

The Ranger Station Fire

How Ford Motor Company Used Social
Media to Extinguish a PR Fire in less
than 24 Hours



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Introduction

The Ranger Station Fire is a story that should be read by every executive who is considering the adoption of New/Social Media communications vehicles into their organizations. The story takes a detailed look at how Ford Motor Company took a potentially embarrassing public relations snafu and systematically resolved it through the use of New Media channels. It takes a real-time look at the event's origins and how the automaker used various New Media channels to deal with it, and finally ends with a list of lessons that executives should consider before diving into the New Media pool.

The data gathered for this story came entirely from online sources, from user forum posts, Twitter archives, and an interview with Scott Monty on the [For Immediate Release Podcast](#). Hyperlinks to all sources have been included within this document. Lastly, timestamps were instrumental in piecing together the timeline for this story, yet since the sites that recorded the data were spread across time zones, a decision had to be made. The author has chosen to normalize all timestamps to a single time zone -- United States Eastern Daylight Time -- chosen for the location of the Ford Motor Company in Dearborn, Michigan.

The Ranger Station Fire

Ranger Stations are usually in the role of preventing fires as opposed to starting them. But at 6:10 p.m. on December 9, 2008, a ten year old Ford fan site called [The Ranger Station](#) became the origin of a corporate communications fire that would rage for almost an entire day before finally becoming contained. Like all fires, this one began with a combustible material which took the form of a cease and desist letter that the site's owner received from the Ford Motor Company. The letter demanded not only that Jim Oakes surrender his web site's URL, but he was also to write the automaker a check in the amount of \$5000. Not knowing what to do, Jim added a spark to the combustible material by posting his dilemma to the 'The Ranger Stations' user forums. Within two minutes of his post, [TRS is being attacked by the Ford Motor Company](#), the spark and combustible erupted into flames of angry comments that lapped at the big bad corporation and its asinine decision to pick on its own fans. Some of the more cynical of the participants joked that this was just Ford's way to recover its revenue shortfalls in these tough economic times. Over the next twenty-two hours, Jim's post would receive 916 of these heated responses, which began burning through the walls of the website and spreading to others...

Scott Monty awoke at 5:30 a.m. on Wednesday, December 10, 2008 no differently than he had for dozens of previous Wednesday mornings. As part of his morning regimen, the Global Digital and Multimedia Communications Manager for Ford Motor Company checked Twitter to see if anything needed his attention. A [tweet](#) waiting for him since 1:30 a.m. indicated that something indeed had. Twitter user Jregner said:

@ScottMonty This is about as bad as PR gets for Ford right now! Very bad move thats going to cause loss of sales: <http://tinyurl.com/5o6jb8>

The hyperlink lead Scott to a Ford fan site called [FocalJet](#), where a user had cut and pasted Jim Oakes' original post the the site's user forums. In addition to JRegner's note, Scott also received a Direct Message from someone pointing him to a similar post on yet another fan site called [Mustang Evolution](#). It didn't take too long for Scott to piece together what had happened while he slept. A communications fire had spread from fan site to fan site, requiring action on his behalf. He placed a call to the Ford's Associate General Counsel before responding to JRegner at 7:29 a.m.:

7:29 a.m. @JRegner Thanks for letting me know. I'm looking into that this morning.



Scott Monty heads up social media at Ford Motor Company in Dearborn, Michigan.



Ford Motor Company made a commitment to using New Media by hiring one of the budding industry's very first players. Scott Monty was hired to spearhead the automaker's activities in the use of social communications channels. For the weeks immediately prior to this event, Scott had been using the channels to explain Ford's stance on the so called "Big Three Bailout Plan." Although Ford Motor Company is considered one of the big three, Scott had been spending his time explaining how Ford's financial situation was different than that of GM and Chrysler. Ford wasn't on the brink of bankruptcy and therefore it didn't need cash. Yet, at the same time, the company did support the bill because of a shared interdependence between the three auto manufacturers. If GM and Chrysler failed, Ford's future would likely be jeopardized.



Ford's hard work to spread this message paid off on that December morning, with a front page article on USA Today – an accomplishment that Scott shared with his 5600 Twitter followers at 8:32 a.m.:

Ford makes the front page of USA Today: Ford benefits from CEO's turn to road less traveled <http://is.gd/aYTm>

But that's when Scott's day took a turn for the worse because as the online community awoke, so did the visibility of the Ranger Station Fire. More people started reading and commenting on multiple user forums. Bloggers dog-piled onto the discussion, writing scathing attacks on the company along with others who microblogged snide comments on Twitter.

