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Corporate blogging and corporate social media

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Introduction

Social media increasingly plays a significant role not only in interpersonal communication, but also in the electronic discourse between corporations, public institutions, NGOs, and private individuals. In the course of the last decade, blogging, microblogs and social networking sites (SNS) have become increasingly mainstream instruments of corporate communication (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Social media have proven to be versatile tools in a variety of functions (marketing, PR, lobbying, recruiting, knowledge management), yet they also challenge the stakeholders involved in their use and force them to develop new communicative approaches. Companies are under pressure to reconcile new ways of sharing and socialising with their established communications strategies. They must appear as competent sociocommunicative actors and minimise a potential loss of face, while also showing that they 'get' social media.

In this chapter we will discuss corporate blogs and corporate social media and examine how both have adjusted to the institutional needs of their users. We discuss the setting of organizational communication as the backdrop against which corporate social media is used and outline the historical development that corporate blogs have taken. We then turn to some of the critical issues related to corporate social media that have been raised in current research from discourse analysis, communication studies and media studies, as well as in business and organizational studies. Finally, we discuss genre analysis and narrative analysis as important methodological instruments for the study of corporate social media and discuss the case of the Whole Foods Blog as an example of how strategic communication is conducted in a blog. We close by providing a brief outlook on future developments in corporate social media.

Definitions

Weil (2006) defines corporate blogging as 'the use of blogs [by business professionals] to further organizational goals' (p. 1). Weil's book was one of the earliest publications on corporate blogging aimed at business practitioners and offering a hands-on approach to social media. Blogs had yet to become widespread at the time, and the observation that they could be productively adopted for institutional communication, rather than for personal aims, was less obvious than it may seem today. Online presence in social media such as Facebook and Twitter is increasingly seen as a requirement for global businesses, especially with regards to branding and public relations (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). The speed and ease of disseminating information and responding to criticism makes social media essential to any business, and especially to consumer companies with significant brand exposure. Blogs and other social media channels are socio-technical entities which are adopted by different actors to reach out to different audiences and serve a range of purposes.

Corporate social media is strategically deployed by companies, rather than taken up out of curiosity or for entertainment, as is most frequently the case with private users. Institutional communication is characterised by a strong emphasis on strategic aims, which are pursued by professionals (marketers, public relations experts) and are generally stable and consistent over a long period of time (Horton 1995). While individuals are equally goal-oriented when they communicate, their aims are more likely to be immediate or short-term, and less clearly articulated and reflected. Private interpersonal communication often revolves around the negotiation of social relationships, and identity management through the expression of thoughts or emotions plays an equally central role (Walther 2007). By contrast, in institutional contexts the goals of individuals are superseded by those of the organization (winning customers, increasing profits, cutting costs), all of which are long-term and require concerted action. From this vantage point, a series of assumptions can be made about organizational communication:

- Organizational communication is distinctively goal-oriented.
- There is a tendency towards explicitness and structure that coincides with more explicit goal-orientation.
- Meta-language is often used to talk about the communicative process itself.
- Specialised lexis (jargon) is often used, especially in internal communication.

According to Horton (1995), corporate communication can be divided at the most basic level into intra-organizational and extra-organizational discourse, then further separated into internal communication between colleagues, departments, and employees of different influence; and external communication with customers (existing and potential), partners, and the general public. This model also reflects the basic dichotomy of corporate-internal and corporate-external communication, which is significant in the context of blogging. Other salient factors include:

- Who communicates (e.g. CEO, sales manager, software engineer)?
- Who is the intended audience (e.g. customers, investors, government regulators)?
- In what mode (e.g. spoken, written, technologically mediated)?
- What is the genre (e.g. advertisement, mission statement)?

