The Blogosphere: A Channel Companies Cannot Renounce

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Technorati has registered over 84 million blogs, 10-12% of which are corporate, meaning they are published with the organization’s support. Nevertheless, despite being useful for companies, given that they are easy to create and inexpensive to keep up, and the fact that they help improve rankings in search engine results, allow for dialogue with customers, and are instantaneous and noninvasive… just 6 percent of the Fortune 500 companies have one, according to Socialtext’s Fortune 500 Blogging Wiki. Why is this? If blogging is still not widespread among companies, it is basically because they are afraid to lose control of their messages, they fear the transparency effect and are not altogether convinced of the legal limits of this medium.

Sure, but does your company truly need a blog? Will the blog be compatible with your company culture? One way to respond to that is by first evaluating what exactly is going on in the blogosphere. If you were able to get past the test, and consider yourself ready to face criticism and not censor conflicting opinions, and you accept that the use of lies could have very negative repercussions for the company, and if you believe that you will always be able to tell the truth, then go ahead.

But don’t be too hasty to answer. At the end of 2006, Sony Computer Entertainment America launched “All I Want for Christmas is a PSP,” a blog written by Charlie, a teenage videogame fan who raved about the wonders of PSP. Supposedly, his cousin wanted to be given one of these consoles for Christmas. A few days afterward, when it was discovered that the blog had been created by a viral marketing company, the scandal was all over the Internet, and Sony had to fess up to the hoax and apologize. Don’t make the same mistake.

The next step for creating a blog consists of deciding on an editorial line and who will be in charge of writing the entries…all of them, not just the first few, since an out-of-date blog is worse than not having one at all.

There are no magic formulas for having a successful blog, but there are some recommendations that can help increase readership. A study carried out by the PwC&IESE e-Business Center, which has analyzed a hundred corporate blogs from the US, Europe and Spain, concludes that there are some factors that can contribute to their success. Those highlighted by the ebCenter include: having your own web hosting and URL, having authors with ties to the organization and whose relationship is clearly expressed, and setting up an internal search function to let users easily find the topics they are interested in.

One of the study’s more surprising findings is its downplaying the importance of some practices often cited as vital for a blog’s success. For instance, while the literature on Web 2.0 claims that user participation is a differentiating factor, the study shows that the most-read blogs do not tend to have a high average number of comments per month.
In other words, the most successful blogs work more like a traditional website, where a user goes to get information, as opposed to an interactive tool. This is not to say that the Web 2.0 concept of participation is in crisis, but rather that interaction on this channel is still in its early stages.

Obviously, no one is required to have a blog. But it is important to keep abreast of what is being debated on those that are up and running. In the same way that communication departments keep an eye on what is published about the company and its sector in the press, radio and television, a blogosphere must also be monitored. Shunning the blogosphere could prove costly to companies, such as what happened to Kryptonite, the leading manufacturer of bicycle and motorcycle locks in the United States. In September 2004, a customer discovered that the company’s top product, a high-security lock called Kryptonite Evolution 2000, could be opened with an ordinary ballpoint pen, and decided to record the procedure on video and post it on a specialized cycling forum. Engadget, a prestigious technology blog, published it and the case was referenced on the New York Times, forcing the company to react. It did so by replacing all of the locks of this type that had been sold, at an estimated cost of $10 million and the consequent tarnishing of its image.

Following in Kryptonite’s footsteps, American PC manufacturer Dell also saw its reputation damaged for ignoring comments on the blogosphere. In June 2005, a consumer started to complain about the poor customer service provided by the company’s corporate headquarters. In light of the paltry response from the organization, he sent an open letter to the head of US marketing and posted it on his blog. BusinessWeek echoed the story and the company decided to monitor the blogosphere from then on. And in July 2006, the company launched One2One: Direct, a blog focusing on customer relations.

The Kryptonite and Dell cases are just two of many examples that demonstrate the necessity of adding blogs to the media list. And not just when sifting through information, but also as a possible medium to include in the company’s communication strategy. Fortunately, there are resources for companies who renounce the benefits of the blogosphere but would like to stay up with its happenings. Free tools such as Technorati let users perform key-word blog searches, so that they can find out which blogs are talking about the company, its services or its products. Moreover, sites like Bloglines and Google Reader allow users to sign up for blogs via RSS and receive updates on those of interest to them.

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