



I blog, You blog, Everybody blogs

Internal communications is, actually, external too

Technorati Inc., a company that tracks, critiques and provides links to blogs around the world, estimated in late 2006 that more than 75,000 blogs are created every day. While most of the estimated 53 million blogs currently on the Internet are seen by only handfuls of people, there is no doubt that the power of the blogosphere – the 21st century phenomenon of people creating web sites and telling their own story to whomever finds their URL – is here to stay.

And what do these people write about on their blogs? Very often, it's their work, their companies, their daily environment. They'll post emails sent to them by annoying bosses or dim co-workers. They'll "chat" about company policies. In some cases, they'll post sensitive information that the corporate lawyers didn't even want sent beyond the confines of the board of directors. Oooops.

Blogs are a double-sided coin, like any communication: they can provide outlets of information that are credible, incredibly fast and accessible by millions. They can also lead to companies facing the reality that "confidential" in a digital world is very, very hard to enforce.

"Did I post that?"

Bloggers can get themselves into big trouble. There's a term for a person who has been fired over blog entries: "dooxed." It's from the famous case of Elizabeth

Armstrong, a web developer in California whose blog (www.dooce.com) contained information her employers objected to. She lost her job, but her blog is still going strong, partially on the notoriety she received from the case. So the company didn't really win.

Often, by the time a company is aware of a negative blog – or worse, a blog posting information that is sensitive or confidential – it's usually too late to do much about it. Employees are fighting back against being fired, arguing that blogs fall under the constitutional right of free speech. Unless there are clear company policies about employee blogs, it's difficult to argue that the employee "should have known better" than to write a caustic entry that makes the company look bad. True, it was stupid – but is it a firing offence?

A recent survey by the Employment Law Alliance showed that only 15 percent of companies had policies regarding employee blogs. The case law regarding electronic communication is still in its infancy. Don't rely on it.

Blogs can be our friends

Every company needs at least one official blog. For many reasons, actually:

- Blogs increase your presence in Search, so search engines such as Google, Yahoo, etc., are more likely to find your web site if there's a blog attached.
- Blogs link to other blogs and thus can create a viral information source that is unmatched by any other medium. Put an RSS feed option on your blog so new entries show up in interested emails immediately.
- If your customer or target market base is young, technologically savvy or has access to media outlets with reporters who are such, your blog will be the source of rich content authored by you.

Don't try to stop the inevitable

Employees will have blogs. No policy can stop this. Even if you try, employees forward emails which can end up on *someone else's* blog.

There is only one thing to do in this age of digital media: make sure your internal communications are as good, or even better, than your external PR efforts.

If your employee morale is good and your employees believe they are getting true, timely information from the corporate powers-that-be, you should have a good feeling about the information that's wending its way into the blogosphere.

If your employee morale is bad, fix it. This is a whole other topic which we will not go into here.

Positive employee blogs can be the best public relations tool a company could ever ask for. Don't try to create a fake blog, though. Your corporate blog should be your official, corporate blog, and it's great if the CEO or a set of employees are the authors – don't try to make it look like some anonymous employee in accounting has his own personal blog and try to use it to influence the blogosphere. It will be exposed and your company will be excoriated. The blogosphere is not forgiving.

Steps to take immediately

If your company has more than six employees, you may not know if one of them has a blog.

1. Do a survey of your employees, find out who has blogs, and get their URLs for monitoring purposes. Do not attempt to tell your employees to shut down their blogs, or even to say nothing about the company. This is fruitless and will lead to resentment.
2. If you do not already have a company blog policy, create one. Tie it to your company email policy ("Electronic Communications" should include use of company resources, penalties for posting material labeled 'sensitive' or 'confidential' and slander/libel). If you do not yet have a company email policy, you are still in the 20th century, and you must catch up fast.
3. Make sure that any company blogger is on the list to receive any company external communication: news releases, annual reports, anything. This person has become an external news outlet. Provide access to sources they can quote, if they so desire.

4. Assign several people within the company to read designated blogs. No one person in the PR department can or should be solely responsible for monitoring employee blogs. Share the job.
5. Celebrate good blogs. Put the links in the company internal newsletter. Refer to them in the Annual Report. Give a great employee blog writer a “star for positive communication” and post it where others can see it.
6. Take immediate action if you find an employee blog that:
 - a. Identifies the employee as affiliated with your company but then shows the employee indulging in practices that could put the company in a bad light by association, i.e., pictures of themselves smoking marijuana or advocating legalizing drugs.
 - b. Contains entries that clearly put the company, its other employees or management in a negative light. If the posted entries rise to the prosecutable levels of slander or libel, bring in the company lawyers. If they are just rude, counsel the employee and try to influence future content by making sure the person knows the blog is being read by supervisors.
7. Repeat steps 1-6 every quarter.

Communications Auditing

Make your employee blog monitoring effort part of a regular, ongoing Communications Audit.

If your company has never conducted a Communications Audit, add it to your list of necessary items. The importance of such a project cannot be overstated. It’s an invaluable tool to measuring ROI for your company’s communications efforts, as well as a way to make sure your messages are consistent across the board.

How does your marketing and public relations team measure effectiveness of messaging, collateral materials and placed articles without a Communications Audit clarifying what went out, when, and what messages were contained?

How does your HR department track what material your employees have in hand about the company and its policies?

Communications Audits should occur annually at a minimum. It should include surveys of all departments that produce written material for internal and external consumption. Any material produced by external sources which refer to the company (news article clips, etc) should also be included.

If your Communications Audit indicates that departments such as Marketing, PR and Sales are not being consistent across the board with their messaging, you've learned that your Brand is not as solid as it could be. This is a fixable problem.

Definitions:

Blog: Originally called *Web Logs*, they were imagined as diaries open to friends and friendly strangers on the World Wide Web. The form has since evolved into a phenomenon called the Blogosphere.

Blogosphere: Defines the entire community or Social Network of Internet sites created by individuals to provide information and entertainment. The Blogosphere now contains commercial entries such as YouTube and corporate blogs. Some blogs have become serious journalistic outlets in their own right, and some just have delusions of grandeur. Small blogs can explode into public prominence overnight, or can remain in the "Long Tail."

Long Tail: in a graphical representation of Internet usage, there are a few sites which spike very high (think Google) with millions of people accessing them. The vast majority of sites, however, slide along the bottom of the chart in a "long tail" that lays flat. Marketers used to believe the Long Tail was a bad place to be. New studies have indicated that being in the Long Tail is just fine, as long as the site is optimized such that the specific niche target audience necessary for that site can find them in Search. Most blogs fall into the Long Tail.

RSS Feed: Stands for "Really Simple Syndication." Users link to RSS Feeds through free downloadable software which regularly checks certain blogs or URLs they have identified. If there is new content, the material is deposited in the subscriber's inbox in their email. An April 2007 study indicated there are more

than 72 million (72,000,000) active RSS feeds trolling the web. This is no longer an early-adopter only technology.

Search: Short for Web Search, the term has entered the general lexicon with two meanings, 1. using a Search Engine such as Google or Yahoo to find a web site and 2. the algorithms, such as Boolean or Tree, that are sent digitally by the Search Engines to find sites for ranking and supplying to Searchers.

Viral: Blogs link to each other, bloggers comment on other blogs, and blog entries have a way of being “lifted” from one blog to another or out into email threads. This often creates a wave of almost instantaneous repetition of information that is suddenly all over the World Wide Web.

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Spark PR Marketing brings internal and external communications expertise to the table. If your company needs a communications audit and measurement system, call on us.

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