These factors shape and constrain organizational communication in specific ways and provide the backdrop against which corporate blogs should be evaluated and understood. The emergence of corporate social media can be regarded both as the appropriation of a personal mode of expression for organizational purposes, and as a conscious reaction on the part of companies to the novel communicative setting of the Internet. Traditional corporate-to-public communication is generally highly vetted, planned and shaped by organizational goals. The realization of such goals is not simply a side effect, but constitutes the core motivation behind communicating with external stakeholders (customers, competitors, regulators) in all circumstances. Following Horton (1995), discourse surrounding business transactions (marketing) is the most archetypical form of external corporate communication and has the simultaneous goals of providing customers with information about a product and persuading them to purchase it. In traditional mass media, such discourse lacks the interactional element of interpersonal communication, but in social media, these elements are consciously mixed and intertwined. In what follows, we describe some of the stylistic properties and rhetorical functions of corporate blogs in organizational settings.

Historical perspectives

Corporate blogging and corporate social media are offshoots of personal blogging (Puschmann 2013). Estimates of the total number of corporate blogs vary, but it can be assumed that they do not exceed 10 per cent of the global population of well over 100 million blogs (Halzack 2008; White & Winn 2009). Puschmann (2010) based his research on a corpus of 137 English-language company blogs operated by large multinational companies – a limited picture of the global population of corporate blogs, especially in relation to the strong growth of online content in languages other than English.

Historically, corporate blogging evolved from employee blogging. In their study of employee blogging at Microsoft, Efimova and Grudin noted that corporate blogging is a term 'which suggests action that is authorized, acknowledged, or in a formal way associated with an organization' (2007: 2), a characteristic not universally applicable to employee blogging. The authors describe the genesis of blogs at Microsoft that began in 2000 and 2001 with the externally hosted blogs of interns and newly hired employees. An internal blog platform was launched as a grass-roots effort, as was a curated list of employee blogs in 2002, which finally led to the establishment of a company-wide blog network. Today, blogs are tightly integrated into MSDN (Microsoft Developer Network), the company's developer knowledge management platform. The changes occurred gradually and incrementally and were initially relatively independent from any central planning mechanism.

While there is no historically precise account of who started the first employee blog in the sense described by Efimova and Grudin (2007), it is plausible to assume that a similar evolutionary process – from scattered private blogs of junior staff to blogs jointly hosted on corporate servers – took place in a similar fashion at other software companies such as IBM, Sun, Adobe and Oracle, all of which today maintain large employee blog hubs (portal sites where employee blogs are hosted) that bundle the content from several thousand individual blogs. The style and content of early employee blogs approximated those of private blogs, specifically the filter variety (blogs that filter news and other informative content based on the interests of the author). In Efimova and Grudin's description, corporate blogging that had been adjusted to management guidelines followed quietly on the heels of these early practices: 'By mid-2003, a server hosting externally visible weblogs was operating. Because some managers perceived a benefit in using weblogs to communicate with customers, this server had formal budget support' (2007: 3). A recurring theme in usage-based research on employee blogging is the persistent tension between organizational goals and personal preferences, both in relation to the corporate hierarchy and among employees (Agerdal-Hjermind 2014). Interpretations of what goals a set of company blogs should achieve vary strongly, posing significant challenges to management.

Blogging proved to seamlessly complement software development as knowledge-intensive and highly specialised work: writing software and writing *about* writing software fit together extremely well. At the same time, as blogging expanded into other sectors beyond coding, senior management keenly felt the difficulties of merging an organic blog movement that had evolved from the bottom up with a top-down structured communications hierarchy. Efimova and Grudin (2007) describe the conflicting perspectives on corporate blogging between two corporate vice presidents at a technology company (p. 4). While one supported blogging as a way of presenting the company as open and transparent, the other was initially sceptical, feeling that blogs upset the corporate organizational structure by creating a stage for self-appointed spokespeople.

