Dear Diary (Hello World!): Developing Corporate Blog Policies

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Abstract

Blogging is an increasingly popular marketing strategy in the corporate world, but many companies have yet to develop proper policies and guidelines for managing corporate and personal employee blogs. This paper develops a deeper understanding of the nature and power of blogs as a corporate asset through blog studies and offers an example of possible corporate blog policy through analysis of several existing ones. We find successful policies that both protect company interests and promote employee speech are best developed through cooperation between employee-bloggers and employers.

Contents

1   Introduction

In the past decade or so, blogging has risen as a powerful new means of communication. Although as recently as mid-2005, 40 to 60 percent of U.S. internet users did not know what a "blog" was, that number has been diminishing significantly (Weil xv). There have been a number of high-profile cases where blogging had a strong impact on mainstream media, such as that of Dan Rather, former CBS Evening News newsman (refer to Wikipedia's "Dan Rather" article or Kirkpatrick's "Why There's No Escaping the Blog" for more details), or Democrat Howard Dean's BlogForAmerica.com, the "first-ever official blog for a presidential candidate" (Weil 6).

Incidents like the "Rathergate" scandal have made it quite clear that blogs are a powerful presence. Increasingly, corporations and media have become aware of the strong impact independent, personal blogs can have on a company's product. "Freewheeling bloggers can boost your product – or destroy it," one Fortune article advises, "Either way, they've become a force business can't afford to ignore."

Some companies have responded by attempting to harness the powers of the "blogosphere" for themselves, utilizing "customer evangelists" to promote company products, or encouraging employees to offer a new level of transparency to company workings and products via "external blogs" (Flynn 4, 134). However, there has also been a demonstrated gap in some companies' knowledge of exactly how blogging *works*. Without a clear understanding of what blogs are, how they operate, and just *why* they are such a powerful market force, companies risk misusing corporate blogs and opening themselves to ridicule that is far more damaging than staying out of the blogosphere altogether. Used wisely,

however, the blogosphere can be a valuable asset to a company's market presence and customer relations. Section 2.2 presents a simple explanation of what corporate blogs are, how they can be a valuable asset to a company, and what entails a "good corporate blog", drawing upon examples both of properly and improperly-employed corporate blogs.

There have been many cases of blogs having a positive or negative effect on individuals, as well. As the number of employee bloggers rise, it becomes increasingly important that companies devise clear policies for blogging in and about the workplace. Well-publicized events, such as the firing of Google employee Mark Jen for his blog content, only underline the necessity of blog policy for the protection both of company interests and employee speech. Section 3 explains in-depth the importance of blog policies, referring to several well-known cases of employees or companies suffering from unclear or non-existent blog policies, and demonstrates several companies' blog policies as examples of effective policy-making. Several employee-bloggers at these companies were interviewed for their satisfaction with these policies and for their opinions on how companies might better serve both company interests and employee-blogger rights with well-defined blog policies.

Lastly, this paper offers several possible blog policies for companies wishing to look into the world of corporate blogging, drawing upon the existing policies in the Appendices and several blog-policy resources and studies. Section 3.2 describes how the policies in the Appendices were formulated and offers advice for devising blog policies.

2 Blogs

2.1 What are blogs?

To go by the definition of "blog" offered by Wikipedia, a "[blog] (a portmanteau of web log) is a website where entries are written in chronological order and commonly displayed in reverse chronological order. 'Blog' can also be used as a verb, meaning *to maintain or add content to a blog.*" (emphasis in original) (Wikipedia, "Blog"). However, this only offers the most technical and not-altogether-insightful definition of what a blog actually is.

Debbie Weil offers a slight expansion of this definition: "a blog…is an easy-to-publish Web site" (2). Nancy Flynn focuses more on the business impact of blogs: "[t]he blog is an electronic communications powerhouse that is likely to have greater impact on business communications and corporate reputations than e-mail, instant messaging, and traditional marketing-oriented websites combined" (4). Lastly, Nielsen BuzzMetrics offers a definition that incorporates Weil and Wikipedia's definitions, while providing additional layers of depth, and which highlights most of the important characteristics of blogs:

> "Weblogs, or blogs for short, are easily published, personal Web sites that serve as sources of commentary, opinion and uncensored, unfiltered sources of information on a variety of topics. Each new entry is called a 'post', and posts appear on a blog page in reverse chronological order. Blog posts typically are characterized by numerous links to other pieces of information, including other blogs, news stories, images/photos, commentaries, videos, and audio clips. Blogs also have other distinguishing characteristics, including a calendar or archives and a permanent Web address for each post (called a permalink). While primarily a one-way communications channel, many blogs do allow readers to post comments and many blogs expand their reach by being linked to other blogs on related topics." (Hannegan and Blackshaw 2006).

In short, blogs are:

- Easily-published
- Personal
- Web sites
- Inter-linked (to other information and to one another)
- Persistent (posts are stored in "archives"; permalinks)
- Interactive (via comments)
- Frequently updated (Weil 7)

These characteristics combine to make blogs one of the most powerful and popular forms of electronic communication today. According to a BBC news report, one new blog is being created every second ("One blog created 'per second'" 2005). Likewise, the audience of blog-readers is increasing, with 32 million Americans reporting that they read blogs in 2005 (Armour 2005). With the rise of Web 2.0 and participatory culture, it comes as no surprise that blogs are so popular.