As a direct result of Jim Oakes's call-to-action in his original post, Ford's Customer Support took the full brunt of over 1000 email messages that poured into awaiting inboxes.

Within a few hours, Scott found himself in the role of firefighter facing an out of control fire, yet without enough facts to fight it properly. Without the means to put out the fire, he attempted to knock it down a little through live Twitter updates:

10:54 a.m. @pblackshaw I was made aware of it this morning and I'm tracking down our trademark counsel to weigh in on it. Not good.

10:55 a.m. @badgergrawling I'm on it. Getting our legal team's perspective and trying to stop a PR nightmare.

11:13 a.m. @leeTrans @davidrinnan @Energy_Geek @petertdavis @insideline_com I'm personally looking into it. Hope to have an answer soon.

11:23 a.m. @ContractorTalk I'm in discussions with our Chief Trademark Counsel about it right now. I'm none too pleased. #ford

That's when Scott did something that is unique to social media communications channels – a feat that would have been impossible merely two years ago. Realizing that the fire was too big for him to fight alone; Scott called on his volunteer firefighters for help:

11:31 a.m. For anyone asking about the Ford fan sites and legal action: I'm in active discussions with our legal dept. about resolving it. Pls retweet

A retweet is probably the most powerful communications device in the social media world today. It's when one Twitter member retransmits a previous tweet to their own Twitter followers. A retweet is an endorsement of sorts, where followers trust the original author enough to retransmit the message to the audiences who trust them. 19 of Scott's 5600 Twitter followers responded by retweeting his message to their own communities that consisted of over 13,400 people!

Meanwhile, Scott continued his play-by-play commentary.

12:17 p.m. @mdurwin @voltageblog I'm finding it's a much different story from our legal department...

12:29 p.m. @petertdavis It means we didn't get the full story from the site owners. There's a deeper issue in question. #ford

1:07 p.m. Re the Ford fan site: I'm finding that there was counterfeit material being sold on it. Trying to get clarity on the URL issue. #ford

With the fire still out of control, one might expect that Scott's entire attention would be totally consumed by it, but the record shows that he was still performing his normal daily duties -- answering questions about the bailout, sharing fun Ford facts, and even tossing a little levity into the mix:

1:32 p.m. Excuse me for just one moment. CALGON, TAKE ME AWAAAAAYYYY!! Thanks. I'm all set now.

2:14 p.m. @davejohnston The irony with that ad is that Ford isn't taking any of the proposed loan money. <http://is.gd/aSY1>

4:03 p.m. @psadler And the Model T only got 12 horsepower with a maximum speed of 20 mph.

Between his stream of Twitter posts, Scott was engaged in multiple conversations. The first involved his legal counsel, who explained that The Ranger Station was selling counterfeit Ford products, actually decals with the Ford logo on it. Scott learned that their letter to Jim Oakes was an attempt to make him stop – with the demands for the URL and \$5000 fee simply added as a legal scare tactic.

Scott requested that the legal team separate the URL issue from the counterfeit one. The Ranger Station was a ten year old fan site and he knew that alienating Ford enthusiasts was not a smart way to proceed. Legal wrote another letter outlining strict rules that Jim Oakes would have to adhere to, including not selling counterfeit goods. Armed with a response in legalese, Scott worked with both the communications and legal teams to write a more human-readable public statement.

A Twitter retweet is probably the most powerful communications device in the social media world today.

Crafting a corporate message is only half of the solution. The other half is deciding what to do with it once completed. The easiest thing would have been for Ford to post a response and have Scott tweet URLs to these locations. But Scott understood the dynamics of social media. The Ranger Station Fire was fuelled by the community's passion, and therefore he needed an alternative to a cold corporate statement to appeal to them. So he picked up the telephone and called Jim Oakes directly.



The following is Scott's description of the events from an interview on The For Immediate Release Podcast:

“I didn't want him to get blindsided by any of this and I just wanted to hear his side of the story and understand what his motivation was. And he was a really, really nice guy...”

Scott describes Jim's side of the story. Evidently, Jim received the letter and panicked. He didn't have \$5000 and didn't want to lose his URL. And so, he asked his supporters for help. Scott describes what happened next:

“And he was literally flabbergasted at the scope that this took on so quickly and did not intend to make any harm towards Ford or cause any trouble for us. He just wanted to do the right thing. “

The two chatted a little before arriving at an agreement:

*...I let him know what the lawyers were thinking and we came to an agreement and then, after our phone call he **posted on his site** what our conversation was about and then I submitted the official statement from Ford...”*

Lessons in Firefighting

Frequently when an event like this happens, we acknowledge how well it was handled, perhaps write a blog post or record a podcast about it, and then collectively move on to the next example. This case contains too many of the subtleties of New Media to do that – subtleties that are frequently overlooked by executives who want to bring similar capabilities into their organizations. Therefore, as the smoldering remains of the Ranger Station Fire cool off, let's take a look at the specific things that Ford Motor Company did correctly and learn from them.

