

When corporate policies become public fodder

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Recent controversies on the Facebook pages of Buffalo Wild Wings and Denny's showed that, even if restaurant brands do not pick sides in heated political arguments, they may not benefit from staying silent either.

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Gun control and the Second Amendment were launched back into the national conversation after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., last Dec. 14. With advocates for and against gun control primed for arguments on social media, including and especially Facebook, the debate quickly spread to brand pages belonging to restaurants like Denny's and Buffalo Wild Wings. Those two chains got caught in a storm when corporate policies surrounding firearms — one restricting concealed weapons in restaurants and one allowing only police officers to carry firearms in restaurants — suddenly were thrust into the spotlight.

At Denny's, the brand addressed head on the consumer and customer concerns about a unit's manager asking an armed plainclothes officer carrying a weapon. The brand saw positive social media reactions. At Buffalo Wild Wings, the brand chose not to address on Facebook its in-restaurant gun policy that had caught heat following a news report. The chain is still seeing negative social media metrics.

Gary Stibel, founder and chief executive of Norwalk, Conn.-based New England Consulting Group noted that the difference in public reaction to Buffalo Wild Wings' and Denny's separate situations shows the importance of being proactive and transparent.

"You can't wait for something to happen," he said, "and while there are no iron-clad rules, you're usually best off by doing something, doing it quickly and doing it openly. These things have lives of their own."

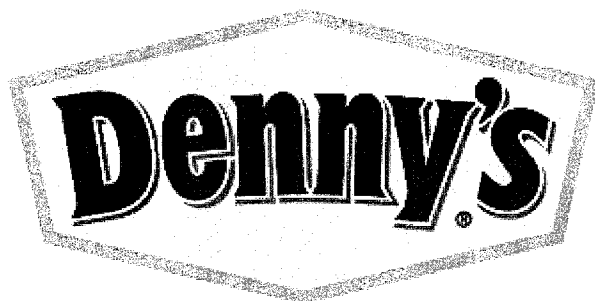
Data from social-media analytics firm TrackingSocial confirms that increased discussions related to gun control significantly affected social media engagement metrics for Denny's and Buffalo Wild Wings. [TrackingSocial partners with Nation's Restaurant News](#) in producing the [NRN Social 200](#), an index that explores the engagement level and relationship between the largest restaurant brands and their social media audiences on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

TrackingSocial found that while engagement spiked at the outset of controversy for both chains, Buffalo

Wild Wings continues to experience negative effects on its growth in Facebook fans, while Denny's maintained better control over that metric.

Proactive response defuses conflict for Denny's

Continued from page 1



On New Year's Day at a location in Belleville, Ill., a Denny's manager asked a customer to leave because she was carrying a gun. The manager did not know the woman was a plainclothes police officer eating with her co-workers, who also were not wearing official police uniforms. Though Denny's policy allows law enforcement officers to carry weapons in its restaurants, the group of police officers left the store, prompting the police chief to ban his officers from

eating at that Denny's.

News of the incident was reported in the Belleville News-Democrat Jan. 2 and was picked up nationally by Fox News and other outlets. By that evening, people started posting a link to the story in the comments of Denny's Facebook posts advertising the Hobbit Menu limited-time offer.

On Jan. 3, Denny's ran a Facebook post that read, "As a company, we are as upset as you about the recent misunderstanding. Denny's supports local law enforcement and the hard work they do on behalf of all our communities, and we sincerely apologize." The post garnered more than 1,500 responses.

The next day, the brand posted again saying that the Belleville Police Department had accepted the brand's apology. About 150 people weighed in on that post. After that, Denny's volume of comments returned to dozens, not hundreds, of responses, with discussion of gun control dissipating dramatically.

According to TrackingSocial data, Denny's measure of people talking about its Facebook page was 10,598 on Jan. 3, the day it acknowledged the situation in Illinois. That metric increased 152 percent to 26,801 people on Feb. 4, a month after Denny's reported that the issue had been resolved.