These issues became magnified as blog audiences grew from small and reasonably intimate circles to mass audiences. There have been incidents of employee bloggers being fired for disclosing confidential company information in their blogs. This phenomenon is part of the larger new theme of 'doocing' – to lose one's job because of one's website – associated with various forms of user-generated content on the Net (Lorenz 2005; Wallack 2005). However, the enthusiasm for novel technology and the need to optimise both internal knowledge flow and customer service led managers to support rather than hinder the proliferation of blogs. Corporate leadership recognised that employees' blogs had better business potential when presented to the public; blogs kept exclusively private offered less potential for control and none of the corporate benefits. This realization led the software industry to adopt a strategy of 'extend and embrace', providing a technical infrastructure and a basic behavioural code (called blogging guidelines or blogging policies) for employees to follow, together with continuous measurement and reviews of the perceived risks and benefits of employee blogging.

Two other processes increased the popularity of blogs in a business context: a crisis in the perception of public-facing corporate discourse, and a general trend towards personalization and 'democratization' in the relationship between institutions and individuals. One impetus for the latter trend may have been *The cluetrain manifesto*, a dual book and open-access Internet publication by Rick Levine, Christopher Locke, Doc Searls and David Weinberger (2000). The book consisted of 95 theses challenging widely held practices and assumptions about mass marketing and the relationship between corporations and consumers in a tone reminiscent of political activism. While this kind of enthusiasm is likely to have since died down, the practical utility of corporate blogs and social media, not only for marketing and PR, but also for internal knowledge management, is widely recognised, not only because these corporate media support the claim that marketing has reinvented itself in a more egalitarian communicative environment, but also because social media is increasingly superior to broadcast media for targeting younger target groups.

Another issue that gave rise to corporate adoption of social media is trust. In a study conducted by a US public relations company, 68 per cent of the American respondents named 'a person like me' as the person they would trust most as a source of information on a company, outranking corporate and political leaders, public institutions, and academia as trusted sources (Edelman 2008). This marked a significant shift from 2003, when only 20 per cent nominated 'a person like me' (Edelman 2006). In the 2008 poll, peers outranked experts and institutions in Brazil, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United States, while financial experts ranked at the top in France, India, Ireland, Mexico, Poland, South Korea and the United Kingdom, and academics were most trusted in Italy, Japan, Russia and Spain (Edelman 2008: 6). The study highlights the importance of direct recommendations and 'word of mouth' marketing in social networks rather than traditional approaches. The boom in digital interpersonal communication via the Internet – both within existing networks of friends and family and among strangers – arguably goes hand in hand with at least a partial erosion of trust in institutional sources of information. Based on the study, the authors formulate the following advice for corporate communicators:

> Share your content with your employees, passionate consumers, and bloggers, allowing them to co-create, repurpose, and improve their knowledge through dialogue. Change your tone from one that pronounces to one that invites participation, ceding some control in return for credibility.
>
> *(Edelman 2008: 5)*

The advice to 'change your tone from one that pronounces to one that invites participation' and to 'cede some control' is based on the impression that only a communicative style that emphasises parity and equality can succeed. While Edelman's focus is on public relations and not marketing, the message is similar: corporate actors should emulate the socio-communicative behaviour of their customers to gain trust and be perceived as competent partners and not manipulators. The issue is not seen primarily as ethical but rather as behavioural: communicate differently and you will be perceived differently.

As the examples in the following sections show, company blogs are consciously used for the purpose of reinventing and redressing the interactions between corporations and their external stakeholders. Blogs, both from a purely technical perspective and because of the social practices they foster, represent a suitable platform for achieving this goal. The inherent assumption in public-facing corporate blogging is that the crisis postulated by *Cluetrain* and reflected in the loss of trust in established corporate communicators and genres can be overcome by adapting to a new environment and its practices. Using an external blog to address a wide variety of stakeholders (potential and existing customers, potential employees, public officials, interest groups) means being on par with the perceived democratic nature of the blogosphere; it also opens the door to a number of new challenges.

