Political Postings Risk Social Media Alienation

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Brand marketers may want to tread carefully

Election Day in the US is still more than seven months away, but there is no shortage of political posting activity on social media sitesâ€”and research suggests that while most people are willing to accept some differences from their own political leanings, a significant chunk of the population will walk away from content that politically offends them.

Pew Internet & American Life Projectâ€™s February 2012 survey of US social network users found, unsurprisingly, that people on social sites donâ€™t always agree with their friends, and that friendship is hardly a proxy for shared opinions or interests.

While nine in 10 respondents said they agreed with the content of their friendsâ€™ political posts at least sometimes, the same number disagreed with friendsâ€™ posts equally often.

It may seem like a given that even the closest of friends wouldnâ€™t agree on every topic, but as social media usage has spread to larger chunks of the population, and the 2012 presidential election season has heated up, the issue has surprised some social network users: Pew reported that 38% of US social network users discovered via a post on Facebook or a similar site that they had a serious political disagreement with a friend.

That disagreement, surprising or not, caused nearly one in five (18%) social network users overall to take some action, whether it was blocking, unfriending or otherwise ignoring future posts from the offending contact.

Among self-identified liberals, that share rose to 28%, while it was somewhat lower for self-identified conservatives and moderates (16% and 14%, respectively). Among liberals, the most common reason to take action was that someone posted something they disagreed with, while moderates and conservatives cared somewhat more about others simply posting too frequently about politics.

As the Republican primary season winds down and focus shifts to the general election, social network users can likely expect more disagreements of this type to pop up, and brand marketers should take note. For now, the majority of social network users are not hitting any unfriend or hide buttonsâ€”but if political disagreements become more widespread, friend and influencer networks may begin to shrink, on average, hobbling the power of social word-of-mouth for marketers.

In addition, any cause-related marketing initiatives may run similar risks, as they often involve politicized issues like buying local or going green.

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