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IPSOS MORI BUSINESS THOUGHT-LEADERSHIP

Social Media

THE CORPORATE CHALLENGE

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writes

»»» **There is little doubt that social media is the buzz word of the moment and interestingly it is a source of both trepidation and attraction from the corporate perspective.**

Companies are all too aware of the reputation damage that can be achieved in a matter of minutes in the online world. One needs only think of Gap's travails last year when its new brand identity was the subject of intense criticism from a range of online communities. This led to the hasty jettisoning of the new brand marque and an embarrassing return to the original logo – costing the organisation millions in wasted marketing activity as well as creating a negative impact on its reputation.

However there is also a tremendous allure for companies in this constantly developing communications space. They clearly want to engage with the vibrant communities that social media creates among consumers and thought leaders alike. Getting the engagement process right produces a number of bottom line benefits. Apple is an obvious example of an organisation that has successfully nurtured an online community held together by a shared belief in the company's values and design philosophy – resulting in the creation of evangelists for the brand, all around the world.

Companies in sensitive sectors such as energy and pharmaceuticals are also attracted to the blogosphere. It represents a great opportunity to engage with stakeholders on wider social issues, particularly those that may have an impact on their license to operate. These companies often face cynicism when they reach out to the wider world through advertising, PR and more formal forms of engagement. The online space provides them with the potential means to create a more fluid dialogue with stakeholders, and the possibility of collaborating on responses to important social issues, such as accessibility to medicines in developing countries, transparency and fairness in the supply chain and so on.

This blend of positive and negative implications of social media creates two clear challenges from the corporate view point. First there is the need to monitor what is being said about you online and second is the desire to develop a credible engagement strategy that will reflect well on your company and what it stands for.

Monitoring social media is clearly the more straightforward of the two. The technology is well established such as web crawlers to track comment through blogs and social networks

as well as more formalised sources of opinion and comment. Online monitoring is effectively seen as a reputational early warning system where potential threats and criticisms of an organisation or its practices are picked up early. The only real challenge a company faces in this area is managing the sheer volume of material generated. Findings from the Ipsos MORI Reputation Council of senior corporate communicators across Europe indicated that sorting out the wheat from the chaff was one of the biggest considerations they faced.

However engagement is a much more difficult proposition, it is about being given the opportunity to contribute to debates, to become an active member of the discussion. However the debates and the communities that generate them are highly resistant to the idea of becoming part of the establishment or status quo – this is the nub of the problem for most large corporates. How do you engage with communities when the very act of reaching out is seen as the institutionalisation of the space they occupy? In many cases these groups will quickly migrate to a new space if they see the corporate giant heading towards them on the horizon.

The key to unlocking this conundrum seems to be around demonstrating authenticity and its bed fellow: giving up control. It's amazing that even now in this well established digital age there are many companies that try to manage their communications using command and control techniques. This, combined with a desire for uniformity of thinking and response, generates a corporate halo which people see as having superficiality at its core.

Engagement in the online world is the antithesis of this. It requires that companies are seen to have only one agenda – the real one. Anything else will soon be discovered and circulated to communities around the world and in the blink of an eye.

So we come to what some would say is an inevitable conclusion, and it is that the individual employee stands the greatest chance of making a credible contribution on a company's behalf. Many companies would say this is great because they are indeed encouraging individual employees to communicate and participate in forums etc. They see it as a way of underlining that their corporate beliefs are genuine and not controlled from the centre. But, and it is a massive but, to be successful this approach requires companies to allow their employees to engage freely in these communities with the minimum of control.

They in effect need to let go and rely on the only real employee briefing that counts – the individual experiences a person has gained in the organisation they work for and the beliefs and values it has nurtured. Anything else leads a social media engagement strategy up the proverbial corporate cul-de-sac.

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