



When is a Personal Blogger a Corporate Commentator?

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09 June 2006: As the number of employee blogs hosted on corporate Web sites increase, the distinction between the personal and corporate blogger blurs.

Blogs as Commentary

By nature, blogs reflect the views of the human blogger. Blogs are participatory in that they can be read and commented on by anyone. When commented upon, they also reflect the views of the reader. The Internet is their playground and the Blogosphere is their community.

Blogs and Creditability

Bloggers live by their own set of ethics, wherein the Blogosphere community determines the creditability of blog postings – such is the culture of a participatory environment.

Personal Blogs and Corporate Ethics

An email message that contains inappropriate content, such as proprietary information, can result in corporate audits or lawsuits. Blog content is no different. On 28 January 2005, Mark Jen was fired from Google because he discussed Google's financial performance in his personal blog. (Read Mark's post on the infamous blog *faux pas*: <http://blog.plaxoed.com/2005/01/26/oops> .)

Employee Blogs on the Corporate Web Site

Employee blogs posted to the corporate Web site reflect upon the company. Disclaimers, such as "The opinions of the writers do not necessarily reflect the position of Company X on these subjects," are ineffectual in managing public opinion. By human nature, most readers perceive everything posted to the corporate site to be representing corporate values. As a result, except for a small number of progressive firms, most companies will pre-approve employees who wish to blog to the corporate site. Before posting, the blog entries normally will be edited for sentence structure, misspellings and inflammatory language, while preserving the blogger's personal style. Without such controls, companies risk damage to their public image. (The degree of legal protection supplied by the disclaimer is a separate matter.)

Corporate Blogging Policies

For the majority of companies, blogging is a new phenomenon. Media coverage of high-profile scenarios, e.g., Mark Jen and Google, has driven companies to develop a “Blogging Policy.” (See samples: <http://www.corporateblogging.info/2004/06/corporate-blogging-policies.asp> .)

Most companies treat blogs as a distinct entity – resulting in a distinct policy. However, blogs are merely a type of e-communication, as is e-mail and instant messaging. Developing separate policies for each media type is laborious and dangerous. A company’s “Code of Conduct” should apply to e-communications no differently than it does to human communications. The “Plaxo Public Internet Communication Policy” (<http://blog.plaxoed.com/2005/03> .) is a good example of addressing e-communication usage holistically. Its focus is not specific to medium, but rather to human behavior when communicating electronically.

What You Need to Do Now

- Do not take an “ostrich approach.” Whether your company endorses corporate-site blogging or not, any employee, contractor or others associated with your company may be blogging about the company on their own.
- If you do not have an e-communications policy, develop one. A current e-mail policy can be used as a starting point. The e-communications policy should focus on human behavior when communicating using any current and future e-communication media.
- Some media have unique characteristics, and it is prudent to mention them in the policy. For example, posting a blog exposes it within nanoseconds to everyone on the Blogsphere.
- Work with your legal counsel in developing any type of corporate business or technology policy, including factors related to blogging.