In an analysis of Denny's Facebook engagement data, TrackingSocial founder Alex Paley noted that Denny's week-over-week audience growth maintained pace, dipping only from 0.39 percent to 0.3 percent, which is in line with typical deceleration in the gathering of new likes as a brand switches promotion. In Denny's case, they moved from promoting the Hobbit Menu to a new breakfast program.

In a statement emailed to Nation's Restaurant News, Spartanburg, S.C.-based Denny's chief marketing officer Frances Allen said Denny's Facebook response to the story out of Bellville reflected the same kind of quick-response strategy the brand tries to employ with guests in its restaurants.

"When we become aware of a situation related to our brand that is drawing customer feedback, we closely monitor our Facebook page and decide whether a public comment becomes necessary," Allen

wrote. “Facebook is a valuable communications vehicle that allows us to respond directly to the concerns of our guests, and we will use it for that purpose as necessary.”

Buffalo Wild Wings still taking heat

Continued from page 2



Minneapolis-based Buffalo Wild Wings’ firearms policy, which is posted on signs at every company-owned restaurant and has been in place since 2009, asks patrons not to bring guns into the store even if they have concealed-carry weapons permits.

Media attention toward the gun ban grew beginning in December, first with a short TV news segment about the policy from a Harrisburg, Pa., affiliate of CBS that aired Dec. 13, 2012, the evening before the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown. As the national debate over gun violence reignited following the shooting spree, more local newspapers began reporting on businesses in their areas with policies forbidding concealed weapons, including company markets for Buffalo Wild Wings.

By early January, people began posting to the brand’s timeline and leaving comments in the brand’s posts to criticize the policy — even in Buffalo Wild Wings’ posts focused solely on the chain’s “wings, beer and sports” positioning. Other people on the brand’s Facebook page fired back to defend the policy, and bitter name-calling often ensued.

Paley noted that the number of people talking about Buffalo Wild Wings’ page jumped to 221,325 on Dec. 14, the day of the Sandy Hook shooting, increasing from 165,784 people the day before. One month after the incident, however, that metric had fallen by 55 percent to 98,078 people talking about the brand’s page as users grew tired of the debate and stopped visiting, Paley said.

He added that Buffalo Wild Wings’ growth rate in new Facebook likes decelerated sharply during the outcry. The brand’s week-over-week audience growth dropped from 0.73 percent during the holiday season to 0.26 percent in January, when there should have been acceleration, Paley noted.

Buffalo Wild Wings spokeswoman Angie Andresen said in an email to Nation’s Restaurant News that the chain does not comment on internal policies related to communications, but the brand released the following statement regarding its ban of guns at company-owned restaurants:

“We’re a brand that is all about having fun with friends. Beginning in 2009, our company-owned restaurants, along with some franchised locations, began asking guests not to bring guns into Buffalo Wild Wings. That business practice has never been a comment on social or political issues. Our position isn’t new, and it hasn’t changed in years. We’re wings, beer and sports. Our focus is always to provide a great experience for all our guests on game day — and every day.”

Protecting brand policies

Continued from page 3

New England Consulting Group's Stibel noted that brands embroiled in future controversies should not "stay on the sidelines" for fear of offending people who disagree with brand policies. Because Denny's and Buffalo Wild Wings have their no-gun policies to protect their customers and provide an optimal experience, they should not worry about losing the favor of people who would forgo a visit to their locations if they could not carry in a gun.

"Be proud of what you say, knowing that not everyone will agree," he said. "You're never going to make everyone happy, and that's not a bad thing. The only time you make everyone happy is when you're benign. You have to do the right thing for the right groups of people."

If the controversy is playing out on Facebook, he added, that is where a proactive response should go.

"You need to engage wherever your consumers are likely to be engaged," Stibel said. "If they see you not engaged, they may attribute that to weakness or fear. But you should be proud of your good policies, or anxious to fix bad ones. If politics has no role in the restaurant business or on your Facebook page, say so."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: February 15, 2013 An earlier version of this story incorrectly recounted the Jan. 1 incident at a Belleville, Ill., Denny's location. All the police officers who left the diner that day were in plainclothes rather than official uniforms, not just the one female officer asked to leave because she was carrying her issued firearm.

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