The "blogosphere" is, according to Wikipedia, "a collective term encompassing all blogs and their interconnections. It is the perception that blogs exist together as a connected community (or as a collection of connected communities) or as a social network" (Wikipedia "Blogosphere"). In short, the blogosphere is the connected network of blogs. This is an important term and concept to know, as a singular blog post or comment on a blog frequently ends up speaking to the entire blogosphere; likewise, an event in the real world will often permeate the entirety of the blogosphere via interlinking. When dealing with blogs, one is, in fact, dealing with the entire blogosphere.

2.2   Corporate Blogs

2.2.1   What are corporate blogs?

What differentiates a "corporate blog" from a "personal blog"? The difference seems trivial at the most cursory of glances: one is written for corporate purposes and the other by an individual regarding their own personal thoughts and experiences. However, the line between these two often gets blurred, especially when an employee at a company writes about work in their personal blog. Typically, however, personal blogs are, as described before, written by an individual for their individualistic purposes, while corporate blogs are written by individuals for a corporation.

There is also a difference between a "corporate blog" and a "business blog"; the latter term often encompasses the former, but there is a rather distinctive difference between the two.

> "Corporate blogging is the use of blogs to further organizational goals...Picture an e-newsletter, a viral marketing campaign, an open channel through which your customers can talk to you and your own news station all rolled up into one. Now wrap that into a low-cost, easy-to-use, always-fresh Web site. That's what effective corporate blogging is." (Weil 1-2).

In essence, corporate blogging does not focus only on profit, or, as Weil puts it, "How do we make money with this thing?" (3). While business blogs in general have the purpose of making money for the bloggers or company, typically through advertisements placed in the blogs, corporate blogs "[are] communications and marketing channel[s]" (Weil 3).

Furthermore, there are two types of corporate blogs: *internal* and *external*. Internal corporate blogs are viewable and accessible only by company employees, while external

corporate blogs are available to the public (Flynn, Weil). The benefits and characteristics of each are explained in more depth in the next section.

2.2.2   Why corporate blogging?

2.2.2.1   External corporate blogs

External, or outward-facing, blogs provide a means of communication to and with the public and other industry members. There are several advantages to external corporate blogs, as described in this section.

Corporate blogging can serve as a defense against criticism by opening a channel of discussion and open communication between the company, critics, and customers.

Macromedia created a few employee blogs around 2002 as a means of providing information and tech support for customers. In 2003, when they released software that was unbearably slow, the employee bloggers – who had become invaluable resources to customers - were quick to acknowledge the problems in the software and the need for fixes; their early response significantly helped alleviate the tension in the blogosphere and ultimately headed off a potential customer service nightmare (Hannegan and Blackshaw 2006, Kirkpatrick 2005).

The channel of communication opened by corporate blogging can also be two-way. Although the Macromedia example demonstrates a one-way method of communication, blogs also allow for conversations between companies and readers (Flynn 21).

In another example, when Microsoft launched their own blog service, MSN Spaces, the service's censoring filters were quickly ridiculed and challenged by members of the blogosphere. Rather than letting the problem perpetuate itself, Microsoft responded through

one of its own employees: Robert Scoble. Scoble has become widely-known in the

blogosphere as Microsoft's "approachable human face", writing frequently in his own blog,

Scobleizer, on the inner workings of Microsoft, as well as his own personal life. In response

to the criticism of MSN Spaces, Scoble agreed, acknowledging the problems with the MSN

Spaces service, and made sure that the Spaces team was aware of and working to resolve

those problems. Additionally, he continuously revisited the issue on his own blog. In the end,

customers who may have joined the anti-Microsoft crowd were mollified and gratified by the

responsiveness and receptiveness that Microsoft displayed through Robert Scoble's blog; one

person even commented, "I didn't like Microsoft before, but at least they're listening to us"

(Kirkpatrick 2005).

The Microsoft example demonstrates the second and third advantages of corporate

blogging: personalization and transparency. The "democratization of power and opinion" in

modern society reflects a growing reluctance to believe corporate messages at face value

(Kirkpatrick 2005). Blogs, especially those written by individuals with distinctively personal

voices, offer companies a more personable face that customers are willing to trust and/or are

able to challenge. Also, they often allow customers to see the inner workings of companies –

customers can watch as problems they are concerned about are resolved (as in the Microsoft

problem), observe company culture and interests, and occasionally monitor the development

of an interesting product or process within a company.

Corporate blogs can also enable conversation among industry members. Dr. John

Halmaka, Chief Information Officer of the CareGroup Heath System, recently began

maintaining a blog in which he discusses his "Life as a Healthcare CIO". In it, he discusses

everything from measures he's helped implement to promote patient confidentiality, to in-

depth analyses of different technologies he employs either in his job or as an independent

consumer, to advice for dealing with spam (Halmaka "Life as a Healthcare CIO"). He began

the blog as an "experiment about how a blog impacts communications with my staff, my

vendors, and my colleagues" (Halmaka "Blogging About Blogging"). In lectures and keynotes,

he found he can refer material in his blog posts, enabling him to "continue the dialog with

[his] audience" (e-mail interview, 14 Nov. 2007). Members of industry often frequent other

members' blogs, carrying on the "dialog" that Dr. Halmaka observed in his own brief

experience with blogging. The persistent quality of blog posts, therefore, enables a

continuous conversation between industry members as they comment on other blogs and

reply with their own blog posts.

