

Social Platforms

Case Study: Should He Be Fired for That Facebook Post?

by Mary Anne Watson and Gabrielle R. Lopiano

December 11, 2015



By the time Susannah Winslow remembered that her ringer was off, she had seven text messages from her father, Dell, who was also her boss. Dell was the president of Downcity Motors, which owned BMW, Range Rover, and Mercedes-Benz dealerships in Charlotte, North Carolina, and had been in the Winslow family for three generations. Susannah, the general manager, was poised to take over in five years, when her dad retired.

It's Monday morning, Dad, she thought, sighing. Dell was an early riser who got to his office at 6:30 AM. Still, he rarely sent e-mails or texts at that hour. Something was clearly up.

"Dad, it's me," she said when he picked up the phone.

"Susie. Finally. We've got a problem. Kenton's been bad-mouthing us on Facebook again."

Editor's Note

This fictionalized case study will appear in a forthcoming issue of Harvard Business Review, along with commentary from experts and readers. If you'd like your comment to be considered for publication, please be sure to include your full name, company or university affiliation, and email address.

Everyone at the company called James Kenton by his last name, a sign of affection and respect for one of their most successful salespeople. He had joined Downcity's Mercedes dealership straight out of college and quickly became its biggest producer, far outselling his peers across the company's locations.

Dell continued, "Greg Coucher called over the weekend. I just heard the voicemail this morning." Coucher was Downcity's contact at BMW headquarters. "He said that Kenton wrote something nasty about Friday's Mercedes launch, and he was glad it wasn't about a BMW. He implied that we need to keep a tighter rein on our staff."

Susannah had heard Kenton's griping about the rollout. Tyson Beck, the Mercedes dealership sales manager, had been in charge of planning it, but Kenton had been breathing over his shoulder for weeks, asking for details. He wanted them to serve fancy canapés, not "low class" food. When he found out that Tyson was planning to use

plastic tablecloths, Kenton had even come by Susannah's office to say, "This isn't a Walmart employee picnic. We're selling luxury here. What are our customers going to think?" Susannah saw his point, but she also trusted Tyson.

"This is an embarrassment, Susie," Dell said now. "The kid clearly hasn't learned his lesson. He's got to go."

"Don't be rash, Dad," she replied. "I'll deal with it as soon as I'm in."

What's Our Policy on This?

Tyson and Susannah were hunched over her computer, looking at Kenton's Facebook page. Dell sat on the small office couch with his arms crossed.

Susannah read: "So thrilled that Downcity went 'all out' for the most important Mercedes launch in years. Nothing says luxury like plastic tablecloths and soda pop." Kenton had posted a photo of a soda can with the Downcity Motors sign looming in the background.

"OK," Tyson said, "It's pretty bad. I'll have him delete it."

"But hasn't the whole world already seen it?" Dell asked. He didn't have a Facebook account and wasn't interested in social media. His daughter handled Downcity's online presence.

"Not really," Susannah replied. "He can restrict who sees it, depending on his privacy settings. And it looks like..." She clicked through to the details of Kenton's profile. "Shoot, he's pretty loose about who can see his posts."

"So that's how Greg Coucher saw it?" Dell asked. "And how do we know that no one at Mercedes headquarters has seen it?"

Susannah grimaced. She and Greg were Facebook friends; she assumed he had also friended staff members at the BMW dealership, who were most likely friends with people at the Mercedes dealership.

“Only people in Kenton’s network can see his posts, Dad,” Susannah said, thinking of all the loyal customers whom Kenton had probably friended.

“Right,” said Tyson. “Unless his friends repost the photo.”

Susannah shot him a “you’re not helping matters” look.

“I’ll remind him that this is inappropriate,” Tyson promised. “I’m sure he’ll take it down, just like last time.”

About a month earlier, another salesperson had let Susannah know that Kenton had posted two photos: One was of seven cars lined up for service in the lot with the caption “Why am I here before the mechanics?” The other was of a BMW that had been driven into a pond by the 16-year-old son of a customer who had let the boy take the wheel during a test drive. When Tyson and Susannah had talked to Kenton about the pictures, he’d said he was just sharing his work experiences with friends and family. He then pointed out that they should think about taking a harder line with tardy employees and teenage test drivers.

“We were clear that this shouldn’t happen again,” Dell said, and he was right. Susannah had asked Kenton not to post anything else that reflected negatively on Downcity or its customers and partners. “At some point we have to question Kenton’s judgment and whether he can represent the company.”

Tyson looked shocked. “Are you suggesting we fire him? He posted this late Friday night, clearly not on company time or from a company computer. He thinks he’s being funny. He’s not trying to hurt the company.”

“But he is hurting it—at least according to Greg Coucher.” Then Dell smiled. “Are you worried about hitting your numbers without him?”

“Of course I am,” Tyson said. That’s what you pay me to do, and he’s our biggest producer. Not only would we be kissing sales good-bye, but I’d have to train a new person.”

Toby Diller, Downcity’s head of HR, walked in. “I’m sorry I’m late,” he said. “I got your e-mails, Susannah. Has anyone talked to Kenton yet?”

