

Employee *Thinking*

Edelman's perspective on current issues and trends in employee engagement

Managing Employee Bloggers

The rise of the blogosphere is empowering employees in ways not unlike the rise of labor unions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although more subtle than those fundamental shifts in the labor-management dynamic, employee bloggers have, in some cases, tipped the balance of influence in their favor to establish levels of credibility with fellow employees and the public at large that many CEOs can only dream of. Employee blogs have helped enhance the reputation of their employers (as in the cases of Microsoft, Sun Microsystems and Stonyfield Farms). Conversely, companies have seen their reputations damaged by high-profile firings of employee bloggers (as in the cases of Google, Delta Airlines and Friendster).

As the potential benefits of employee bloggers become apparent, so, too, do the corresponding liabilities. Blogs can influence news, analysts and regulators. Blog content also rises with great speed to the top of search engine placements due to sites' frequent updates and concentration of similar keywords. Organizations need to have a well-formed point of view on how employee blogging and CEO blogging fit into their communications mix, and need to put policies or guidelines in place to enable blogging to occur in a more organized - and ultimately productive - way.

Types of Employee Blogs

The majority of employee blogs fall into two categories: blogs written by employees intended for other employees, and blogs written by employees intended for external audiences, such as customers or potential customers. The common thread for employee blogs, regardless of the intended reader, is that the employer has most likely little to no oversight or control over the content, especially in the case of blogs created on employees' own time and equipment. For any blog to be credible, it should deal with both positive and negative comments and be transparent. Companies must develop the fortitude to withstand their own employees' opinions about the company's products or services, even when those opinions are negative. If that fortitude can be mustered, the results may be striking, such as recent examples of Microsoft, Sun Microsystems and Macromedia. Many of the employee blogs written for other employee audiences are used as knowledge management tools, such as in the cases of Google, Stonyfield Farms, DaimlerChrysler and IBM.

Developing Employee Blogging Guidelines

Nearly 70 percent of companies have no policies or guidelines in place for employee bloggers, according to a recent study by Edelman, which puts both companies and blogging employees at risk. Without a set of guiding principles in place, bloggers may interpret what is proper according to their own set of values and HR departments may apply different standards to different bloggers and thereby open the company to potential discrimination issues.

Companies that have successfully implemented blogging guidelines have realized that the guidelines must shape the activity rather than prohibit it. Before crafting guidelines on employee blogging, organizations should first contemplate aspects of their internal culture and assess their vulnerability in the blogosphere. Questions to ask include:

- Are we a "listening" culture?
- Are we open and comfortable with honest feedback, and can we actually handle and manage it?
- How critical is stakeholder management to brand building and corporate reputation?
- Is our company or brand committed to transparency?
- Is our category disproportionately being shaped by external perceptions on the Internet?
- What is the morale, motivation and commitment of our employees?
- Are employees already blogging and what are they saying?

This last question, while perhaps obvious, is an important one. Many an organization has been surprised to learn what's being said about them in the blogosphere, but even more surprised to learn how many of those comments are coming from their own employees. Conversely, companies that deploy some kind of Internet-monitoring services typically have a better handle on the real-time pulse of what's being said about them, both in content, tone and source, in public areas of the Internet. As a result, they're also in far better positions to respond intelligently rather than react on the fly.

Each company should develop policies or guidelines that are specific to its mission, its employee base and its company goals, but some commonsense rules should apply, including:

- Employees are responsible for their own commentary
- Employees blog at their own risk (including the risk of being sued for obscenity, libel, defamation, trade secrets, etc.)
- All company proprietary information is off-limits and grounds for dismissal
- Media coverage, if any, is to be routed through normal PR channels

After contemplating the questions above and deciding what parameters to put around employee blogging, organizations can benefit from a number of insightful blog guidelines already in existence. For links to publicly available blogging guidelines, go to www.edelman.com/speak_up/empeng

For a copy of Edelman's white paper, "Blogging from the Inside Out: The Rise and Effective Management of Employee Bloggers," contact Christopher Hannegan at +1 312 240 2686 or cph@edelman.com