These examples demonstrate some of the chief characteristics and advantage of

external corporate blogs: two-way communication between industry members, companies,

and customers, instant customer service, transparency, and personalization. For a more

complete list of reasons to corporate blog, refer to Nancy Flynn's list in Chapter 3 of her book,

Blog Rules (p. 20-24).

2.2.2.2   Internal corporate blogs

Internal, or inward-facing, blogs are typically written by and for a company-only

audience. A number of companies, such as IBM and Sun Microsystems, have implemented

internal corporate blogs as a method of communication and retention within their companies.

Similarly to wikis, another website form that allows multiple users to aggregate their

knowledge by collectively editing and adding content, blogs allow for the accumulation of

knowledge within companies (Wikipedia, "Wiki"). In short, blogs, through interlinking, allow

for individual opinions and knowledge to be aggregated and perpetuated throughout the

company community, allowing employees to collaborate on their projects by referring to blog posts written about the subject in question (e-mail interview with Elling, 15 Nov. 2007).

Employees in technology companies also blog on technologies, project, policies, and other developments within the company and, similar to Dr. Halmaka's experience blogging in the healthcare industry, often respond to one another's blog through comments or posts in their own blogs. In contrast to e-mail messages, which are sent to individuals, require multiple copies of the same message to be sent to individual inboxes, and do not easily facilitate clean, retained community discussions about a subject, an internal company blogosphere is often filled with discussions of relevant topics across a number of blogs. It is a responsive, active community of conversation that enables the transmittance of a message to a broad audience from a single source (a blog to its readers and fellow blogs), and therefore an increasingly effective means of communicating company events and developments to its employees. The autonomous company blogosphere will typically be more receptive to passing on a message if it is not dictated to do so; rather, if a company provides a certain amount of information (such as the launch time of a product, details of its launch, and information about attending the launch), employee-bloggers will independently pick up on this information and relay the information to their readers (e-mail interview with Monday, 15 Nov. 2007).

3   Blog Policy

3.1   Why are blog policies important?

Blogging as a corporate strategy, both for marketing and other purposes, as outlined in Section 2.2.2, is becoming increasingly popular. According to Nancy Flynn, "89 percent of corporations surveyed are either blogging or plan to do so." (4). As the number of companies and employees blogging rises, so, too, do the chances of legal repercussion for both companies and employee-bloggers. The 2006 Workplace E-mail, Instant Messaging, and Blog survey reported that "2% [of 416 employers surveyed] have fired workers for offensive blog content – including posts on employees' personal home-based blogs" (2006).

Why does the firing of employees concern companies? The lack of blog policy can lead to two harmful effects on employee blogging: either employees, ignorant of what is or isn't permissible by unstated company guidelines, blog carelessly about workplace-related things they believe are innocuous, and are subsequently fired because of their blog postings, or employees are discouraged from blogging, as they are unclear on does or does not need managerial approval (Pope 2004, Bray Feb. 2005). The former case can involve things as major as revealing company secrets to things as minor as griping about one's work and coworkers, while the latter has a chilling effect on the company and the industry, robbing the company of the chance to take advantage of the communication and knowledge aggregation enabled by corporate blogging. Without clear blog policies in place, employers that fire employees for their blog postings can open themselves up to lawsuits involving discrimination, as in the case of Ellen Simonetti, a former Delta airline stewardess, who was fired for posting pictures of herself posing in her Delta uniform in an airplane. She currently has a lawsuit

pending against her former employer (Wikipedia, "Ellen Simonetti"). Delta had no blogging policy in place at the time that the "inappropriate" blog posts were written; Simonetti has said since, "if [Delta] had had a policy that I had been made aware of, I could have self-censored." (Simonetti 2007).

Furthermore, a dichotomy currently exists between bloggers' perceived expectations of privacy and their actual privacy. A 2003 study revealed that although bloggers are aware that their writings are technically available to the public, many assume that their audience is limited to a certain, core number of readers interested in the topics on which they typically blog (Vigas 2003). Similarly, employees hold a sense of separation between their personal, out-of-work blogs and their workplace. Therefore, it comes as a great surprise to employees when they are fired for seemingly innocuous workplace grumblings in their personal blogs, many because they were unaware that their blog had an audience within their company (Pope 2004, Armour 2005).

Blog policies are important, therefore, so that employee bloggers can take measures to censor their blog content and protect themselves against unexpected backlash. While cases where employees reveal confidential company information have clearly defined consequences in existing non-disclosure agreements, a fuzzy line exists in the realm of material that is related to the workplace, but does not involve sensitive information. The most surprising or unexpected firings often happen when employees complain about their work or coworkers in their personal blogs – conversations that traditionally might take place around the ubiquitous company water-cooler – and are fired because of their postings. A clearly defined blog policy warning employees against such behavior would go a long ways towards helping employee bloggers understand what content in personal blogs is considered

appropriate by company standards. Mark Jen, a Google employee who was fired in a well-publicized case weeks after joining the company because of his personal blog content, went on to help formulate the blog policy at his new company, Plaxo. In one of the responses to his draft of the policy, which he posted in his blog, he commented, "If Google had a policy like [Plaxo's], I would definitely have followed it and my posts at 99zeros [his blog while working at Google] would probably have had slightly different content." (Jen Mar. 2005).