Lesson #1: Everything Is Public

The first lesson has nothing to do with the story itself, but rather the data that was used to tell the story. The point is that EVERYTHING online is archived and people with enough interest can mine that data for information.

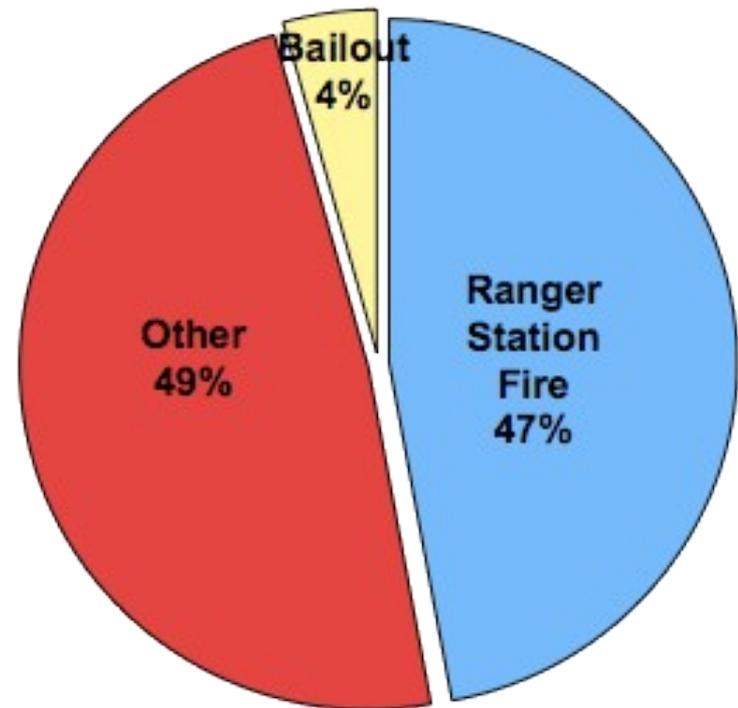
Executives looking to adopt New Media into their organizations can do the same thing by taking an active role in researching what's being said about their brands online. They can follow conversations on Twitter, read blog posts and user forum conversations. The data is available to anyone with access to a web browser and can be instrumental in its value to a company. The question is whether or not the company is willing to do the digital archeology work required to uncover it.

Lesson #2:

Companies don't talk: People do

People are the most important part of building a New Media strategy. Unfortunately, most companies attempt to shoehorn technologies and responsibilities into a specific organization such as marketing, PR, or the “Web team” without an understanding of the interdisciplinary skills required to cut across many departments. In this case, Scott Monty not only required the ability to communicate with clients, prospects, fans, the legal team and his communications team, but he needed the ability to assess all of that information and make quick decisions.

Executives considering the use of New Media channels must consider how these channels will be used, who is going to use them, and where it makes sense to have these folks report within their organizations.



Scott tweeted 138 times on December 10th. Here is a breakdown of the topics he covered that day.

The following list describes the traits that New Media communicators require:

Listener

Without the ability to monitor social networks such as Twitter, Scott Monty never would have received the early warning necessary to address the fire.

Researcher

Rather than jumping into the fray, Scott needed to get to the bottom of things first. He needed access to the right people and the authority to do something with them.

Multitasker

Instead of a single-minded activity, Scott needed to juggle between the inside and outside worlds, getting to the bottom of the problem, architecting a solution and working with the customer to roll out the solution – while keeping the rest of us informed as to the progress.

Authorized Speaker

Without the authorization and trust of his upper management, Scott would have been hamstrung by the traditional bureaucratic red tape that binds official corporate communications. Such a delay would have allowed the fire to spread faster and farther, creating a situation that would have been hard to overcome.

Human Communicator

Scott's ability to add a human touch to his comments put a face on Ford. Anyone who was following the story could see that he was working is tail off trying to get to the bottom of the problem. Add the fact that he made a personal call to Jim Oakes is probably the single most important decision made all day, an act that headed off a potential “he said-she said” situation.

Not afraid to ask for help

Social Media is about people. People like to help other people, especially those who they trust. Realizing that the problem was too large for any one person to tackle alone, Scott put his ego aside and asked for help. His calls for retweets multiplied his reach by the audience size of those who retweeted him.

