A Blogger in the Midst

Teaching Note

Purpose

This teaching note is designed to accompany the Halley Suitt’s case study “A Blogger in the Midst” published in the Harvard Business Review. This case was designed to discuss how executives should respond to social media. Specifically, this case follows Will Somerset, the CEO of Lancaster-Webb Medical Supply, a manufacturer of disposable gloves and other medical products, as he finds out that one of his employees is a widely known blogger known as GloveGirl.

Teaching Objectives

1) Students will understand the reality of social media and its effect on current business practices.
2) Students will be able to identify possible directions a CEO can take when confronted with employee use of social media that influences the organization.
3) Students will analyze how uncontrolled external communication can positively and negatively impact an organization.
4) Students will explore the importance of monitoring social media related to one’s organization.

Summary

Will Somerset, the CEO of Lancaster-Webb Medical Supply, a manufacturer of disposable gloves and other medical products, is about to launch a new line of medical gloves. As he prepares to deliver his big unveiling no one is showing up to his presentation. He quickly finds out that he is being upstaged by GloveGirl, an internet sensation blogger in the medical glove community. Furthermore, GloveGirl is actually one of his employees.

The case follows Will as he attempts to wrap his head around blogging and how GloveGirl has actually increased his organization’s sales. However, GloveGirl doesn’t
always get information correct on her blog. Admittedly, GloveGirl has no problem updating and correcting information, but how does one manage or handle someone within an organization that has gone rogue? Will is ultimately left trying to make a decision for how to proceed with GloveGirl.

Case Analysis

Within this case there are two basic issues that can be dealt with within a classroom context: social media and external communication.

Social Media. This case involves a CEO coming to terms with how social media is impacting his organization. Unbeknownst to Will Somerset social media has had a strong impact on his organization’s profitability. However, Will’s organization has not authorized or had overseeing ability of the blogger in question. While Will has been unaware of how social media is impacting his organization, organizations need to seriously address the use of social media both by its employees and by the organization itself.

At a basic level, organizations need to adopt social media policies to prevent proprietary information from being leaked to the public. As people have started to communicate their every move and life situation, creating policies that limit how people communicate what happens in their workplace has become a necessity. As such, one of the first things that Lancaster-Webb Medical Supply must do is determine what its policy on social media will be. Only after the organization has created a specific policy related to social media can it really make a decision on how to handle GloveGirl.

Second, Lancaster-Webb Medical Supply needs to determine how it wants to use social media to promote its organization. In a study conducted by Cone, they found that 93% of Americans expect companies to have a presence in social media (Cone Consumer New Media Study, 2009). Furthermore, 85% of Americans say companies should interact with consumers via social media. Lastly, two-thirds of households making $75K or more feel a stronger connection to brands they interact with online. Because the general public is utilizing social media and desires to interact with its favorite organizations through social media, all organizations need to develop a crystal plan for utilizing and implementing social media.

Ultimately, this case is about what the CEO of Lancaster-Webb Medical should do about GloveGirl. Unfortunately, there really is no easy solution to handling GloveGirl. On one hand, one of the reasons people trust and respect GloveGirl is that she is an independent voice blogging online. While some people see her as a corporate mouth piece of Lancaster-Webb Medical, many others do not see the immediate connection. If Lancaster-Webb Medical brought GloveGirl into the corporate structure, she could end up losing the credibility she has as an independent voice.

External Communication. Traditional perspectives on the lines between organization and the external environment held that the two constructs were easily differentiated. As technology has advanced, the lines between internal and external have disappeared in some contexts because the flow information has become less
filtered by gatekeepers. Now, one employee can have a social media posting read by more people than an organization’s latest advertising campaign. In many respects, the rise of social media has actually enabled a more democratic approach to external communication because a variety of voices can now be heard. However, organizations must control their external image. In essence, Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) Typology of Public Relations (e.g., Press Agentry/Publicity, Public Information, Two-Way Asymmetric, and Two-Way Symmetric) because historically external communication has been viewed as an activity of the organization and not by numerous members within the organization itself.

Theoretical Extension

One possible theoretical extension for this case study is social presence theory. Short, Williams, and Christie’s (1976) social presence theory classifies different communication media along a continuum of social presence, where the degree of social presence is equated to the degree of awareness of the other person in the mediated interaction. According to social presence theory, communication is effective if the communication medium has the appropriate social presence required for the level of interpersonal involvement required for a task.

One can argue that the effectiveness of a blog is directly related to not only the content contained within the blog but to the extent the blog writer interjects his or herself into the blog itself. In the case of GloveGirl, she not only writes about the products she’s promoting and analyzing, but she also throws in tidbits about her own life. Whether GloveGirl realizes it or not, the personal information is what ultimately keeps her readers coming back to her blog because people become aware of her as a real person in the mediated environment.

Teaching Plan (60 minute Class)

5-10 minutes Go over the basic parts of the “A Blogger in the Midst”.

10 minutes Discuss the nature of the case and how organizational communication content and theory can be applied to the case.

10 minutes Propose possible decision alternatives for the CEO.

10 minutes Discuss what criteria should be utilized when selecting the best alternative presented.

10 minutes Apply the criteria selected to the possible decision alternatives.

5-10 minutes Select the best decision.

5-10 minutes Come up with a clear plan of action.

5 minutes Case wrap-up.
NOTE: Depending on the nature of your class, you may not get through the entire case in one sitting, which is perfectly normal.

References


Recommended Readings