Even more importantly than policies regarding the content of personal blogs, however, are policies governing what permissible content in corporate blogs are.   "With 55% of business blogs 'facing out' for customers and other third parties to read, the lack of written blog rules is a potentially costly oversight" ("2006 Workplace E-mail, Instant Messaging, & Blog Survey"). Having no blog policies in place to guide the content of corporate blogs opens the company to liability lawsuits if an employee blogger posts copyrighted material, or can also lead to defamation, slander, or libel claims (Flynn 48). The power of blogs to influence public opinion of a company is also considerable, and therefore blog policies to regulate corporate blog content can help protect companies against legal repercussions and damaging public relations incidents.

Such policies can also help companies maintain a positive rapport with their customer-readers. If they are drafted well, blog policies can both protect a company's interests (towards privacy, intellectual property, productivity, and efficiency) while allowing employees the freedom to write what they wish in the honest, personal voice that grants blogs their power. As Nancy Flynn notes, "the blogosphere is all about transparency, trust, and relationships" (34), and "[blogging] culture demands absolute honesty. The blogosphere hates a phony!" (86). Dishonesty in blogging shows an inherent misunderstanding of the

nature of blogs, and ultimately can cause significant damage to a company's public

reputation and standing.

> "If you fudge or lie on a blog, you are biting the karmic weenie. The negative reaction will be so great that, whatever your intention was, it will be overwhelmed and crushed like a bug. You're fighting with very powerful forces, because it's real people's opinions." (Steve Hayden, vice chairman of Ogilvy and Mather, as quoted in "Why There's No Escaping the Blog", Kirkpatrick 2005).

> Although the previous few paragraphs make it seem readily apparent that companies

should form blog policies for both personal and corporate blogs, a surprisingly few number

of companies have actually done so.

> "According to the AMA/ePolicy Institute Survey, 8% of organizations operate business blogs. In spite of the risks, only 9% have policy governing the operation of personal blogs on company time; 7% have policy governing employees' business blog use and content; 7% have rules governing the content employees may post on their personal home-based blogs; 6% use policy to control personal postings on corporate blogs; 5% have strict anti blog policies banning blog use on company time; and merely 3% have blog record retention policies in place." ("2006 Workplace E-mail, Instant Messaging, & Blog Survey").

Almost every expert and article related to corporate blogging or blogging in and about the

workplace underlines the need for companies to formulate blog policies (Hobson 2005, Jen

Mar. 2005, Giles 2004, Flynn 13, Weil 43, Armour 2005, Simonetti 2007, Hannegan and

Blackshaw 2006). Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the companies that have published

company blog guidelines or policies are in the technology industry: Sun Microsystems,

Yahoo!, Microsoft, and IBM, to name a few.

3.2   Custom-tailoring a blog policy for your company

Interviews with several company blog policy-makers were conducted for this section. It

is interesting and worthwhile to note briefly how many of these people were contacted and

found. A Google search for "company blog policy" yielded several policies on the first page,

all of which were posted in those blogs of employees at those respective companies. Several

of the contacts were reached through e-mail addresses displayed on their blog pages, while

others were contacted by leaving a comment on the blog post containing the policy. Still

others were found through other sources (such as books, articles, and other interviewees) and

contacted through referral; much like the interlinking between blogs, many of the people in

this particular area of interest (blog policy-making) are connected and refer to one another

while discussing the topic.

3.2.1 Formulating your company's blog-policy

If your company has either decided to pursue corporate blogging or is simply vested in

establishing blog guidelines and policies for the protection of both employee and company

interests, there are many resources that you can draw upon for reference (see Section 3.2.3).

A company's blog policy should be custom-tailored to that particular company's needs.

While some companies may need to more firmly regulate their corporate blogs because of

industry standards (such as in the healthcare and law industries), stringent industry standards

does not necessitate an anti-blog policy like that recommended by Flynn (59). Bloggers like

Dr. John Halmaka demonstrate that it is possible for those within sensitive industries to blog

without violating privacy or confidentiality (Halmaka 2007).

As advised by Weil, a blog policy should, at the very least, achieve the following, from

an employer's point of view:

- Clarify what topics are on and off limits.
- Be clear about whether or not employees can blog on company time.
- Specify whether a disclaimer should be included ("The thoughts expressed here are my own…")

Furthermore, a blog policy should encourage the following for employee bloggers:

- Be smart and use your common sense.
- If you wouldn't want to see a particular blog entry published in the newspaper, then don't post it.
- If you're trashing your employer or divulging confidential information and are worried your boss might fire you…keep worrying. (46-47)

These guidelines hold in general for most policies in the Appendices and address some of the prevalent concerns regarding blogging in and about the workplace.