Critical issues and topics

What are the precise incentives for corporations to blog? While the goal of connecting more effectively with outside stakeholders is apparent, the exact motivations are varied and depend crucially on the target audience, on communicative goals and on how the individual company conceptualises blogging.

One reason to blog – at least initially – may be to simply follow a trend, with no clear knowledge of how blogging contributes to the achievement of specific organizational goals. In a study conducted by agencies Porter-Novelli and Cymfony, nearly two-thirds of respondents stated that their company began its first blog not to satisfy a specific need, but because of 'pressure to participate in the medium' (Hirsch & Nail 2006: 7). The advice given by consultants, which is often vague and based on stereotyped claims about the changing discourse environment, reflects this hype to join in without clear objectives. Weil claims that as blogging has emerged as a new way of interacting with a company's stakeholders, the way to lead a conversation has turned from 'packaged, filtered, controlled' to 'open, two-way, less than perfect' (2006: xvi). This observation points toward the notion of a changed environment that demands adaptation from corporate actors and justifies the targeted use of blogs for companies. However, it is clear that blogging and the move towards social media in general are broader phenomena that institutions need to pay attention to, if they do not wish to lose touch with their external stakeholders.

To meet the demands of interpersonal communication between corporation and consumer, corporate blogs often opt to let individuals communicate on behalf of the organization. Yet this poses its own risks for companies, as the individual blogger may become too powerful in his role as spokesperson, or his personal goals may run counter to the strategic objectives of the company. Corporate blogging guidelines and other codes of conduct are implemented to prevent such issues, and many company blogs are written by teams, not single authors, to prevent any conflicts arising. The need to personalise communication in an environment that demands uniformity is challenging because of the increasing complexity of objectives that form the *raison d'être* of external corporate communications. Companies need to constantly balance the need for authenticity and appropriate marketing strategies against the conflicts arising from this gap for the blogging employee.

Corporate blogs written in an accessible or informal style borrow from the personal and subjective character of personal blogs, which makes them available to a readership that does not necessarily consist of experts. A subjective perspective transforms corporate blog posts from a collection of formal, distant press releases to a set of informal and more emotional experiences.

Corporate blogs are generally created with the objective of furthering organizational goals. However, since a variety of goals exist and many individuals from different departments and branches can potentially be involved, the corporate blog is far from being a single, clearly delineated genre. Instead, it branches out into different subtypes that address different communicative needs, are aimed at different reader communities, and are written by different departments inside an organization. Zerfaß (2005) points this out in an early study and proposes a typology of corporate blogs, first differentiating topic-oriented and personal blogs. The types he presents are related closely to a set of organizational goals: internal communication, market communication, and public relations. Since Zerfaß's (2005) study, companies have gained more experience with new forms of embedding, streaming, sharing and socialising. They have developed strategies to react to criticism and quickly disseminate information. As the University of Massachusetts's 2012 Inc. 500 Social Media Report shows, the numbers of fast-growing companies running a corporate blog rose to 44 per cent from 37 per cent a year before (Barnes and Lescault 2012). The report also shows an increase in the use of social media: in 2012, LinkedIn has taken the lead as platform most used by these companies (81 per cent), whereas the use of Facebook has decreased. Twitter is the third most commonly used platform (67 per cent) among the 500 fastest growing private companies in the United States.

Current contributions and research

Researchers from a variety of fields have approached corporate social media and corporate blogging with different questions and using different methods. Early research examined aspects such as the role of workplace email for internal communication (Sproul & Kiesler 1986) or the disclosure of financial information online (Craven & Marston 1999). Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) note the potential of social media for redefining organizational communication and provide a set of guidelines for companies seeking to integrate social media strategically.

