

Valuable Lessons From 5 Shockingly Bad Social Media Fails

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Social Media Week is a leading news platform and worldwide conference that curates and shares the best ideas and insights into social media and technology's impact on business, society, and culture.

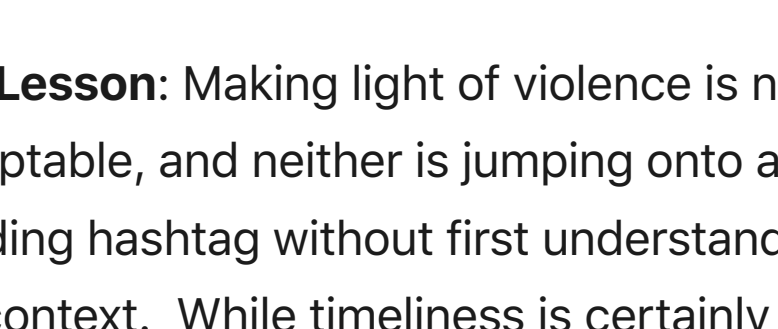
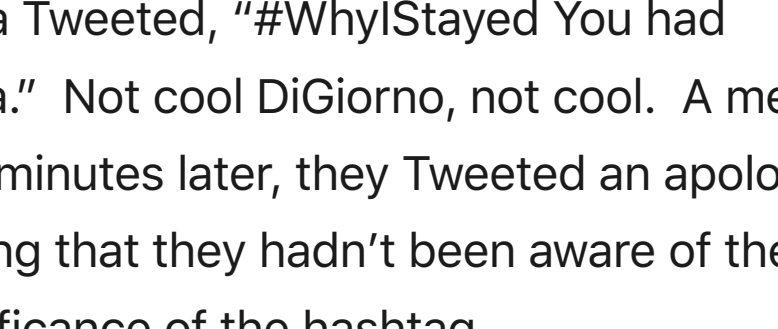
In the grand scheme of things, social media is still in its relative infancy. The first players in the game, MySpace and Facebook, are still just adolescents after all.

So it's no big surprise that the game is always changing, and that even massive corporations with expert social media teams are still making major mistakes.

Unlike the old stalwart, print journalism and traditional ads, social media posts are often launched into the digital universe before they've gone through any type of approval process. The results can range from mildly embarrassing, to the downright offensive.

But, instead of chastising the creators of these blunders, let's examine what the average individual and business can learn from their mistakes.

1. DiGiorno – #WhyIStayed



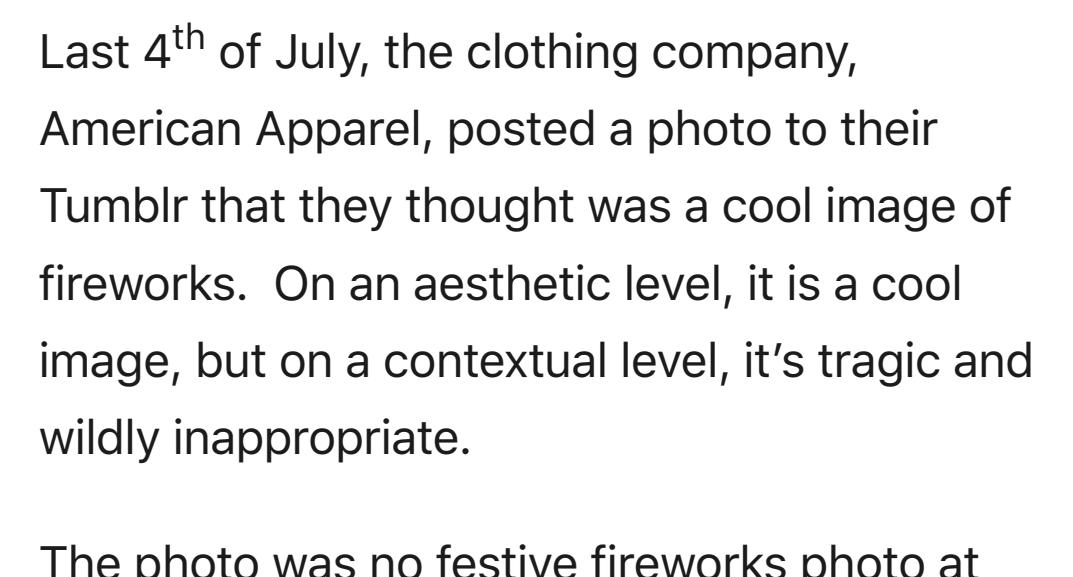
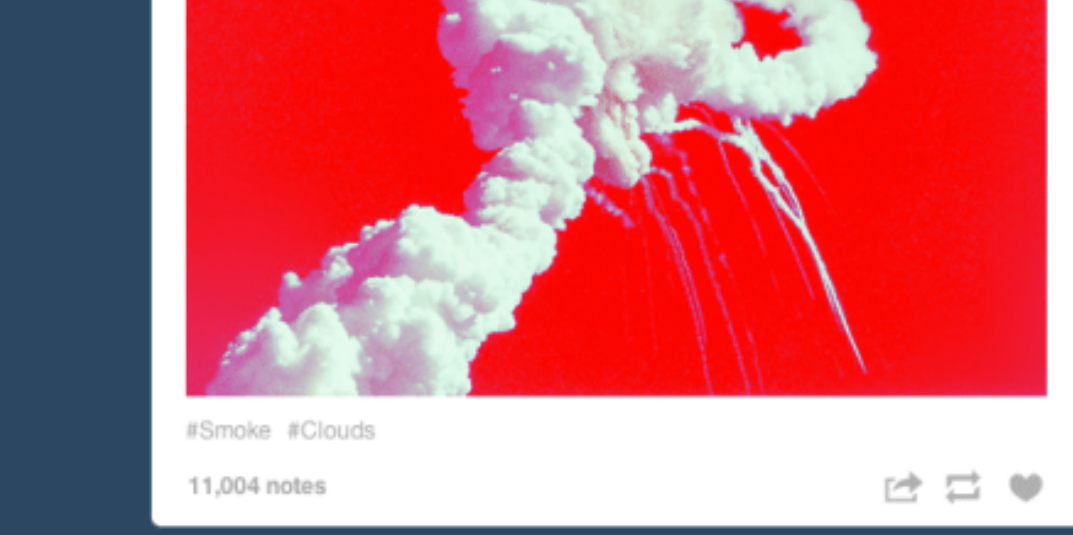
Trending topics and hashtags are a no-brainer for companies seeking to join the dominant discussion on social media. Just take #TheDress for example – everyone from Kim Kardashian to your granny was adding their color interpretation and hashtagging it like crazy.