Blog policies should reflect what it is trying to guide and regulate: namely, blogs. As one of the chief characteristics of blogs is their ability to grace a company with a more personable face through its employees, it is important that all employees be able to read and understand the policies easily. Chiefly, this can be achieved through two means: not writing the blog policies in "legalese" (i.e. legal jargon) and allowing employees to actively participate in and contribute to the policy-making process. Allowing employees to participate in the writing of the policies also helps maintain the honest and transparent quality that corporate blogs should promote. Although opening the door for policy-development in this already "risky" blogging venue may seem intimidating, the following cases where blog policies were developed with employee-blogger input prove that blog policies formed through collaboration can be extremely effective.

3.2.1.1   IBM

The idea of an IBM blog policy was initially proposed within the already-existing internal blog community in response to several corporate blogging-related media events transpiring at the time. Several IBM bloggers then collaborated on an internal wiki over about a week and generated a rough copy of IBM's blogging guidelines, which was then taken and polished by the IBM corporate communications team. To date, there have been

no noticeable issues with the IBM blogging guidelines or with IBM bloggers. One of the most notable aspects of the way in which the IBM blogging policy was developed is that all of the people involved in developing the policy – including the corporate communications team – had prior experience with blogs and were familiar with pre-existing guidelines at other companies and with the current situation of corporate blogs (Snell 2005, e-mail interview with Snell, 16 Nov. 2007). Having a clear idea of the dangers and problems other companies were experiencing with corporate blogs and having an insider view of the oft-confusing blogging world allowed the IBM team to develop an easily understandable policy that addressed both employee and company concerns.

Notable points about the IBM policy-development process:

- Initial policy collaboratively written by IBM bloggers
- Final policy polished and produced by corporate communications, several of which were also bloggers
- Drew upon previous guidelines and policies at other companies
- Addressed many of the issues regarding corporate blogging at the time, such as Mark Jen's unemployment.

3.2.1.2   Sun Microsystems

The Sun Microsystems policy was also developed collaboratively, though not quite to the extent that IBM's policy was. The original Sun Microsystems blogging policy was initially proposed by employee Tim Bray in 2004 after then-VP-now-President Jonathan Schwartz and other notable figures in Sun promoted blog as a new form of collaboration and transparency. A meeting was then called between Bray and several company executives and employees, which then proceeded according to Tim Bray's account:

"I presented a bunch of vision statements as to what our customers and we might hope for if we started using this tool effectively, and the discussion got real interesting. It became apparent that there were a lot of people out there who wanted to speak up but thought it might be a firing offense. It turned out that Sun had an official policy in place from years gone by, saying that speaking up in public without management and legal approval **was** a firing offense. Jonathan [Schwartz]'s reaction to this discovery wasn't printable." (Bray 2004).

Bray's account further emphasized the need for blogging policies: the lack of a clear blogging policy can have a chilling effect on employee blogging, stymieing the flow of communication and ideas in a strongly collaborative medium. Bray then drafted an initial policy, which was edited according to suggestions from the Executive Vice President, John Fowler, and then further edited to suggestions from the legal team. Within a short amount of time, the Sun Microsystems blog policy was written and disseminated to the Sun community. "The response to the invitation to blog [was] enthusiastic," Bray recalled. When questioned about whether there had been any negative incidents or problems with the policy since its establishment three years ago, Bray responded:

"There've been some outbursts of acrimonious discussion on the internal bloggers' discussion list, and a couple of incidents where someone posted something egregiously stupid and shamefacedly took it down. I'm not aware of any actual disciplinary action; that's not to say there hasn't been any, but I think I'd be aware if there had been. The number of incidents has been vanishingly small considering that we have thousands of people doing this; blogging is regarded by management, and the population in general, as a huge win.

I find your focus on "what might go wrong?" a little disturbing. Would you expect that employees should be expected to misbehave given a chance to speak in public? Wouldn't that be a symptom of a company with big problems?" (e-mail interview with Bray, 15. 2007).

To date, the media and many traditional companies have been reluctant to regard blogs as anything less than dangerous. Many companies are reluctant to grant employees the ability to speak openly about their company, fearing, perhaps, that the employees are largely

dissatisfied with their workplace and would take the opportunity to lash out, like Bray

incredulously suggested. Rather than regarding their employees as resources, some

companies view them as potential threats, which, in this lawsuit-happy modern landscape,

may be a somewhat valid fear. "Let one violation slide today, and you may find yourself

battling a department full of blog policy scofflaws tomorrow," Flynn warns, emphasizing the

need to discipline employees rigorously to follow blog policies (52).

Fortunately, internal corporate blogospheres are typically self-policing. Although

many companies are concerned about blogs opening the doors to inappropriate material,

one of the more abstract but important qualities of the internal corporate blogosphere is the

perpetual monitoring by bloggers' peers of the appropriateness of blog posts. Because

employee-bloggers are constantly reading other internal blogs, the response to potentially

inappropriate material by the blog community is often faster and more effective than a single

blog monitoring team can achieve.

Blog communities often form their own community standards, which are upheld by the

community members and typically in line with the company's interests. When a blogger posts

offensive material, the blog community is quick to apply pressure to the offending blogger

through their own blog posts and comments on the blogger's blog – frequently, the peer

pressure from the community can cause a blogger to relent and remove the offending

material from his or her blog.

