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REPUTATION MATTERS

EMPLOYEES ARE THE ULTIMATE CO-BRANDING OPPORTUNITY ON CORPORATE SOCIAL MEDIA

6 Steps to Forge a Brand Partnership with Your Employees

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Employees can be both brand ambassadors and brand detractors. They can also be an organization's most important co-branding opportunity over corporate social media.

Corporate co-branding and cross-branding have long been marketing staples: companies co-brand with one another ([Nike + Samsung](#); [Ford + Microsoft](#); [Apple + Cisco](#)); for-profits co-brand with non-profits ([Starwood Hotels + UNICEF](#); [IKEA Foundation + UN Refugee Agency](#); [Tide + the American Red Cross](#)); and all of the above co-brand with movies, music, and sports ([Aston Martin + James Bond](#); [PINK + NFL](#); [VISA + The Olympics](#)).

But, in this ever-evolving world of social media – where almost everyone is thinking about how to “brand” himself or herself personally on the web – organizations can leverage that trend into their biggest co-branding

opportunity of all. In other words, since there is no stopping the personal branding efforts of employees on social media, organizations can adapt to thrive.

SHERYL SANDBERG'S BRILLIANT CO-BRAND WITH FACEBOOK

Take, for example, [Sheryl Sandberg's](#) best-selling feminist book on women's leadership, [Lean In](#). How did the [personal brand she used the book to create](#) interact with Facebook's not-always-so-woman-friendly corporate brand? Strange bedfellows, if you think about it.

After all, Sheryl is not only a best-selling author and founder of what amounts to a social movement for young women, she is also the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, as well as the first female member of its board.

Yet, it is brilliant co-branding. Women now make up about [76% of Facebook members](#), a percentage that has been steadily growing over the past several years. *Lean In* not only served as a way to draw more women in, but also to make Facebook's brand more woman-friendly. In fact, the book's activism may well have provided a much-needed counterpoint to [Mark Zuckerberg's "Social Network" reputation of starting](#)

[Facebook as a way to rate the girls he saw in the Harvard dining hall.](#)

NOT ALWAYS SO SUCCESSFUL

Corporate brands and their employees' personal social media activities do not always dovetail so smoothly. Postings made by individual employees have already profoundly embarrassed their organizations, and have sometimes led to dismissal – as in the case of [an ill-advised Twitter exchange at a Tech conference](#), [PR Executive Justine Sacco's stunning insensitivity and racism on Twitter](#), and [the actor Aflac used as the voice of its mascot duck making highly incendiary jokes on social media about the 2011 tsunami and earthquake in Japan](#).

EVERY EMPLOYEE'S PERSONAL BRAND IS ALSO A CORPORATE BRAND

This causes organizations to question where their employees' "brands" end and their corporate brands begin, since every employee's tweet, blog, LinkedIn and Facebook entry, and Instagram and Pinterest photo, potentially impacts the company's reputation.

But it also may cause companies to adopt an unduly restrictive, punitive, or short-sighted policy toward employee

social media presence, instead of seeing the medium's possibilities.

Every organization we know of is struggling with these issues: How much control should they wield? How much license should they grant their employees on social media, since it is almost impossible to prohibit participation? What kind of policy is right for their organization?

Standard practice [spans the gamut from authoritarian and restrictive to laissez-faire](#). Some organizations still insist on vetting every employee communication (you can imagine how well that works). Others have long, involved guidelines for every social media interaction. And yet others try to homogenize their employees' social media presence by suggesting a "template" for their various profiles. Some simply ask employees to exercise good judgment.

And, while it is imperative that employees heed to high standards of engagement on social media – decency, decorum, intelligence, judgment, etc. – and that organizations protect themselves by ensuring their employees are adhering to such standards, that is the floor, not the ceiling, of corporate/employee social media partnership.

In fact, we would like to suggest that organizations consciously form a partnership with their employees in

order to create a win/win branding opportunity, just like Sheryl Sandberg did with Facebook.

To that end, here are six steps for companies to consider in forging that partnership:

Step 1: Set up a clear policy and make sure each employee signs off on it – literally

Most companies already have a policy for employee social media engagement, along with basic guidelines. These rules and guidelines need to be crystal clear, easily accessible, and distributed to every employee on day one.

