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Commentary

Play Defense And Offense

Denise Lee Yohn, Jan 04, 2010 05:00 AM

Most companies now realize how important social media guidelines are for setting the ground rules for employees' usage of blogs, Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, etc. The best guidelines encourage users to be responsible and respectful, indicate how confidential information should be handled, and reiterate the corporate rules of business conduct.

But even the most robust guidelines are written and used primarily as Defense. The intent is to protect the company and its brand name.

Companies need to play Offense too. Social media and networking are ideal ways to promote the company and the brand -- and yet, in my audit of over 30 organizations' social media guidelines, none indicated how the brand can and should be promoted with these new tools. To take full advantage of the brand-building opportunities in social media and networking, companies need to play more Offense.

In recent years, many companies have cultivated the role of employee as brand ambassador. Front-line employees in particular are recognized by many as critical brand touchpoints; "friends and family" discounts or coupons are often distributed through employees in order to generate broader awareness and positive impressions in the community. Why not extend these efforts to the new social platforms and encourage and enable employees to use these tools to promote the brand?!

I'm not talking about showing how to use trademarks and logos. Companies need Brand Guidelines to inspire and instruct employees how to generate excitement and interest in the brand. Brand Guidelines include:

- **How to talk about the brand** -- the messaging and themes that communicate what the brand stands for, what the vision is, and what the key differentiators are.

Leaders shouldn't assume that employees know this information and how to articulate it. Relay the brand strategy in a way that's accessible and understandable to employees at all levels and in all functions. Explain the background and rationale behind the strategy since people are more likely to buy into the "what" if they understand the "why." Plus this knowledge helps them figure out how to represent the brand in unexpected or unusual situations.

- **What the brand personality is and ways to bring it to life in writing style, images, etc.**

Explain how the brand would act if it were a person -- that way, employees can personally relate to the brand and understand its defining attributes. Include writing samples, images, stories, and videos that capture the personality of the brand. These help people express the brand appropriately when they use similar methods.

- **Examples and ideas showcasing creative ways to promote and interpret the brand.**

Since using social media and networking as brand ambassadors may be new to employees, they need inspiration in addition to instruction. Provide thought-starters and "straw man" ideas as

fodder to get their creative juices flowing. Share best practices from the few companies whose employees are already doing it well (Zappos and Google provide good examples.) Disseminate brand-building posts and content from your own employees who are on the forefront of the movement.

- **How to foster relationships with customers that contribute to a great brand experience.**

Ensure employees know who your key target segments are and what's important to them. At the same time, ensure they know what the current brand campaign or sales focus is and they have accurate information (e.g., website URL, promotional offer, new product announcements, etc.) to share with customers. Help them make the connection between what customers are looking for and what the brand has to offer.

Brand Guidelines promote proactive and productive engagement in social media. The combination of playing Offense with Brand Guidelines and Defense with Social Media Guidelines makes for a winning strategy.