

Interpersonal communication between brands and consumers:

A self-presentation study of corporate blogs.

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Many researchers have suggested that interactive media fundamentally change the practice of marketing communication. The Internet has been opening up the potentials for new forms of conversations and relationships between consumers and producers (Bezjinar-Avery, Calder, & Iacobucci, 1998). Blogs, defined as “frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence” (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004, p.1), are one of the recent online communication forms the marketers have begun to explore as a communication tool. Business blogging has been a new keyword among marketers to such an extent that *BusinessWeek* covered corporate blogs under the headline “blog will change your business” in May 2005. The news story presented cases of business blogs that a GM vice president and Stonyfield had run for a marketing purpose.

Blogs are basically a personalized form of media that enhance interpersonal communication (Herring et al., 2004) and business men have started to exploit these unique characteristics of blogs to make good impressions to consumers. In addition, blogs, which are conversational and highly interactive, offer a unique channel for developing relationships among people or organizations (Keller & Miller, 2006).

Even though many companies have adopted blogs as a tool for communicating with their consumers, little empirical research has been done on corporate blogs. This study empirically examined how blogs have been used as a marketing communication tool by companies and explored interpersonal communication strategies corporate blog authors have adopted to influence visitors.

Characteristics of blogs

Blogs have distinctive features that differ from other forms of computer-mediated communication. These features include: 1) easy-to-use content management system; 2) archive oriented structure; 3) latest information first order; 4) links to other blogs; 5) easy to provide feedback for each blog post (Huffaker & Calvert 2005; Herring et al., 2004). The flexible and interconnected nature of blogs allows people to use blogs for various purposes. People can keep personal diary (Bortree, 2005; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005), interact with other bloggers (Herring, Kouper, Paolillo, & Sheidt, 2005), build new virtual communities (Blanchard, 2004), and disseminate their messages to mass audience (Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005). The borderlines among all the communication practices are blurred in blogging.

Previous literature on blogs has suggested that corporate blogs have good potentials to be a marketing communication tool (Smudde, 2005). Blog authors can reach anonymous people in an intimate and personalized way, because blogs have a mixed nature of mass communication and interpersonal communication. Marken (2005) argues “blogs provide a fast, effective, and economic means of carrying out two-way communications with the firm’s many audiences”(p.31).

Corporate blogs can be defined with two elements identified by Sifry (2004): Corporate blogs are 1) endorsed explicitly or implicitly by that company, and 2) posted by a person (or a group of people) who are affiliated with the company. Some researchers have argued that corporate blogs provide a chance to communicate their consumers in a humanized voice. Keller & Miller (2006) found that people who read the organizational blog are more likely to perceive the organization’s “conversational human voice” than people who read organization’s traditional web site, after conducting an experiment. Hill

(2005) suggest that small businesses are able to use blogs effectively for a wide range of purposes from viral marketing to search engine optimization, by interviewing 15 business bloggers. In his research, interviewees said that blogs can play a role in increasing the visibility and credibility of a business.

Corporate blogs can be considered as a form of personification of brands. Blog authors post the brand or the industry related stories using informal languages in a personal diary format to imbue the brands with personality traits. Marketers, CEO, communication managers present themselves through corporate blogs to represent the brands and the companies. When people interact with humans as representatives of the brand, people easily perceive interpersonal relationship with the brand (Fournier, 1998).

Interpersonal communication strategies

Interpersonal communication researchers have identified various strategies people adopt to influence others. How people personalize themselves in their presentation to the other people has been studied mostly based on Goffman (1959)'s ideas of self-representation. Goffman states that individuals present themselves like participating as a performer at a stage. The presentation of self in everyday life is “an ongoing process of information management, whereby the individual is constantly trying to influence others’ attitudes and behavior” (Papacharissi, 2002, p.377). The performer does not always perform his/her roles as actors on stage and can be on back stage where the behind-the-scenes living occurs. The person keeps his/her real selves on the back stage from the public eye.

