Burkenroad Symposium tackles ethics of social media

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If there was an overriding theme at this year's Burkenroad Symposium, "Taming the Dragon: The Ethics of Doing Business in the World of Social Media," panelist David Vinjamuri summed it up best.



Burkenroad Institute Director Adrienne Colella, left, with panelist David Vinjamuri. Vinjamuri emphasized the importance of ethics in social media at this year's symposium. Photos by Cheryl Gerber.

"Just because you can doesn't mean you should," said Vinjamuri, founder of ThirdWay Brand Trainers and "Brand Truth" columnist for *Forbes* magazine. "There are many things that are perfectly legal and not at all ethical."

Vinjamuri was one of three national experts who took on the topic of ethics and social media for this year's symposium. Joining Vinjamuri were Michelle Sherman, a Los Angeles-based attorney who specializes in social media law, and Chris Weil, global chairman and CEO of New York-based marketing firm Momentum Worldwide. Laila Morcos, senior account public relations executive at Peter A. Mayer Advertising, moderated the discussion.

The symposium, an annual presentation of the Freeman School’s Burkenroad Institute, took place on Friday (Feb. 10) in Dixon Hall.

Vinjamuri cited a laundry list of ethical and legal transgressions committed by businesses in their social media activities, everything from secretly sponsoring bloggers to write about their companies to creating phony review sites to hype their products. Invariably, Vinjamuri said, those misdeeds come back to bite those businesses.



Attorney Michelle Sherman discussed some of the legal issues of social media.

“It’s not okay to assume that you can influence people in a way that you wouldn’t be comfortable with if everyone knew,” Vinjamuri said. “The only thing that is of value is your reputation as a company, as a brand or as an individual, and all those things will be gone if you misbehave.”

Despite social media’s reputation as the Wild Wild West, Sherman said many of the laws governing offline business conduct also apply to social media. For example, employers can’t enforce social media policies that punish employees for engaging in protected activities — such as criticizing a manager or complaining about working conditions — on a personal Facebook page.

“If you have a social media policy, you don’t want it to be overbroad,” Sherman said. “We’ve seen companies fire employees that they then had to rehire because they fired them based on protected activity.”

Weil closed things out with a discussion of how social media is changing intellectual property models, and he also got the biggest laugh of the morning by making his point via YouTube sensation Antoine Dodson.



Marketing executive Chris Weil, left, and panel moderator Laila Morcos. Weil said social media is transforming traditional intellectual property models.

Dodson, a resident of Huntsville, Ala., became an Internet celebrity after his interview with a local TV news crew about an intruder who broke into his home went viral. Weil showed a clip of Dodson's original interview and then a clip of "Bed Intruder Song," a recording and video by Brooklyn band the Gregory Brothers that sampled Dodson's impassioned rant to hilarious effect.

Instead of simply appropriating Dodson's voice for their own financial gain, the band reached out to Dodson and signed an agreement to split all proceeds from the song with him. Weil said that philosophy, one in which social media participants share credit and profits, will become the new standard.

"They did the brilliant thing," Weil explained. "They said, 'Hey, we didn't write these lyrics. We added value to something that happened, and we're going to share, 50-50, all the proceeds with the person that did.'

"That's how things are going to be going forward. The co-creation model."