

When an Employee or Spokesperson Criticizes Your Company

by Kara Alaimo



Last month three of Under Armour’s celebrity endorsers – Stephen Curry, Misty Copeland, and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson – publicly criticized the company’s CEO, Kevin Plank, for making a favorable statement about President Trump. This was an unusual PR challenge. Normally, executives worry about their endorsers behaving in ways that reflect poorly on their companies, such as getting in trouble with the law. They don’t expect to be reprimanded by the very people they’re paying to market their products.

In today’s hyperpartisan environment, companies are facing backlash from in-house employees, too. As detailed in this report, one Oracle staffer posted a letter explaining that he had quit his job because the company’s co-CEO, Safra Catz, joined Trump’s transition team. And after IBM chief

Ginni Rometty congratulated Trump on his election win, staffers circulated an online petition asking her to allow them to refuse to participate in projects that violate civil and constitutional liberties. It now has more than 2,000 signatures.

What should companies do when insiders publicly condemn them? Based on my experience training communication executives on how to handle such situations, here's what I recommend.

Communicate your values early and often. It's difficult for companies to remain apolitical these days. Retailers such as Bloomingdale's, Walmart, and Overstock.com face boycotts from anti-Trump activists for selling products from the Trump brand, while others, such as Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus, face boycotts from Trump supporters for discontinuing them. Companies from Chobani to Pepsi have been forced to set the record straight after fake news stories made claims about their views. Others have had to respond when the president himself has tweeted about them.

Employees and endorsers should know where you stand before you speak out publicly. Now more than ever, companies must proactively communicate their values and public positions on contentious issues, ideally when hiring or signing people, so that no one is surprised by the stances that the business and its senior executives take. More important, you should help to ensure that most of your workforce and representatives are aligned with you, not against you. "Most people believe ordinary employees before they'll believe a very senior officer of a company," notes Leslie Gaines-Ross, chief reputation strategist at the global communications firm Weber Shandwick. "They turn to people they know from Little League or PTA meetings. So inform employees and count on them to be advocates."

Consider clauses against public disparagement. Employment and endorser contracts can be modified to include language that prohibits people from publicly criticizing your company. But tread carefully here: Such requirements might discourage people from wanting to work for you. And it's important to make sure these clauses don't run afoul of the law. In the United States, for example, employees can't be fired for speaking out publicly in an effort to improve working conditions.

Pay attention to employee and endorser opinions. When stakeholders feel strongly about a particular issue, companies should consider taking a stand in their name. As Helio Fred Garcia, president of Logos Consulting, says, “If those who matter to you are directly negatively affected, they may call on you to step forward to protect them.” Examples include technology firms defending their global talent against the Trump administration’s changes to immigration policy, and health care providers speaking out against a potential repeal of the Affordable Care Act, which could hurt their patients.

The only way to know how your employees feel is to ask them. Companies should consider town halls and other governance processes that allow staffers to nonpublicly express their views and help shape corporate policy. You should also provide options for employees to share their thoughts confidentially in writing if they don’t want to speak up at internal events; surveys are one way to do this. Even if you end up taking a stance that not everyone agrees with, dissenters who feel that their voices have been heard and respected may be less likely to voice their views elsewhere.

Don’t censure anyone after the fact. Companies are legally entitled to dismiss employees who make offensive comments about them, unrelated to the terms and conditions of their employment, according to [Nicholas Fortuna at Allyn & Fortuna](#). But when political disputes go public, I don’t advise going on the attack. That will only create a bigger PR problem for your firm. Instead, make clear that you appreciate and encourage a plurality of ideas. State that you respect each person’s right to voice their opinions and that it won’t in any way affect their careers. IBM, for example, missed an opportunity to reinforce these values when it declined a New York Times request for comment on the employee petition last month.