Self-representation research has explored what kinds of impression management strategies people employ. Jones (1990) introduced five impression management strategies

that people use to present themselves: ingratiation, competence, intimidation, exemplification and supplication. Ingratiation is most frequently used strategies, whose goal is to be liked by others. Examples of ingratiation are saying positive things about others, statements of modesty, familiarity, and humor. The goal of competence strategy (also referred to as self-promotion) is to be perceived as skilled and qualified. The competence strategies include claims about abilities, accomplishments, performance, and qualification. Jones described ingratiation and competence as two most common strategies used by people to achieve power maintenance and augmentation.

Personal websites are a stage where web authors act like a performer to manage what the audience sees, because the author has complete control over the information on the webpage (Papacharissi, 2002). Dominick (1999) found that homepages expressed ingratiation most frequently and competence in situations where performance is valued, after measuring the degree of the impression management strategies of 500 websites.

Blogs present deliberate expressions of the identities of their authors, mostly through verbal language. On the other hands, unlikely other website formats, blogs, as a personal diary, have been considered revealing some amount of “backstage” information. The intimate, informal and personalized writing style creates the impression of revealing the author’s real self (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005). However, blogs are a front stage where authors can control information and perform in public. Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) found that popular blog authors (i.e., A-list bloggers) use competence and ingratiation strategies most frequently.

Research Questions

Previous research has suggested Because of the unique characteristics of blogs as a personalized and interactive media, blogs have been considered as having good potentials to foster an intimate relationship with their visitors (Smudde, 2005; Marken, 2005). Corporate blog authors are likely to adopt various interpersonal communication strategies to manage brand images. The authors, as a representative of a company or brand, would be actively engaged in the impression management of the brands. Corporate blogs represent not only the author's individual identity but also the brand/company identity. Also, the author will actively control the information of themselves and their companies.

RQ1) What impression management strategies do corporate bloggers tend to use?

RQ2) How much do the corporate bloggers disclose themselves and companies?

Method

This study conducted content analysis to review the corporate blogs. Content analysis is “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context” (Krippendorff, 1980, p.21). The sample of the content analysis was drawn from Fortune 500 companies and top 100 global brands (Interbrand). The researcher searched for the blogs of top brands and companies using Google and looked at the list from Fortune 500 business blogging wiki (<http://www.socialtext.net/bizblogs/index.cgi>). The corporate blogs analyzed in this paper were the blogs that are endorsed by the corporate copyright marks or those to which corporate websites has links. Finally, 31 corporate blogs were analyzed in this study (see Appendix A). If the company had multiple corporate blogs, the first listed blog was analyzed.

Categories coded in this study included basic demographics of the item (e.g., author, date, title, URL), topics discussed on blogs. Impression management strategies were measured by asking whether the blog postings contain statements praising others (ingratiation) or show their competence (competence) or criticize others (intimidation), based on Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005)'s discussions and operationalization. The strategies were recorded as dichotomous categories as being present or absent.

The content of the first page each blog was analyzed by two coders. Collecting data was from coding July 1st to July 7th 2006. Two trained coders analyzed the blogs with a coding guideline and coding sheets. Intercoder reliability was tested using Holsti's formula to measure the percentage of agreement. The average intercoder reliability was .887.

Findings

Table 1 summarizes descriptive statistics regarding blog types, authors, industry, topics, and blog features. The most popular format of the corporate blogs was a blog run by multiple authors. 16 companies had this multi-vocal type of corporate blogs; 14 companies had blogs maintained by one authors (uni-vocal); and four of them had blogs run by one main author and several guest authors (semi uni-vocal). Out of 31 companies surveyed, 13 were from computer and Internet related industry.

Ingratiation and competence were most frequently used impression management strategies for corporate bloggers. 74% (23) of the blogs surveyed showed praises and 74% (23) of them showed competence. 19% (6) of the blogs used blaming strategies. Most corporate bloggers demonstrated ingratiation and competence by presenting their abilities or praised others rather than criticize or blame.