The same was true in the aftermath of the disturbing hotel video footage of Ray Rice punching his wife. In just 24 hours, there were over 46,000 Tweets using the hashtag #WhyIStayed, and most of them were poignant messages from women explaining what made them stay in abusive relationships.

Trying to capitalize on the trend, DiGiorno Pizza Tweeted, “#WhyIStayed You had pizza.” Not cool DiGiorno, not cool. A mere four minutes later, they Tweeted an apology stating that they hadn't been aware of the significance of the hashtag.

The Lesson: Making light of violence is never acceptable, and neither is jumping onto a trending hashtag without first understanding the context. While timeliness is certainly important when it comes to social media, you can always afford to wait a few minutes to find out what you're even talking about before you risk poking fun at someone or something serious.

2. New York Police Department – #MyNYPD



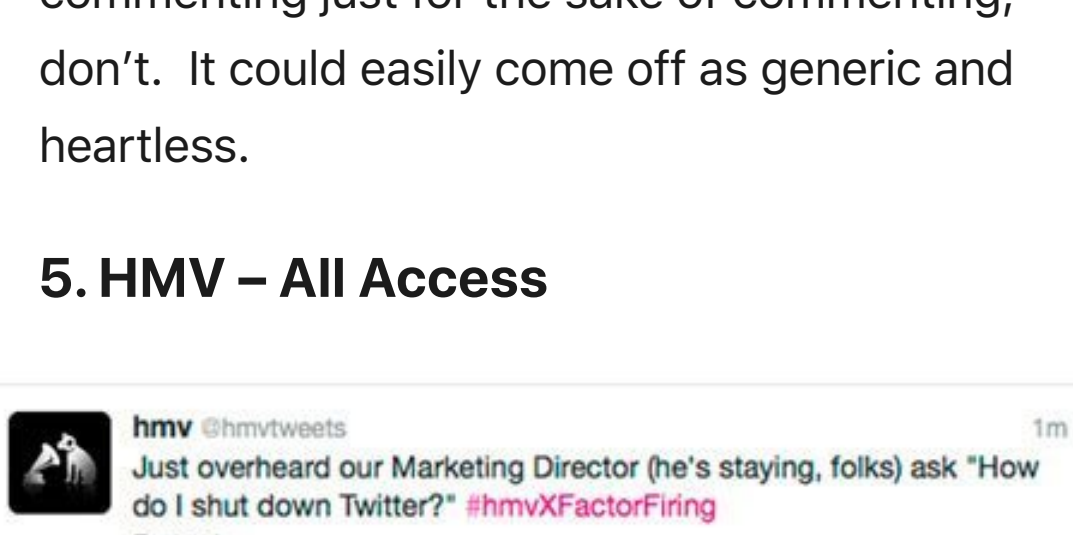
With the extremely negative press that police all over the country receive as a result of brutality cases, the PR folks at New York's Finest had the bright idea of encouraging NY residents to give them a little free, positive press. But it totally backfired.

They Tweeted out, “Do you have a photo w/ a member of the NYPD? Tweet us and tag it #myNYPD. It may be featured on our Facebook.” Sounds like a good idea, but the fed-up public decided to turn the hashtag on its head and began using it to accompany images of disturbing police brutality. It wasn't long before people in other cities joined in, tagging their own police departments.

The Lesson: Be careful what you wish for because you just might get it. When you ask for people to chime in on a public conversation, you have to be ready for whatever may be said, and realize that you have zero control once it's out there.