The community standards are ever-evolving, as well, and are quick to address issues

of appropriateness that may not have been covered under official blog policy. For example,

a blogger at Sun used some "particularly bad language" on his or her blog and ignited a

furious discussion among the internal community as to the appropriateness of swearing in

blog posts. While swearing is not explicitly covered under Sun's blog policy, the community

standard set by such a discussion ultimately decided whether or not swearing was appropriate

in Sun blogs (e-mail interview with Monday, 15 Nov. 2007). Generally speaking, though,

internal blog communities like Sun's have the implied principle of "use common sense", which

prevents most issues from arising.

> "Of the >65 thousand Sun blog posts, I can count on one hand the times one of our
> self-policing bloggers have raised an eyebrow about a blog post. The benefits that
> come out of sharing proprietary information with our bloggers, including pre-
> announced information far out-weighs the liability." (Skrocki 2007)

Sun's blog policy is considered fairly liberal by any standard, but all of the employees that I

spoke to expressed a deep level of satisfaction with the transparency, honesty, and

communication that the corporate blogs have facilitated within and without the company.

Employees are allowed to speak their mind on released company products and technologies,

as long as their arguments are backed by solid evidence and not merely proclamation that

such-and-such product "sucks"; rather than drawing ire from the company, a discussion

between employees and customers typically ensues regarding the disputed product and

technology, enabling a transparent and honest conversation that frequently leads to

satisfactory solutions to the problem at hand.

> Notable points and lessons from Sun's policy-development:
>
> - Initiated by an employee-blogger (Bray)
> - Enthusiastically supported by several prominent executive members, such as
>   Jonathan Schwartz, now-CEO of Sun, and John Fowler, Executive Vice
>   President, Systems.
> - Written by employee-blogger, edited by executives and legal teams

3.2.1.3   Plaxo

One of the most notable aspects of Plaxo's blog policy-development is that Mark Jen, the Google employee who only months before had lost his job because of his blog content, took a large role in helping develop it. Drawing upon his experience with Google and collaborating with a team at Plaxo, Jen helped develop the company's policy for employees' electronic communication. He posted an initial draft in his blog and asked for feedback from readers, many of whom were not Plaxo employees, and edited the draft in response to valid suggestions from readers.

Notable points about Plaxo's policy-development:

- Written by employee-blogger fired from his previous employment because of his blog content
- Collaborated with blog readers and coworkers to develop and refine the policy

3.2.1.4   Thomas Nelson Publishers

Michael Hyatt, CEO and President of Thomas Nelson Publishers, devised the first draft of his company's blogging guidelines in collaboration with several fellow employees, who were presumably also bloggers. Unlike the three previous companies described in Sections 3.2.1.1-3.2.1.3, Thomas Nelson Publishers was focusing on developing a blog *aggregator* site; the "Corporate Blogging Rules" established guidelines that blogs had to follow to be included in the company's aggregator (Hyatt 18 Mar. 2005). Like Plaxo's Mark Jen, Hyatt then posted the initial draft of the policy in his blog. A week later, Hyatt posted a new version of the Corporate Blogging Rules, which had been extensively revised because of responses to the initial draft.

> "Many readers were put off by the formality and legalese of the [first draft]. They felt it should be more conversational and less intimidating—after all, we are trying to promote blogging within our company not stifle it.

Other readers pointed out where the document was inconsistent or unclear. Some even noted items that we had neglected to address, like who owns the content." (Hyatt 27 Mar. 2005).

The new draft was revised through collaboration between Hyatt, Gabe Wicks ("unofficial chairman of [Thomas Nelson's] Blogging Oversight Committee"), and Frank Wentworth, Thomas Nelson's General Counsel (Hyatt 27 Mar. 2005), and eventually became Thomas Nelson's official blog policy.

Notable points about Thomas Nelson policy-development:

- Initiated by CEO-blogger Michael Hyatt
- Initial draft posted to Hyatt's personal blog
- Second draft revised in collaboration with counsel and executive input, and in response to reader commentary left on blog post for initial draft
- Second, and final, draft written in layman's terms, instead of legalese

3.2.2 Summary of process

As seen in Sections 3.2.1.1-3.2.1.4, blog policies are frequently and effectively implemented with input and participation from bloggers, both employee and non-employee, and often draw upon the blogging experience of the policy-makers. In many cases the development of a blog policy was initiated by an employee-blogger in response to or in anticipation of anxieties surrounding blogging, both from employee and company points of view. Blog policies draw upon existing guidelines and policies for advice. Ultimately, the policies succeed in protecting both company and employee interests by creating an environment that fosters employee freedom of opinion while establishing clear guidelines for what is considered acceptable by the company. By involving employee bloggers in the policy-development process, all employee bloggers become aware of the guidelines and risks involved in corporate blogging. Subsequently, community standards are unofficially created

and enforced by members of the corporate community, greatly reducing the risk of inappropriate content.

3.2.3 Suggested policies

The following are some points that companies may wish to incorporate into their own blog policies and are drawn from the policies in the Appendices, as well as from discussions of blog policies online. The Bibliography contains a full list of resources that were read and condensed to this list of fifteen points, as well as several interesting articles and blog posts related to the topic of blog policy. Again, the strictness and ultimate points that end up in a company's blog policy should reflect the company's culture and interests, rather than blindly following the examples presented here.