In a comprehensive approach to corporate blogging, Zerfaß (2005) outlines more specific features. Like Weil, Zerfaß emphasises that a clear strategic objective is required for a company blog. Thus, while personal blogs can be characterised by lack of a fixed external purpose, corporate blogs are not viable without explicit communicative goals. Blogging cuts across the organised and structured processes of internal communication, market communication, network communication and public relations that form the framework within which corporate communication takes place. This makes blogging difficult to plan and control, which runs counter to the assumed prerequisite of concerted organizational action. In corporate blogging, it can be difficult to determine the author, the addressee, and the overall tone of communication. It must be clear who is communicating, who is addressed and how the communication is conducted, but the stability of these factors is undermined in blogging, since anyone can create or consume a blog; and the content and style of corporate blogs are largely in the hands of individual employees who may feel unprepared to achieve strategic objectives through blogging. The degree of organizational purposefulness intrinsically required for corporate blogs is therefore extremely hard to combine with the prototypical characteristics of private personal blogs. This situation thus calls for a reconceptualization of corporate blogs along the lines of topic blogging and publishing, where topic and the addressee are two distinct (albeit overlapping) considerations. It is possible to subsume a range of activities and goals ranging from knowledge management to product promotion and crisis de-escalation.

Before a blog can be launched, five steps should be taken by practitioners, according to Zerfaß:

- Practitioners should make themselves familiar with blogs and post/message feeds to gain an understanding of the format.
- A form of blog monitoring should be implemented to control the blog and measure its success.
- Opinion leaders and critics should be identified.
- Companies should gain experience by launching a non-public blog on the company intranet.
- If prior experiences are positive, a public-facing blog on the Internet can be launched.

Such a measured and careful approach reflects organizational considerations for coherence and sustainability. Since they have much more to lose by unsuccessful ventures into the blogosphere than individuals, corporations must plan step by step how they want to implement blogs. Similar suggestions for the successful integration of planned corporate blogging into a company's corporate communications strategy are given by countless marketing and public relations experts, new media consultants and researchers with backgrounds in communication studies and economics. However, two core recommendations offered by Zerfaß – adopting a form of blog monitoring and identifying (and addressing) opinion leaders and critics – are more problematic than they initially appear. Despite attempts to measure the impact of blogs, questions remain regarding how well any metric, list of stakeholders, or feedback sample can capture the actual quality of response given by the readership.

Puschmann (2010) proposes a typology of different blog types based on communicative function. The typology is based on authorship, assumed function, and suggested audience. It identifies shared communicative purposes that we infer from the description given in the blogs themselves, as well as the aims that are associated with them. Table 14.1 summarises different types based on these parameters. Neither Zerfaß's nor Puschmann's taxonomy is by any means the only way to categorise corporate blogs. However, authorship appears to be a good predictor of a blog's aims insofar as specific corporate units have the task of conducting certain kinds of strategic communication such as marketing and public relations. This in turn has implications both for the envisaged target audience and the goals associated with blogging.

Main research methods

In the studies discussed above, an important role is assigned to genre analysis as a methodological framework for the study of corporate social media. *Genre theory* is a popular approach in disciplines studying recurring patterns in language use and communication, because it offers an explanation for the typified nature of discourse and for the specific norms that evolve as genres become culturally entrenched (Bhatia 2002; Freadman 2012; Swales 1990). Genres are recurring textual patterns used by specific communities for a set of communicative goals. Swales (1990) argues that a shared concept of genre 'helps to clarify relationships between texts and media, as well as between texts and society' (p. 948). Organizational discourse in particular is strongly shaped by genre, as a result of its transactional nature (Yates & Orlikowski 1992). A complex organization can only function if there are rules of form and style imposed on various formats of communication, both inside a company and

Table 14.1 Different functional types of corporate blogs.