In terms of self-disclosure, 21 out of 31 corporate blog authors use their real names. 50% (16) authors revealed their biography; 65% (20) of them showed their photos in the blogs; 23% (7) revealed their hobbies; and 20% (6) of authors showed their favorites. However, none of corporate bloggers reveal their contact information including their physical addresses, email addresses and telephone numbers.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the samples (n=31)

	Number	Percentage
Industry		
Manufactured goods	23	74
Service	6	19
Retail outlet	2	6
Topic*		
Product and brand	20	65
Company and industry	23	74
Personal issues	6	19
Public issues	5	16
Others	2	6
Number of blogs		
Multiple	9	30
One	22	70
Blog type*		
Multi-vocal	16	52
Uni-vocal	14	45
Semi-uni-vocal	4	13
Position of the author*		
Imaginary character	1	3
Executive officer	9	29
Manager	11	35
Employee	15	48
Others	5	16
Department*		
Marketing	9	29
Communication	3	10
Development	15	48
Others	6	19

*multiple answers

To manage the impressions and control information of the company and authors, corporate blog authors tend to moderate the comments visitors leave. Out of 25 samples that had a comment function, nine blogs announced that they would screen readers' comments before posted in their policy statements. Two of them posted that they could erase comments that did not fit into their purposes. Two of them had a comment function that does not allow visitors to see comments. Therefore, at least 14 blogs (56%) screened visitors' comments to control the information regarding the blogs.

Conclusion

This study shows the corporate bloggers are actively engaged in managing impressions to their visitors. Corporate bloggers tend to use ingratiation and competence strategies in the posts to make themselves and their companies more likable and trustworthy. Because this kind of blog is related to a company's image, concerns about what is appropriate to publish are greater. Most corporate bloggers control the "backstage" information, like visitors' comments, even though intimate and informal ways of writing create impressions that blogs would show us some amount of backstage information.

In terms of self-disclosure, more than half of corporate blogs reveal authors' real names, photos and biography. The self-disclosure of authors' names, photos, and biography may enhance the credibility of the blog. However, none of them provide consumers with contact information like email address, telephone number, or physical address. In most corporate blogs, leaving comments is the only way for visitors to communicate with the authors.

Many interactive marketers have argued corporate blogs could be a better tool for “open direct communication” with consumers (Marken, 2005; Smudde, 2005). However, the result of this study suggests that the corporate blogs are still likely to focus on making good impressions to their consumers and visitors rather than attempt to communicate with their consumers.

Appendix A. list of collected samples

Company name	URL
Amazon	http://aws.typepad.com/
Boeing	http://www.boeing.com/randy/
Cisco	http://blogs.cisco.com/gov/
Cox communication	http://www.digitalstraighttalk.com/
Dell	http://linux.dell.com/blog/
Ebay	http://ebaydeveloper.typepad.com/
Electronic Data Systems	http://www.eds.com/sites/cs/blogs/eds_next_big_thing_blog/default.aspx
Ford	http://blog.ford.com/BLOG.CFM
GE	http://www.grcblog.com/
General Mills	http://www.realbakingwithrose.com/
GM	http://www.gmblogs.com/
Google	http://googleblog.blogspot.com/
HP	http://h71028.www7.hp.com/enterprise/cache/104417-0-0-0-121.html
Honeywell	http://www.honeywellblogs.com/
IBM	http://www.ibm.com/developerworks/blogs/
McDonald's	http://csr.blogs.mcdonalds.com/
Microsoft	http://blogs.msdn.com/default.aspx
Motorola	http://burton.motorola.com/en/team_moto/
Nike	http://blog.nikebasketball.com/
Nokia	http://lappi.typepad.com/
Oracle	http://blogs.oracle.com
Owen Corning	http://saveenergy.owenscorningblog.com/
SAP	https://www.sdn.sap.com/irj/sdn/weblogs?blog=/
Sony	http://blog.station.sony.com/
Sprint	http://businessblog.sprint.com/1/1/
Starwood hotel & resort	http://www.thelobby.com/
Sun Microsystems	http://blogs.sun.com/roller/main.do
Texas Instruments	http://blogs.ti.com/
Wells Fargo	http://blog.wellsfargo.com/guidedbyhistory/
Xerox	http://blogs.parc.com/playon/
Yahoo	http://www.ysearchblog.com/

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