1) Use common sense when posting
2) Create posts of value (add something to the industry/company)
3) Respect your audience
4) Respect your coworkers
5) Do not disclose proprietary, confidential, sensitive, or financial information about the company.
6) Respect copyright and fair use laws
7) Welcome feedback, both in- and out-of-blog
8) Be honest
9) Do not disclose personal information about other individuals
10) Ask for other parties' approval before citing them in your posts
11) Obey the company's handbook
12) Quality matters
13) If writing about the company, include a disclaimer (Example: "The opinions expressed here are the personal opinions of [employee name] and do not necessarily represent [company name]'s positions, strategies, or opinions.")
14) Write as yourself
15) Obey the law

Companies may also wish to include elements more specific to their own preferences, such as whether employees are allowed to blog on company time, whether advertising should be included in employee blogs, and how often employees may want to post.

Lastly, and most importantly, it should be made clear that blogging is *optional* and done by the choice of an individual. Forcing employees to blog if they do not wish to will only increase the chances of all the legal and other repercussions discussed earlier; happy and voluntary employee bloggers are less likely to blog negatively about the company than employees that are forced to blog.

4 Conclusion

Developing a solid blog policy is an important priority for companies in modern society. Regardless of whether a company has an official corporate blog structure in place or not, the growing number of bloggers ensures that a company will have employees who are blogging. Blog policies allow employee bloggers to blog more carefully and to protect themselves against unexpected consequences brought on by unclear or incomplete company policies on blogging. In turn, companies can better protect themselves against information leaks or negative backlash from the blogosphere by communicating clearly to their employees their notions of blog content appropriateness. Furthermore, by writing successful blog policies, companies can utilize the transparency, communication, honesty, and personalization offered by blogs to bolster their standing in the public eye. Lastly, the best way to derive a successful blog policy is through collaboration between employee bloggers and legal/corporate communications teams, which creates a policy that captures the essence of blogging while clearly dictating the legal consequences and limitations associated with blogging for a company.

5   Appendix A: IBM blog policy
Guidelines for IBM bloggers: Executive Summary
(Full policy available at
http://www.ibm.com/developerworks/blogs/page/jasnell?entry=blogging_ibm)

1. Know and follow IBM's Business Conduct Guidelines.
2. Blogs, wikis and other forms of online discourse are individual interactions, not corporate communications. IBMers are personally responsible for their posts. Be mindful that what you write will be public for a long time -- protect your privacy.
3. Identify yourself -- name and, when relevant, role at IBM -- when you blog about IBM or IBM-related matters. And write in the first person. You must make it clear that you are speaking for yourself and not on behalf of IBM.
4. If you publish a blog or post to a blog and it has something to do with work you do or subjects associated with IBM, use a disclaimer such as this: "The postings on this site are my own and don't necessarily represent IBM's positions, strategies or opinions."
5. Respect copyright, fair use and financial disclosure laws.
6. Don't provide IBM's or another's confidential or other proprietary information.
7. Don't cite or reference clients, partners or suppliers without their approval.
8. Respect your audience. Don't use ethnic slurs, personal insults, obscenity, etc., and show proper consideration for others' privacy and for topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory -- such as politics and religion.
9. Find out who else is blogging on the topic, and cite them.
10. Don't pick fights, be the first to correct your own mistakes, and don't alter previous posts without indicating that you have done so.
11. Try to add value. Provide worthwhile information and perspective.

6   Appendix B: Sun Microsystems blog policy

Key points from Sun Microsystems blog policy

(Full policy available at http://www.sun.com/aboutsun/media/blogs/policy.html)

- Advice
- It's a Two-Way Street
- Don't Tell Secrets
- Be Interesting
- Write What You Know
- Financial Rules
- Quality Matters
- Think About Consequences
- Disclaimers
- Tools

7 Appendix C: Sun Microsystems blog guidelines

(Taken from http://www.sun.com/aboutsun/media/blogs/BloggingGuidelines.pdf)

Summary of the important rules:

1. Do not disclose or speculate on non-public financial or operational information. The legal consequences could be swift and severe for you and Sun.

2. Do not disclose non-public technical information (for example, code) without approval. Sun could instantly lose its right to export its products and technology to most of the world or to protect its intellectual property.

3. Do not disclose personal information about other individuals.

4. Do not disclose confidential information, Sun's or anyone else's.

5. Do not discuss work-related legal proceedings or controversies, including communications with Sun attorneys.

6. Always refer to Sun's trademarked names properly. For example, never use a trademark as a noun, since this could result in a loss of our trademark rights.

7. Do not post others' material, for example photographs, articles, or music, without ensuring they've granted appropriate permission to do this.

8. Follow Sun's Standards of Business Conduct and uphold Sun's reputation for integrity. In particular, ensure that your comments about companies and products are truthful, accurate, and fair and can be substantiated, and avoid disparaging comments about individuals.