corporate blog type	*department*	*target audience*	*Functions*
product blog	marketing, customer service	consumers	a) to promote a product directly b) to generate a discussion centred on the product c) to address issues closely related to the company's products d) to provide customer support
image/lobbying blog	public relations/ communications	consumers / focal group	a) to create a positive public perception of a company b) to actively shape the public discussion of a company and its products c) to advance company interests in regards to policy (lobbying) d) to preempt or react to criticism (crisis management)
recruitment blog	human resources	potential employees	a) to capture the interest of potential employees b) to communicate directly with potential employees and respond to their questions
executive blog	management	consumers, investors, partners	a) discuss the position of the corporation and its products in the market b) evaluate competitors and their products c) legitimate management decisions such as layoffs, restructuring, expansion, etc. d) outline future strategic goals
knowledge blog	subject-matter expert	other small/ medium enterprises	a) to share specialised knowledge in a subject matter (e.g. engineering/software development/hardware r and d) with stakeholders inside or outside of the company b) to seek information and advice from other experts about such issues c) as as a mnemonic instrument for the author

in interaction with consumers, competitors and other stakeholders (Berkenkotter & Huckin 1995). More recent approaches to genre theory include social actors, their communicative goals and the texts they produce in a model of underlying communicative principles that govern specific types of interaction. The mutual recognition of the forms that genres take is essential to discourse participants who need to anticipate the aims and expectations of communicative partners, especially online (Lüders, Prøitz & Rasmussen 2010). Weil's definition emphasises the goal-oriented nature of corporate blogs and hints at the fact that the corporate blog forms a sub-genre which, like other forms of corporate communication, is subject to its own communicative situations and conditions.

Narrative analysis provides a second analytical lens for the study of corporate social media (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008; Georgakopoulou 2006). Digital narrativity and corporate blogging not only present a challenge for website owners who have to adapt to new developments, but also for the recipients who need to adapt their narrative competence in order to read stories that are largely composed of multimodal content and characterised by a high degree of interactivity. In a similar vein, Ryan (2006: 11) stresses the multimodal character of digital narratives when she argues that 'the property of being a narrative can be predicated of any semiotic object produced with the Internet to evoke a story to the mind of the audience', noting the interplay between storytellers and readers in digital environments. According to Ryan, the narrative potential of a text is perceived individually and the recipient takes an active role in turning the offered information into a meaningful narrative.

Storytelling offers the opportunity to enrich corporate strategy with emotional and adaptive impressions through interaction, as the technical affordances of Internet communication allow narratives to spread across different social media platforms that may be only loosely linked. This migration of stories can establish, preserve and strengthen corporate identity on the Internet. A narrative following a canonical structure may not succeed in holding its audience's attention, as users find their way through webpages according to their individual interests, with links diverting them toward various competing narratives. Nevertheless, transmedial strategies try to align the different self-representational channels and tools on relevant websites and social media, so they can be associated with the company or its brands.

Quite often, a transmedia approach is taken when placing products in various channels in order to reach the target audience wherever they are mostly likely to engage. In addition to increasing reach, this adds a medial subtext specific to the respective contribution; as Jenkins (2006) notes, 'stories . . . unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world' (p. 334).

A case study: the Whole Foods Market blog

As we argued in the previous sections, it is the combination of personal and organizational goals that we encounter in organizational blogs that makes them stand apart as a distinct (sub)genre. Particularly in cases where 'tellable' incidents are told from a personal point of view, storytelling must be seen as an essential element of the blogging strategy. Bruner (1991) highlighted the importance of storytelling for the shaping of identity, and since then there has been extensive research on how companies actually tell stories in digital environments (Boje 2009; Gabriel 2008). Today, storytelling has established itself as a marketing technique intended to associate the company with specific values. The corporate blog is a tool that can be easily used for storytelling strategies, as this genre adapts to narrative purposes as well as to informational purposes; further, its use of combined media can reach multiple target groups efficiently and effectively.

