Recalls & Social Media
Friend or Foe?
Background

Social media has influenced virtually every aspect of business operations. Product recalls are no exception. Today, nearly 70 percent of Americans use some form of social media, with Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter being the most popular\(^1\).

The pervasiveness of social media impacts various stages of recalls, from the first reports of issues through notification and beyond. Companies are often alerted to an issue by a consumer complaint aired publicly on these channels. They may choose to make social media part of their announcement strategy. And the existence of social media heightens the potential for brand damage. In this whitepaper, we’ll examine how companies have used social media during a recall – for ill and for good. And we’ll look at the lessons that can be learned and best practices that should be implemented.

\(^1\)pewinternet.org
Sharing of Grievances

When a customer has an issue, it takes time to locate a customer service email or physical address and draft a written complaint, or to find a relevant phone number, go through the prompts, and explain the problem to a representative.

In the past, many may have chosen not to bother, even going so far as to switch brands with little fanfare. With the ease of social media, they are increasingly posting their issue publicly – in many cases bypassing direct communication with the company altogether. This is understandably concerning to companies who may have systems in place for capturing consumer data through traditional means. But it also gives companies a chance to respond to issues they may not have known about otherwise and, if the problem must be escalated to a recall, the opportunity to discover it sooner and reduce its size and impact.

To do that, companies must have a team available to monitor social media. This goes beyond simply receiving alerts when the company is mentioned on Twitter or a new visitor posts a comment. Just as customers may not take the time to locate a phone number, they may not use the official Twitter handle of a company, or they may tag the wrong account. If companies are to make the most of this opportunity and provide the best customer service possible, they must monitor the use of their name as much as possible. This strategy requires preplanning. The immediacy and short-lived nature of social media demand a designated team and strategy for monitoring social channels – and ensuring the task isn’t pushed to the back burner in favor of other aspects of the business.
Recall Announcements: To Post or Not to Post

Depending on the product, issue, and regulatory body overseeing the recall, the question of whether or not to post to social media may not be a question. The Consumer Product Safety Commission typically insists that a social strategy be included in corrective action plans.

The Food and Drug Administration and Department of Agriculture, on the other hand, don’t usually mandate it, but may request it as a best practice. But the way in which companies actually employ social media to spread the word about recalls has run the gamut, with some companies staying silent and others repeatedly posting information on various channels and responding quickly to customer questions. The public reaction to those postings has also varied based on the type of product, the remedy, and – as always – how well the recall is being executed.

Recalls involving children and pets often receive a disproportionate amount of traditional media coverage, phone calls from concerned caregivers, and social media chatter. We examined the social media approach of two companies who recently experienced these sensitive recalls. Both posted their recalls on Facebook, but that is where the similarities end. Company A also shared the issue on Twitter and took the time to reply to comments and correct disinformation through both channels. As a result, most of the comments were positive, with customers even taking note of the company’s transparency. Company B, on the other hand, posted the recall on Facebook only and left the comments alone. While a few customers chimed in to defend the company and correct disinformation on its behalf, most of the comments were critical in nature and went unanswered.

Recalls involving children and pets often receive a disproportionate amount of traditional media coverage, phone calls from concerned caregivers, and social media chatter. 

2 stericycleexpertsolutions.com
So is social silence the safer bet? Not necessarily. We also looked at examples of companies that opted not to post recall information on Facebook. Rather than maintaining a recall-free page, many customers commented about the recall on unrelated posts, even leveling accusations of a lack of transparency. In some cases, this led to a domino effect, with consumers sharing negative experiences unconnected to the recall, spreading fear and disinformation. It is tempting to believe that by avoiding social media, companies can better control the message. But the reality is that in the social sharing age, information – and disinformation – will spread anyway. In many cases, it is better to engage in the conversation.

Using best practices to share recall information via social media can have added benefits. By providing a link that contains as much information as possible, including a comprehensive FAQ list, call volumes may be reduced. Using every means possible to relay information to consumers can reduce the impact of recall fatigue and help prompt consumers to take action. This reduces liability and the potential that the recall will have to be reannounced, unnecessarily extending the story. But the conversation is crowded. To be most effective, social media posts must be repeated frequently and across multiple channels.
Of course, companies don’t have to post the recall – or even have a social media presence – to receive serious social backlash from customers in response to a poorly managed recall. In the past, the public would tell a handful of friends and neighbors about a bad experience, sharing their negative brand perception in person or over the phone.

Now, they can broadcast their thoughts to hundreds of people with a few keystrokes. Word of mouth has been replaced with word of mouse. Companies big and small should incorporate social media into their recall strategies. But social media has a short lifespan, and the conversation is crowded. Therefore, it can’t replace traditional notification methods, such as a press release, posters, and – when possible – direct notifications. And it still contains greater pitfalls than one-way communication methods. But when used effectively, it can help maintain consumer trust and build loyalty to help brands come out stronger.