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When Social Media Campaigns Backfire: McDonald's Edition

By Laura Gutierrez on February 2nd, 2012

We all know when a social media campaign backfires. It's splashed all over our news channels. (Society seems to enjoy train wrecks.)

McDonald's recently jumped on that train—though probably not totally aware of it. Here's what happened: McDonald's used a hashtag (#MeettheFarmers & then #McDStories) to incite followers to tweet their McDonald's experiences. Among the top tweets, [according to this article](#), "I haven't been to McDonalds in years, because I'd rather eat my own[...]" Well, I'll stop there. You get the idea.

The hashtag backfired on them. But why? It's not like McDonald's twitterer said anything terrible, made an insensitive comment or anything like that. After the fact, even, they changed the hashtag to try to alleviate some of the damage...so what really went wrong?

My take

McDonald's is, obviously, a major corporation with lots of brand recognition and followers. There is a potential backlash no matter the product, which is probably why companies and brands are wary of using social media, but where I think McDonald's went wrong is knowing their audience. In recent years, fast food joints have ramped up their efforts to include "good for you" menu choices. Even here in Minneapolis, we've seen an uptick in restaurants that use local products, and more [CSAs](#). Not saying that the McDonald's of the world don't have a place, but pretending its food choices are healthy might have been a little too much for the public.

It would have been on thing to make McDonald's audience aware that the company is making strides to bring in healthier food, but it's a whole 'nother thing to ask the public to comment on a menu that's still more than half full of unhealthy food.



According to [this CBS News article](#), McDonald's blames the media (don't we all!). But let's face it, as I said before, society likes a trainwreck (insert any celebrity "reality" show here), and media outlets are pretty decent about giving the public what they want.

So, how can you avoid? Do some research on your audience before engaging in a major campaign. Test it out with some focus groups. But especially, be realistic about your product, and don't oversell what you have.