In this section, we discuss the Whole Foods Market blog as an example of how a corporate blog can be strategically deployed. The chain of Whole Foods grocery stores runs three corporate blogs: the 'Whole Story', 'John Mackey's Blog', and 'Walter Robb's Blog'. The 'Whole Story' is a topic blog focussing on the presentation of different stores and discussing topics like whole food nutrition, sustainable ways of living, environmentally responsible products, recipes, etc. A team of bloggers updates this blog almost daily, and though the blog offers no information on whether there is a permanent team of bloggers, it does provide links to short profiles of each contributor. Another topic blog, named after CEO John Mackey ('John Mackey's Blog'), focuses on conscious capitalism and other topics related to the conjunction between corporate responsibility and business. Despite the blog's title, it is evident from the headings of each post that employee Kate Lowery has authored most of the posts. However, the CEO appears in this blog as an interviewee and/or as a figure of authority writing or lecturing on the topic of conscious capitalism.

Co-CEO Walter Robb and COO A. C. Gallo run a third blog entitled 'Walter Robb's Blog' which primarily posts announcements concerning the brand Whole Foods Market, reports about formal speeches and keynotes, etc. According to Table 14.1, the three blogs are representatives of the executive ('John Mackey's Blog', 'Walter Robb's Blog') and image ('Whole Story') blog types. According to Zerfaß's typology, their organizational goals range from 'persuasion and the coverage of important topics' to 'market communication'. By raising issues pertaining to 'a sustainable way of life', 'corporate responsibility' or the Whole Foods company in general, the company covers a wide range of topics related to what is considered to be a sustainable, responsible and healthy lifestyle. Covering these topics works to align the brand with these specific concepts, thereby constructing a corporate identity that brands these topics as the values of the company. Similarly, these values shape the company's storytelling strategy, which is also carried out through corporate blogging. By linking the stories told on a corporate blog with central goals and values, storytelling becomes an important aspect of the corporate communications strategy. Blogs by employees and CEOs on topics largely aligned with the company's core values contribute to the construction of an image where everybody works towards a shared higher value that can be identified with the brand.

The following example from the Whole Foods Market blog shows how this impression can be achieved through the stories a company shares with its followers and readers.

> One of my greatest passions, other than food, is riding motorcycles. I love it even though it is not exactly the most carbon-neutral activity. Sure, the gas mileage is better than a car, but there is always room for improvement. That's where the Brammo Enteria electric motorcycle comes in.
>
> *(posted by Chad Lott, March 26, 2013)*

The example above appears under the blog category 'environmental stewardship' and narrates the experience of a blogger with an electric motorcycle. Although the issue of electric motorcycling is not explicitly linked with nutrition, it falls within the range of topics related to a sustainable and responsible lifestyle, making such a story 'tellable' in the specific context. But the commercial purpose of the post has not been forgotten, as a link to the motorcycle manufacturing company is embedded within the first third of the post, in the form of the blogger's meta-comment: 'Note: I received no compensation from Brammo other than the use of their motorcycle'. The rest of the blog post focuses on the advantages and the disadvantages of the motorcycle from the blogger's first-person perspective. As suggested before, the presence of a human protagonist and the narration of their experiences transform a product-focussed press-release or commercial into a more personal and emotional description of a real-life experience. It is thus the first-person perspective that contributes significantly to the emotional effect of a blog post. As Uri Margolin points out,

> Every 'I' sayer has by definition immediate epistemic access to his or her own sensations, mental states and episodes. On the other hand, any 'we' sayer who makes assertions such as 'we felt that . . . ' or 'our current state of mind is . . . ' combines in fact immediate inside knowledge as regards his/her own internal states with beliefs (second or third person attributions), based upon inference from external data, concerning the internal states of the other individuals in the 'we' reference class.
>
> *(Margolin 1996: 117)*

It is this distinction between first-person 'I-narratives' and 'we-narratives' that makes a corporate blog post written in first-person singular appear more authentic than a blog post written in a 'we-narrative' mode. While the 'I-narrative' appears to be rooted to the experiences of the speaker, the 'we-narrative' is more open to interpretation as to who exactly feels, sees or describes.

