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[A Discussion on Bullying, and Not of the Trademark Kind](#)

Posted on April 28, 2011 by [Laura Gutierrez](#)

There's been a lot of talk on DuetsBlog about [trademark bullies](#). Some of this may apply, but I'm talking about the bullies that leave uncalled-for comments and "intrude" on your social space.

The consensus, more often than not, is that as a business, you *must* reply (in hopes that you can display your ability to deal with something like a flaw in your product). No response, in that case, makes your business look like it doesn't care about your customers—it works against you.

There are some great articles on how to respond to criticism. I'm sure we could talk all day about the best practices of responding to criticism, but that's not what I'd like to focus on. There's talk about how *to* respond, but I'd like to cover when it's appropriate *not to* respond.

There are still some companies that are not on social media platforms because of the fear that someone might say something that is not appealing to the business brand. Regardless, consumers—through all types of media—are voicing their opinions about products and services. Not all of it is nice, warranted or wanted. And some of it, quite frankly, is unnecessary.

As a business owner or an employee of a business, we tend to be a bit more sensitive about the products or content we produce, so when someone posts something negative about it, we tend to panic (not always literally). It's hard to see what is the "correct" path (there is no "right," just a "subjective-right")—to respond or not to respond.

Some commenters have a history of being, well, jerks. They never have anything positive to say, and instead of being proactive about their concerns, they wait for a particular post to spark their stream of hatred. So, before you panic—whether that means you physically get upset, prepare a scathing response, or let it get to you—do enough research to make yourself comfortable with your decision to respond.

Below are some things to consider.



What is the question behind the question?

It may not be a question, exactly, but the concept is the same: what is he/she really saying? What do they want? Dig deeper and find the motivation. (Thanks to Jeff Williford of the Disney Institute for this concept. Jeff was a keynote at LMA National Conference in Orlando.)

What does their content tell you?

Look at their social platforms. Do they have a history of negative comments? Is the comment too poorly written to take it seriously, asks [Greta Kowalkowski](#). [Jim Ducharme on the Social Marketing Forum](#) suggests:

“Check their recent tweets on their Twitter page and get a sense of their mindset and attitude. You may even find there is an agenda behind the tweets and that might influence whether you respond, if at all – this is a judgment call.”

My friends Nancy Myrland at [Myrland Marketing](#) and [Tom Matte](#) of [Max Advertising](#) agree that you, first-hand, must observe this behavior. Just thinking this particular comment is mean-spirited isn't enough to just ignore.

Another word for those types of commenters: “trolls” (and not of the bejeweled belly kind—see [Wikipedia entry](#) on it). Again, do your homework before deciding if the person is being a bully or is just voicing their concerns.

Do you actually have content to respond?

This tip comes from my college professor, Dean Beckman, who said:

“It always depends on the situation of course, but I would say in general don't respond if you don't have any factual or even anecdotal evidence to refute the comment.”

Including just fluff in a response might be detrimental. There's always “thanks for the comment,” as Nancy Myrland says.

Don't fight negativity with more negativity

(This is more of a rule than a suggestion.) [Lisa Barone over at Outspoken Media](#) puts it like this:

“Let's face it, social skills and a beating heart aren't necessarily two characteristics common to most organizations. Giving them a microphone to address the people vocally speaking out against them, well, let's just say this could go horribly wrong.”

It's not a recent post, but it's still applicable. Take a breath, don't respond instantly. Your business isn't going to go south in under an hour—it's OK not to respond right away.



If you respond, what will your commenter respond back?

Will engaging them in a heated conversation help either of you? Sometimes, giving them attention is their goal, and no matter how genuine you are about your response, they're going to come back at you with more. Many times, ignoring the bully will make them go away.

[Seth Godin](#) touches this on his post from Tuesday:

"A bully acts up in a meeting or in an online forum. He gets called on it and chastised for his behavior.

The bully then calls out the person who cited their behavior in the first place. He twists their words, casts blame and becomes an aggrieved victim.

Often, members of the tribe then respond by backing off, by making amends, by giving the bully another chance.

And soon the cycle continues.

Brands do this, bosses do it and so do passers-by. Being a bully is a choice, and falling for this cycle, permitting it to continue, is a mistake."

Before you become too hard on yourself, remember that you can't please everybody.

Your turn. What are your suggestions? Do you have a bully story to share (no names, please!)? Let us know in the comments.

