

FINDING THE RIGHT CHANNEL FOR YOUR CEO

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Abstract

Over the years, there has been an incredible amount of change for the internal communication professional -- in particular, the choice of internal media that is now available. There are many social-media applications, but in this article the author wants to focus on the latest craze -- the CEO blog. Over time people have witnessed other forms of new media introduced into the workplace only to fail miserably. Before the days of video streaming via your desktop, interactive business television was being positioned as the answer to every CEO's internal communication challenge. The big push at the moment is for CEOs to have their own blog.

Full text

Time is a precious commodity for your CEO invest it in the right technology

The arrival of the latest web-enabled technology has set the world of corporate communication alight with new possibilities. But with opportunity comes risk, especially when it comes to leadership communication. Take the CEO blog, a powerful tool to engage employees, but a threat to reputation if used unwisely. Darren Briggs warns communicators to avoid the hype and select their CEO channels with care.

Over the years, there's been an incredible amount of change for the internal communication professional - hi particular, the choice of internal media that's now available. Technology has been a terrific enabler. There's no question that over time, and with the generation Y workforce emerging, webenabled social media will become one of the tools used by leaders to communicate and connect with their people.

But as internal communication professionals, we have to manage these new channels responsibly and not get carried away by the hype that surrounds the latest corporate fashion accessory. There are many social-media applications, but in this article I want to focus on the latest craze - the CEO blog.

CEO channels that have failed

Over time we've witnessed other forms of new media introduced into the workplace only to fail miserably. Before the days of video streaming via your desktop, interactive business television was being positioned as the answer to every CEO's internal communication challenge. Companies like British Airways invested a significant amount of money in this new technology to find that employees were more interested in watching mainstream daytime television than the CEO's broadcast.

In the early days of the intranet, there were few organizations that got the user experience right. I can remember when I was at Microsoft UK in 1998, as a pioneer of this technology we had an empowered model for publishing on the intranet. The result at the tune was more than a million pages of unmanaged and unedited content that the average employee found incredibly frustrating to use.

Even today, despite pouring money into this technology, it still astounds me the number of companies in which the intranet isn't deemed useful or valued. In fact, ask your CEO how often he or she uses the intranet as a communications tool. This may give you some insight into whether or not they're ready to embrace new social media as the next best way to communicate with their people.

Advice on launching a blog

The big push at the moment is for chief executives to have their own blog. My advice on this is quite simple. Don't do it unless your CEO is prepared to write it personally and commit time to it on an ongoing basis.

It's critical that the employee sees the content as being authentic - if not, it won't be credible and it could have a negative long-term impact on the channel, or worse still, the reputation of the chief executive.

Lessons learned at Nike

Let me share a real example of what I mean. A few years ago, Phil Knight, the founder and chief executive of Nike was asked to participate in an intranet-based all-employee global chat room. At the given hour, several hundred people signed in from around the world and participated in an hour-long web-chat with Phil.

Having declared this a huge success, several weeks later the chat room was repeated. On this occasion, the number of participants declined dramatically. The reason? Those that participated first time round felt that the answers to the questions posed were not from Phil. The reality is that Phil was present in the room, but didn't physically provide the answers - they were managed via a corporate communication professional.

On the third occasion that a chat room took place; Phil was present with a live webcam showing him participating. Unfortunately the damage had already been done.

Back to the time issue

If you're lucky enough to have a CEO who's prepared to write their own blog, then you should ask them to consider how much time they're prepared to invest. Time is a precious commodity for most chief executives. With the best intentions they might commit to a weekly blog and find that over time, even this commitment becomes difficult to fulfill.

The key issue for all internal communicators to carefully consider is how will blogs and other forms of social media compliment and enhance their existing internal media mix?

When considering it as an application for leadership communication, you should also consider whether or not the approach fits the natural style and personality of your chief executive. In some instances, it just might not be the best option.

Darren Briggs is partner at The Company Agency, where he advises and coaches senior leaders to be more effective communicators. He has 20 years corporate experience working at chief executive and board level with companies such as British Airways, Microsoft, Nike, PepsiCo and Vodafone.

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