A similar incident occurred when MasterCard required journalists to give them a hashtag plug in order to receive credentials to the Brit Awards last year. Unsurprisingly, the journalists were not happy and began using the hashtag to publicly criticize the company. The moral of these stories is not to let your wishful thinking block out the foresight of a potential backlash.

3. American Apparel – Challenger Context Fail

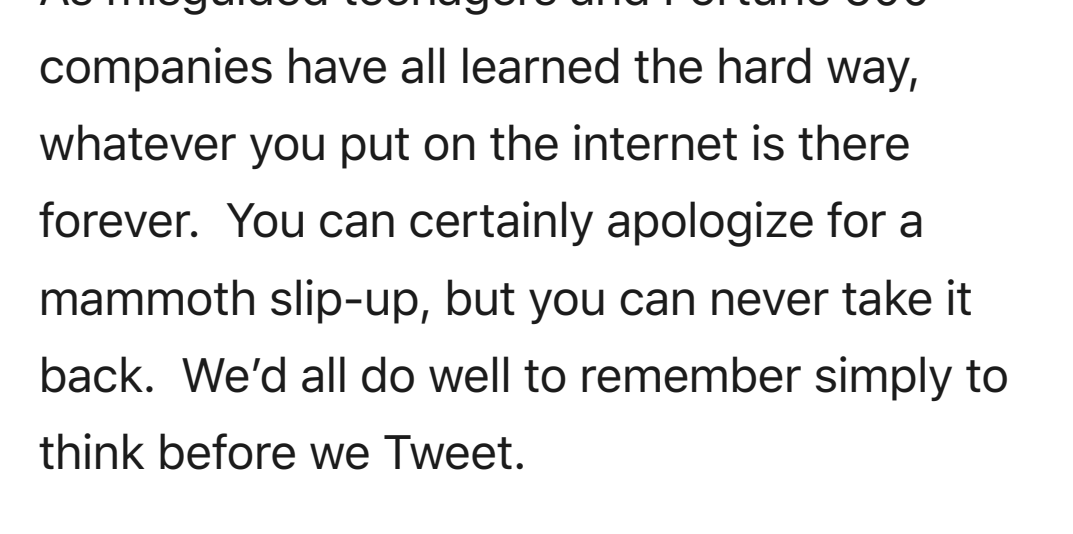


Last 4th of July, the clothing company, American Apparel, posted a photo to their Tumblr that they thought was a cool image of fireworks. On an aesthetic level, it is a cool image, but on a contextual level, it's tragic and wildly inappropriate.

The photo was no festive fireworks photo at all. It was actually the Challenger space shuttle disaster that killed seven people in 1986. After the shock and awe began to roll in from their followers, they issued an apology and blamed the gaffe on sheer ignorance of what the image represented.

The Lesson: American Apparel isn't the first company to unknowingly use an image that had serious implications. It can be tempting to use Google image search and grab the first thing that suits your needs, but if you don't know the context, you could end up looking insensitive and ignorant. Play it safe and use Google's reverse image search to see where else a picture has been used or where it originates.

4. Epicurious – Scone Solution



It's nice when companies find a way to offer a heartfelt message to people who've suffered some sort of hardship. What's not nice is when they try to capitalize on a much-talked about tragedy in order to push their products.

Many have done it, but perhaps the oddest case was that of food magazine Epicurious senselessly Tweeting scone and breakfast recipes to buoy our spirits the day after the Boston Marathon bombing. “Boston, our hearts are with you. Here's a bowl of breakfast energy we could all use to start today.” Um... what?

The Lesson: Despite evidence to the contrary, you don't actually have to say anything about a tragic event or disaster. If you or your company has a relevant message, you can communicate that, but if you're commenting just for the sake of commenting, don't. It could easily come off as generic and heartless.

5. HMV – All Access

British entertainment retailer made the dire mistake of giving access to the company Twitter account to a whole bunch of staffers, and then unceremoniously firing them before revoking access. It shouldn't have been a surprise then that these unsatisfied employees took to Twitter and began badmouthing the company, calling the 60 layoffs a “mass execution.”

This forced the HMV executives to publicly explain internal business, essentially airing dirty laundry that could have been kept private had they had a closer eye on their social media accounts.

The Lesson: One of the fired HMV employees put it best when he/she Tweeted, “Never fire the social media people until you've changed the passwords: @hmvtweets has gone rogue.” Some companies give anyone and everyone access to their social media accounts, which could not be more ill-advised.

No, your unpaid intern should not be able to become the public mouthpiece of your gigantic corporation. Handling the company's social media may have once been deemed a fluff task, but by now you should know better and handle the position with care.

As misguided teenagers and Fortune 500 companies have all learned the hard way, whatever you put on the internet is there forever. You can certainly apologize for a mammoth slip-up, but you can never take it back. We'd all do well to remember simply to think before we Tweet.

Brian Burt is the founder of [WebRev Marketing & Design](#), a Chicago digital marketing, web design & social media firm. His passion for the field is what drives him and keeps him constantly on the lookout for new trends and dynamic strategies to share with clients and readers. On the rare occasions that he's not working, he enjoys traveling to warm climates and collecting vintage cars.