8   Appendix D: Plaxo blog policy

(Full policy available at http://blog.plaxoed.com/?p=41)

SPECIFIC POLICIES

1. Your public communications concerning Plaxo must not violate any guidelines set forth in your employee handbook, whether or not you specifically mention your employee or contractor status.
2. You may participate in Plaxo-related public communications on company time. However, if doing so interferes with any of your work duties and/or responsibilities, Plaxo reserves the right to disallow such participation.
3. You must include the following disclaimer on published public communications if you identify yourself as a Plaxo employee or if you regularly or substantively discuss Plaxo publicly: "The opinions expressed here are the personal opinions of [your name]. Content published here is not read or approved by Plaxo before it is posted and does not necessarily represent the views and opinions of Plaxo."
4. You may not communicate any material that violates the privacy or publicity rights of another.
5. You may not attack personally fellow employees, authors, customers, vendors, or shareholders. You may respectfully disagree with company actions, policies, or management.
6. You may not disclose any sensitive, proprietary, confidential, or financial information about the company. This includes revenues, profits, forecasts, and other financial information, any information related to specific authors, brands, products, product lines, customers, operating units, etc. You may not disclose any information about any specific customer. Further detail is provided in the "Security and Confidentiality" section of your employee handbook.
7. You may not post any material that is obscene, defamatory, profane, libelous, threatening, harassing, abusive, hateful or embarrassing to another person or any other person or entity. This includes, but is not limited to, comments regarding Plaxo, Plaxo employees, Plaxo's partners and Plaxo's competitors.

Suggested Guidelines:

1. If you think you will get in trouble directly or indirectly because of any communication you are about to make, please discuss it with your manager first.
2. Remember that you are not anonymous. Even if you write anonymously or under a pseudonym, your identity can still be revealed. You should communicate as if you are doing so under your own name. Indeed, it is recommended that you do communicate using your real name.
3. You will probably be read or heard by people who know you. Post as if everyone you know reads or hears every word.

4. You are personally legally responsible for any content you publish. Be aware of applicable laws regarding publishing your content or regarding the content itself before you post. This includes adhering to applicable copyright laws.

9 Appendix E: Yahoo! blog policy

(Full policy available at http://jeremy.zawodny.com/yahoo/yahoo-blog-guidelines.pdf)

Best Practice Guidelines:

1) Be respectful of your colleagues
2) Get your facts straight
3) Provide context to your argument
4) Engage in Private Feedback

10   Appendix F: Thomas Nelson Publishers blog policy

(Full first draft available at
http://michaelhyatt.blogs.com/workingsmart/2005/03/corporate_blogg.html)
(Full second draft available at
http://michaelhyatt.blogs.com/workingsmart/2005/03/corporate_blogg_1.html)

First draft of Corporate Blogging Rules:

1. You agree to write under your own name.
2. You agree to write about the company, your job, or some aspect of our business on a regular basis.
3. You agree to include the following disclaimer on your site: "The opinions expressed on this site are the opinions of the participating user. Thomas Nelson acts only as a passive conduit for the online distribution and publication of user-submitted material, content and/or links and expressly DOES NOT endorse any user-submitted material, content and/or links or assume any liability for any actions of the participating user."
4. You agree not to attack personally fellow employees, authors, customers, vendors, or shareholders. You may disagree with the company and its officers, provided your tone is respectful and you do not resort to personal attacks.
5. You agree not to disclose any sensitive, proprietary, confidential, or financial information about the company, other than what is publicly available in our SEC filings and corporate press releases. This includes revenues, profits, forecasts, and other financial information related to specific authors, brands, products, product lines, customers, operating units, etc.
6. You may comment on the company's competitors, but you agree to do so respectfully without ridiculing, defaming, or libeling them in any way.
7. You agree not to post any material that is obscene, defamatory, profane, libelous, threatening, harassing, abusive, hateful or embarrassing to another person or any other person or entity.
8. You agree not to post advertisements, solicitations and/or market and/or promote any business or commercial interest, chain letters or pyramid schemes.
9. You agree not to post any material that is copyrighted unless (a) you are the copyright owner, (b) have the express, written permission of the copyright owner to post the copyrighted material on your blog, or (c) are reasonably sure that the use of any copyrighted material conforms to the doctrine of "fair use."
10. You agree not to post any material that violates the privacy or publicity rights of another.
11. You agree to conform to the rules of the *Thomas Nelson Company Handbook*, especially as it relates to rules regarding conduct outside of your employment and the Insider Trading Policy on file with Human Resources.
12. You agree not to post material that contains viruses, Trojan horses, worms, time bombs, cancelbots or any other computer programming routines or engines that are intended to damage, detrimentally interfere with, surreptitiously intercept or expropriate any system, data, or information.

13. You agree not to post or conduct any activity that fails to conform with any and all applicable local, state and/or federal laws, including, without limitation, 15 U.S.C. 6501 et seq. (the "Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998").
14. You acknowledge that any reliance on material, content and/or links posted by other parties will be at your own risk. You assume full legal responsibility and liability for all actions arising from your posts.

Second Draft of Corporate Blog Rules

1. Start with a blogging service.
2. Write as yourself.
3. Own your content.
4. Write relevant. Write often.
5. Advertise—if you wish.
6. Be nice.
7. Keep secrets.
8. Respect copyrights.
9. Obey the law.
10. Remember the Handbook.

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