“I was about to,” Tyson said.

“Let’s hear from Toby first,” Dell said. “We let Kenton get away with a slap on the wrist last time, but don’t we have a policy on this sort of thing?”

Toby explained that technically they didn’t. They hadn’t yet updated their employee manual to cover social media. He and Susannah exchanged glances. They’d been talking about this for months, but it kept dropping down on the to-do list.

“All we have is a line that reads, ‘No one should be disrespectful or use profanity or any other language that injures the image or reputation of the company,’” Toby said.

“Well, this seems to be a clear violation of that,” Susannah said. “And what about the section on unauthorized interviews?”

Tyson jumped in. “He didn’t give an interview. There’s no journalist involved here.”

“That’s what Facebook seems like to me—people just interviewing themselves all day long,” Dell said. “I don’t get this generation. Not one bit.”

“Don’t be such a curmudgeon,” Susannah countered. “We were all young once, and if we’d had access to the technology Millennials have, we probably would have gotten into the same trouble.”

“He’s getting us in trouble—that’s the difference,” Dell said. “Susie, figure this out. I think I’ve made my views clear. I’d be happy to see him gone by the end of the day, even if he is our top salesman.”

Make an Example of Him

Susannah and Toby climbed into a Range Rover Sport. The dealership had few places for a private conversation, so they often used the roomy interior of one of their cars.

“It’s impossible to think with Tyson and Dad hovering,” Susannah said. “I just need to understand my options.”

“I think you’ve got three,” Toby said. “First, since the photos he posted of the event were his own, and he was expressing his opinion—which he’s entitled to—on his personal Facebook page, we could ignore it.”

“That seems awfully lenient to me,” Susannah said. “I don’t want him—or anyone else—thinking this kind of behavior is OK.”

“The second option is to make an example of him. Because he damaged the company’s reputation in a public forum, we could take some sort of disciplinary action.” Toby laid out a few alternatives: make a note in Kenton’s personnel file, request that he rescind his remarks, or suspend him from work, with or without pay.

“And you think we could legally do any of those things?”

“I do. I think we could even fire him. That’s the third option. He violated the employee handbook when he was disrespectful of the company image, and it was a second offense. That would set a clear precedent regarding employee social media use, which, given the age of many of our new hires, is becoming increasingly important.”

Susannah asked if Kenton might sue. “He might,” Toby said, “but I don’t think he’d have a case. It’s not like this qualifies as free speech.”

She wasn't so sure. Were they essentially censoring Kenton? What if he had posted something about poor working conditions? Wouldn't that be protected?

Of course, her father and grandfather had always insisted on treating employees well. Other car dealers might behave as if salespeople were a dime a dozen, but Downcity was different, as its incredibly low turnover attested.

"I guess I'm more worried about what he might say. Kenton's a good guy; if we insist that this can't happen again, I think he'll try his best. But if we fire him, he's essentially free to say whatever he wants about us."

"I hear you," said Toby. "But I'm more in Dell's camp. We gave Kenton a second chance to demonstrate good judgment, and he failed again. Besides, I don't think we can opt not to fire him just because of what he might post on Facebook. Then it's as if we're hogtied because he's such a hothead."

Kenton did have them in a bind, Susannah thought.

Get Ready for a New Generation

The next day Susannah went to Green's Lunch with Rachel Evans, a rising star on the sales team, for one of their regular get-togethers. Knowing how challenging it could be to work with almost all men, Susannah had taken Rachel under her wing.

"I know you probably can't talk about the Kenton thing," Rachel said after they'd ordered. "But remember when you asked me to help you better understand our generation? I wonder if I can shed any light."

"You're right that I can't discuss it," Susannah said. "But I'll listen."

"I can see how this might not be a big deal to Kenton," Rachel said. Susannah raised her eyebrows at the implication that he wasn't remorseful.

“Don’t get me wrong. I think he’s a little embarrassed. But we’ve grown up with social media, sharing our opinions with friends, family, and even our employers, so we all have a story about posting something we regretted. To be fair, though, he didn’t say anything that wasn’t true. He just added some sarcasm. We all thought the refreshments were a little off-brand.”

“On the other hand,” Rachel continued, “what he did was unnecessary and stupid. He got in trouble once but still did it again. He definitely should have better privacy settings, and maybe he should think twice before friending his professional contacts. And he should approach Tyson or you directly if he wants things done differently at the dealership—not gripe with all of us or do it online.”

Susannah winced. Kenton had come to her and Tyson; they’d just ignored his feedback.

Rachel was on a roll: “If you look through his feed, you’ll see that he says a lot of positive things about DOWNCITY too. He loves his job and our cars, which is why he’s so good at selling them. But I worry that he just can’t help himself and it’s only a matter of time before he does it again.”

Susannah smiled. “Thanks, Rachel. That was very helpful. Now let’s talk about you. How was the conference last week?” But even as her protégé answered, she kept thinking about Kenton. Should he simply be reprimanded again? Or should the consequences be greater this time?

Question: What should Susannah do about Kenton’s Facebook remarks?

Please remember to include your full name, company or university affiliation, and e-mail address.

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