

PRWEEK

JULY 17, 2006

TOP-ED Myriad benefits to CEO blogging

Whether CEOs head up private or public companies, they need to consider the benefits of blogging.

One-on-one dialogue. A.G. Lafley, Procter & Gamble CEO, said that fostering a dialogue among stakeholders "is not an exercise of choice; it's a requirement of the job." While Lafley did not specify that a CEO had to blog, what better mechanism exists today for a direct dialogue with stakeholders?

Stakeholders who read your blog are an active, engaged community with an interest in what you have to say. According to a recent survey from the USC Annenberg School, nearly 72% of Americans say the online communities to which they belong are "very" or "extremely" important to them.

Transparency. In the age of Sarbanes-Oxley, CEO malfeasance has become more visible, and CEOs have become more accountable for their decisions to their boards, shareholders, and customers. Therefore, CEOs should welcome the opportunity to have their own forum to offer perspectives on issues of concern to stakeholders. After all, investors often base a significant part of investment decisions on their impression of the CEO - another advantage to building trust within the confines of legal disclosure requirements.

But CEOs facing challenging ethical situations are in the minority. Most CEOs operate with integrity. Blogging simply represents another effective opportunity to tell their companies' stories. That said, the corporate blogger must be willing to take criticism and tolerate differences of opinion.

Branding the company. Public perception enhances - or diminishes - a brand's value. With a blog, the CEO has a unique opportunity to help shape that perception. If a CEO does not champion the brand, who in the company should? A corporation that identifies itself with a cause enables the CEO to showcase its social commitment. If the brand is product-focused, the CEO can talk product, as GM vice chairman Bob Lutz does about Saturn and Chevrolet.

While surveys show that general readership of blogs is low, their impact can be substantial. A blog can improve your search engine ranking by maximizing links. Further, more than 50% of media reporters surveyed said they get ideas for stories by reading blogs. Thus, your brand will show up.

Being forward-thinking. Twenty-nine *Fortune* 500 CEOs are already blogging. Sophisticated CEOs have learned the nuances of working with TV, radio, and newspapers. But the blogosphere is more complex.

Writing a blog is the best way to learn about how it works and what's possible. Some CEOs may only want to blog on an intranet; others will go straight to the Web. CEOs may want their PR people to do initial research on the blogging experiences of other CEOs before they get involved.

In the end, CEO bloggers may need to devise a system to get the job done. Blog entries need regularity: e.g., daily, weekly, or bi-weekly. The ideas should come from the CEO, supported by PR. Blogging protocol calls for the CEO to personally write every posting, but I feel that convention can be challenged as long as the thoughts expressed are truly those of the CEO. Who would object to an "as told to" line if the option were no CEO blog at all?

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