Although an individual, first-person perspective contributes to the credibility and perceived authenticity of a blog, the reporting of commonly valued actions through a 'we-narrative' mode can contribute to feelings of affiliation with wider norms and communities. The following post is categorised as 'Company Info' and is part of the series 'Our Hidden Gems.' This series of interview posts introduces local branches by interviewing the leader of the marketing team. The team leader answers questions about the store, the best team member, the tastiest dish offered, and any common activities team members share. The questions invite a 'we narration' and contribute to the creation of a shared corporate identity.

At the same time, such interviews enable the global website to show how the globally predefined goals and values are transferred into the local branches and how these goals and values (positively) affect the everyday life of the team members.

> We've just opened HWY, our licensed bar, and the bar menu features a fantastic pulled pork sandwich and has a great selection of local beers and wines. We also have a green roof made of sedum (. . .) and reclaimed wood panelling that covers the front walls of the store (. . .)
>
> *(posted by Elizabeth Beal, 26 March 2013)*

The interview on Whole Foods Blog shows that various strategies – storytelling, commercially oriented interviews, personal reports – are used to establish and reinforce a corporate identity. With key topics framing the company's overall narrative, individual storytelling about experiences connected to these topics shapes and projects the company's identity. While individual perspectives contribute to a more authentic picture of the company, global actions like the county-wide lead interview series show that global values and goals are individually played out in local branches.

Future directions

Blogging has established itself as a tried and tested instrument of corporate communication. At the same time, companies are expanding their strategic communication to Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook and LinkedIn, and microblogging services such as Twitter. These platforms make use of basic structural elements that are quite similar to blogs, while offering the advantage of a large-scale centralised infrastructure and interface. The pre-set design of SNS offers few possibilities to personalise sites, as the major part of available service is strictly defined, but this also has advantages for users and for companies, as it presents pre-set combinations of multiple modes (texts, images, video clips) across different platforms.

The continuing diversification in corporate social media is a reaction to growing numbers of Internet users globally and to a diversification of devices and platforms. Apps are increasingly integrated within a company's multimedia portfolio, and the new standard for corporate websites is responding to demand for content that can be easily read and navigated on smart phones. Companies increasingly realise the impact of tweeted news, publicised 'likes', and shared and uploaded content, and they encourage their followers and fans to share their opinions, pictures and videos related to the brand. With followers and fans engaging with the brand, companies are constantly interacting with consumers in a variety of digital contexts. Beyond medial diversification, aspects such as cultural differences in the usage of social media must be accounted for, as the Internet increasingly establishes itself in emerging markets (Jeon, Yoon & Kim 2008).

Whether directly embedded and integrated via newsfeeds on the corporate website or connected via hyperlink, different social media platforms have become seamlessly integrated into company websites. As a result, web strategies have become more complex, coordinating many platforms at once, and this development has opened up new possibilities and genres that a company can use for self-representation. Genres on the Internet quickly adapt to new trends; new media formats emerge as well as new ways of narrating stories. Like no other medium, the Internet assimilates new media formats and furthers the process of remediation, in which 'hypermedia applications (. . .) import earlier media into a digital space in order to critique or fashion them' (Bolter & Grusin 2000: 53). Corporate blogs have already taken this step and have merged typical business narratives, like reports, with the Internet-specific phenomenon of blogging – which is itself a re-mediated genre, if you consider its often-stated diary-like quality. Like no other medium, the Internet draws on various semiotic modes in a fragmented, sequenced and simultaneous way.

Related topics

- Chapter 1 Approaches to language variation (Hinrichs)
- Chapter 12 Digital media in workplace interaction (Darics)
- Chapter 13 Digital advertising (Kelly-Holmes)
- Chapter 20 Online communities and communities of practice (Angouri)
- Chapter 21 Facebook and the discursive construction of the social network (Tagg & Seargeant)

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Further reading

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A foundational paper on the relevance of the concept of genre to organizational communication.