Warrior

Today, anyone with a keyboard and an Internet connection can cast their opinions far and wide. Just as Scott's role was to get Ford's message out, he also needed to defend it. By calling out bloggers and Twitterers who were spreading inaccurate information, Scott defended his brand appropriately.

Interdisciplinary Communicator

Like combustion fires, social media fires come in all forms too, with each requiring a different set of skills to solve them. Without his ability to understand legal, customer support, online communications, and the long term ramifications of decisions made under duress, Scott would have failed in his efforts.

For every person who retweeted one of Scott's messages, it was made available to an average of 747 additional people.

Lesson #3:

Without Support: New Media Fails

Most corporate communications strategies are built around the concept of control.

Control the message/Control the brand.

Long meetings are held to craft perfectly tuned messages to be delivered from a corporate pedestal. Once approved, only certain spokespeople are authorized to distribute them.

The system served us well when only a few could afford to be publishers. But today, where anyone can post to a fan site and 1000 of their friends can jump to their aid, new methods must be devised.

Had Ford taken the traditional route -- organizing a committee to determine how to respond -- this situation likely would have spilled into the mainstream press, where the fire would have been too big to handle.

Scott Monty used the power of the retweet a 3rd time to spread the good news of Ford's front page article in USA Today. 26 of his followers retweeted his message to over 17,700 of their followers.

Companies must support their New Media communicators. If “CALGON, TAKE ME AWAAAAAYYYY!!” are the words chosen for that specific moment, then upper management must trust that they are the right words for the right time. Without that level of trust and authority, your company's New Media efforts are doomed to failure.

What is the ROI of Scott Monty?

New/Social Media is usually dogged with the following question:

“Yeah, but what’s the ROI?”

Let’s turn the question around and ask the same question about this story:

- Scott Monty spent 19 hours working on this problem.
- He lead an investigation
- He ran multiple meetings
- He made multiple phone calls (one to the owner of the site)
- He posted 138 times to Twitter
- His asked for help and his followers cast his message to 32,332 other users
- He squashed the story in less than 24 hours.

You tell me. What was Ford’s Return on Investment?

Wrap-up

The adoption of New Media channels into your organization promises to be a challenging yet exciting effort. Through proper use, they allow your company to connect with your customers in ways that were impossible just a few years ago. But with opportunity comes responsibility. The content injected into New Media channels cannot be created by committee. The content can't be created by nameless and faceless entities. Real people communicating in real voices must feed content into those channels.

Additionally, New Media is not about spending money. Remember, Twitter is free. Instead, New Media is about how management allocates employee time and supports the use of that time. It requires management to reevaluate the roles of its present employees and then determine the best allocation of those resources to meet the needs of rapidly growing online communities.

Is your company ready to add New Media channels into its communications mix? Are you, as an executive, ready to make the tough decisions to make it happen? If so, take a lesson from the Ford Motor Company and start by hiring someone like Scott Monty.

As Smokey the Bear says, "Only you can prevent forest fires."

Glossary

Direct Message, or “DM” in Twitter parlance, is a private message between Twitter users.

New/Social Media: New technologies are called by different names. Some call it New Media, others call it Social Media, and still others call it Web 2.0. All are referring to essentially the same thing. In this case study, we predominantly use the word New Media.

Retweet: When one Twitter member retransmits another member’s tweet.

Tweet: A message on Twitter is called a tweet

Twitter is a free online service that allows its users to share messages in 140 characters or less. Called “micro-blogging,” Twitter has become a platform for real-time online discussions that range from the mundane to breaking news stories. It can be found at <http://twitter.com>.

Sources, Credits, and License

Sources

<http://twitter.com/scottmonty>

<http://search.twitter.com>

The Ranger Station Website

For Immediate Release Podcast

Mustang Evolution Fan Page

FocalJet Fan Page

Photo Credits:

<http://scottmonty.com>



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The Author

Ron Ploof is the founder of OC New Media, LLC, a consulting firm dedicated to helping businesses use New Media channels to better communicate with their customers.

Ron is one of the early podcasters, having produced a family-safe storytelling podcast called Griddlecakes Radio since 2005. In October 2007, he launched his blog, [RonAmok!](#), where he focuses on the business uses of New Media.

Ron is a sought-after public speaker, speaking before audiences such as The Public Relations Society of America, The Orange County Executive Network, The National Investor Relations Institute (NIRI), San Diego Social Media Club, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and The Massachusetts Software Council. Ron has been interviewed on local and national radio programs, podcasts, and has been quoted in national and trade publications.

You can follow him on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/ronploof>

