Two large marketers, Aflac and the Chrysler Group, are struggling to answer that uncomfortable question in the wake of incidents that took place within days of each other. The incidents, involving remarks on Twitter that were judged to be tasteless, inappropriate and insensitive, point out some inherent risks of social media.

One challenge is the "amplified effect" of social media, said Ian Schafer, chief executive at Deep Focus, a digital agency in New York, citing how, on Twitter, "you put something out and it can be retweeted thousands of times."

"It's an age when anybody can communicate to an audience," he added. "It didn't used to be that way."

The relative newness of that phenomenon, said George E. Belch, a marketing professor at San Diego State University, means "there are people in your company who forget when they post on a blog, on Twitter, on a Facebook page, that it's out there -- and it's out there at warp speed."

Another risk with social media is how many users vie to be first with what they consider clever comments on news stories and other subjects their friends and families care about.

"I'm concerned," said Daniel Khabie, chief executive at Digitaria in San Diego, an agency that is part of the JWT division of WPP. "I think you should think before you speak, and you should think before you tweet."

"We, as people, have a social responsibility," he added. "What you say in social media shouldn't be just a chain of thoughts."
Brands need to "establish a social media policy," Mr. Khabie said, because without such precautions, "we're giving people loaded guns to do incredible harm."

The first incident began last Wednesday, when an employee of New Media Strategies, an agency handling the Twitter account for the Chrysler brand that is aimed at consumers (@ChryslerAutos), posted a comment there that read, "I find it ironic that Detroit is known as the #motorcity and yet no one here knows how to drive." Between "to" and "drive" was a vulgarity.

The comment was deleted, the agency dismissed the employee and Pete Snyder, chief executive at New Media Strategies, wrote in a post on the company's blog that the agency "regrets this unfortunate incident."

On Thursday, Chrysler said it would not renew the agency's contract. In a post on a corporate blog, Ed Garsten, a spokesman for Chrysler, cited a new advertising campaign for the Chrysler brand, which carries the theme "Imported from Detroit," as a reason.

"This company is committed to promoting Detroit and its hard-working people," Mr. Garsten wrote, adding: "Inside Detroit, citizens are becoming even more proud of their town, and outside the region, perception of Detroit is rapidly improving. With so much good will built up over a very short time, we can't afford to backslide now and jeopardize this progress."

Professor Belch said he believed that "we're going to see more of this" because "I don't think people can always turn off their personal lives and say, 'I'm crossing over to corporate brand communications now.'"

The Aflac incident began on Saturday, when Gilbert Gottfried, the comedian who supplies the voice for the squawking duck character in most Aflac commercials, started to post at least 10 jokes to his personal Twitter feed (@RealGilbert) about the earthquake and tsunami in Japan -- a market that accounts for 75 percent of Aflac's revenue.

By Monday, Mr. Gottfried had been dismissed, effective immediately.

"Gilbert's recent comments about the crisis in Japan were lacking in humor and certainly do not represent the thoughts and feelings of anyone at Aflac," Michael Zuna, senior vice president and chief marketing officer at Aflac, said in a statement.

"Aflac Japan -- and, by extension, Japan itself -- is part of the Aflac family," he added, "and there is no place for anything but compassion and concern during these difficult times."

The Kaplan Thaler Group in New York, an agency owned by the Publicis Groupe that creates ads for Aflac, and also created the duck character, referred inquiries about Mr. Gottfried to Aflac.

Laura Kane, a vice president at Aflac, said on Tuesday the company had stopped running television commercials using the voice of Mr. Gottfried, including one that had been introduced only last week.

"We are re-voicing them temporarily," she added, as the company makes plans for "a nationwide casting call to find a new voice for the duck."

Aflac invoked a morals clause in Mr. Gottfried's contract in dismissing him, Ms. Kane said.

The jokes can no longer be found on Mr. Gottfried's Twitter account. He posted two comments there on Tuesday. In the first, he wrote, "I sincerely apologize to anyone who was offended by my attempt at humor regarding the tragedy in Japan."
The second comment read: "I meant no disrespect, and my thoughts are with the victims and their families."

In considering the Aflac and Chrysler incidents, John Diefenbach, chairman at MBLM in New York, an agency that specializes in tasks like brand strategy, said: "I come down in favor of the company. They took the action they needed to take."

"The liberties that have been created by the Internet, by social media" must be balanced against "the idea that there's an accountability and a responsibility if you're being paid by someone to do a job," Mr. Diefenbach said.

Craig Macdonald, chief marketing officer at Covario in San Diego, an agency for search advertising and social media advertising, said he would recommend that marketers pursue a strategy of "controlled chaos" in social media.

"Offer employees some sort of certification course and tell them, 'We'll tolerate some negativity and dumb stuff, and we'll course-correct as we go along,' " Mr. Macdonald said. "Then monitor what they say, course correct -- and do better next time."

PHOTO: Gilbert Gottfried was fired by Aflac after certain comments about the crisis in Japan on his own Twitter account. (PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTIN LANE/EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY)

Late Edition - Final

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