or to tweet timely travel tips. These actions may not be as flashy as a giveaway, but if they provide true value to Canadian Jet’s customers, they will be more effective at building brand equity and loyalty.

I can understand why Charlene is struggling with the wording of the apology. In our situation at KitchenAid, we had made a mistake and needed to acknowledge it. But Canadian Jet hasn’t done anything wrong by launching the contest. Rather, critics hijacked the hashtag. Instead of dwelling on what’s gone wrong, the company needs to move on.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?
SOME ADVICE FROM THE HBR.ORG COMMUNITY

QUITTING NOW would be the kiss of death. The CEO needs to show that he’s willing to fly even if the weather is bumpy (or the tweets are negative). The company should use the contest to build relationships with customers, not manage its image.

Tanvi Gautam, founder, Global People Tree

INTERNET TROLLS are bullies and, as with all bullies, should be hit back. Acknowledge the haters. Then start a new promotion, with a hashtag like #improveCJ, that rewards the customer who posts the best recommendation for improving the airline.

Arben Pema, sales executive, BlackLine Systems

THEY SHOULD give out two prizes: one for the best positive tweet and another for the best negative tweet. The CEO should then invite the winners to headquarters to thank them personally. You can bet they’ll tweet about their experience.

Maurizio Morselli, human resources executive, Banca IFIS

DON’T BE defensive, and don’t take yourself so seriously that you’re not open to criticism. And next time you put together a social media campaign, consider structuring it differently (perhaps “The best tweet about the top reasons to fly Canadian Jet”) to encourage positive feedback.

Kathleen Booth, CEO, Quintain Marketing
Overall that day, there were 72,000 tweets about McDonald’s, and only 2,000 were negative.

Charlene and her team can do something similar. They can stop using #CanJetLuxury and instead promote something more fun and more focused on the contest, like #WinYourDreamTrip. She would lose the branding, but a hashtag isn’t the only way to get your identity across.

I’m not faulting Charlene or Jerry for thinking about ending the contest. When you’re seeing 100 or 1,000 tweets going by every hour, it’s easy to focus on the bashers. But tactically speaking, they would be better off engaging with the customers who are making positive comments. They should send thank-yous to those people, retweet their tweets, and even pay to promote some of the best posts.

In the future, Charlene and her team can prepare for problems like this by adopting a tactic we use at McDonald’s. Our team holds “hater sessions,” where we ask ourselves, “If we said X, how would someone who doesn’t like us respond?” That way, when people take shots at the company on social media, we’re not surprised. In fact, we expect it, so we’re able to ignore the negative comments more easily and prepare senior leaders for all potential scenarios.

As much as we try to keep our brands tidy and spotless, there is no brand that’s perfect or universally beloved. Jerry, Charlene, and other leaders at Canadian Jet need to be OK with that. Instead of backing off a smart idea, they need to be confident that they’re doing something fun for their customers and see the contest through.

Rick Wion is the director of social media at McDonald’s.

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