We suggest wrapping the guidelines and policy into a letter of agreement that outlines not only the rules but the opportunities a social media partnership between employer and employee could encompass. The agreement would be akin to the non-disclosure and non-compete agreements employees often must sign upon joining an organization.

In this case, we suggest asking employees to sign a social media letter of agreement every six months, in order to update it with new policies, and keep the agreement top of mind. Distribute it in hard copy, electronically, on your intranet – and in any other way you can. No one wants the organization or employee to be derailed by late-night

slip ups that can occur when policies are forgotten.

Step 2: Make sure the agreement focuses on your corporate brand

Start your guidelines with a recap of your corporate brand statement, vision, values, and voice, as well as how you position the brand on social media.

Make it clear that each employee must embody those values, both on- and off-duty, as well as on and off social media. But emphasize as well the opportunity to partner with employees so that they extend the corporate brand and brand values through their own efforts.

Unless designated to do so, employees should not speak for the organization on personal social media – that way lies reputational disaster. But they can embrace and extend the organization's voice in each and every social media interaction. So, for example, if integrity and excellence are key attributes of your brand, your employees can seek to emphasize those qualities in all of their activities.

Step 3: Talk to and train employees who plan to use social media

Employees must truly understand the company's brand and guidelines, as well as social media use in general. Because social media knowledge is uneven, even

among the most digitally literate employees, training – in person, electronically, and by teleconference and webinar – needs to be offered immediately upon hiring, and intermittently throughout employment.

In order to minimize risk, it is essential that everyone understand how to control their privacy settings, who they are posting to, and what they allow into the ‘public’ domain.

The social media team – those who are paid to uphold the corporate brand’s online reputation – should be available 24/7 to answer questions when employees are uncertain, or must make a judgment call about a piece of content they’d like to share.

Step 4: Monitor social activity closely, but appropriately

Be clear with your employees that you are watching. It is irresponsible not to keep tabs on online, public social activity. This doesn’t entail friending employees on Facebook, following private Instagram accounts, or requesting access to a private Twitter feed. But it does include making sure that anything a news outlet might be able to see, you can see too. Any public information should be subject to monitoring.

Employees might raise valid concerns about posts that are more private, or they might feel that monitoring is invasive. So, make sure that your social media policy is regularly updated and that you have active conversations about your employees’ comfort levels with your policies. But always be cognizant of the fact that risk still needs to be minimized.

This means keeping a close watch on where and how your brand name is mentioned (many services allow you to keep track of keywords, hashtags, and mentions). Even employees who represent the brand shouldn’t be mentioning their work without permission – doing so could create problems if the employee makes an offhand comment that the organization would rather not be revealed.

Monitoring can help prevent sensitive information from being released either by accident or through poor judgment. And if a piece of information is released, the company can know quickly and take fast, decisive remedial action. Finally, monitoring can help employees begin to understand that [nothing said online is truly anonymous or completely private](#).

Step 5: Create a social media strategy and profile for your executive leadership team, and provide them with help to achieve their desired voice

Every organization comes to a different decision about the visibility or lack thereof of its CEO and executive leadership team on social media, depending upon its industry, public profile and strategy regarding customer engagement.

All CEOs do NOT have to appear on social media, and in fact most should not.

Many CEOs and board members request their own social media consultants to help them understand the medium as well as their personal profiles and activity. [Jack Welch speaks about using fresh-out-of college employees to serve as “social media mentors” to his leadership team and even to board members.](#) But these mentors or consultants should always be coordinating their efforts with the “keepers of the corporate brand,” in order to assure that not even the CEO wanders too far from the reservation.

Strategy, discretion, and a less-is-more default are the right starting points for most organizations when thinking about the personal social media presence of their leaders. Still others, to fulfilling a social contract of trust with the public. And on Wall Street trading floors, traders will

Step 6: Leverage your employees appropriately

Employees can be a great asset online. The better connected your employees are, the easier it will be for your brand to attract attention from those connections, and the more influential your brand will be.

Your employees can help act as a brand promotion mechanism – occasionally posting important updates, sharing and producing thought leadership, and accelerating the brand on social media. However, the organization must be clear about what these posts can entail, how they should be presented, when they are presented, who they are presented to, and through which social networks. This is why it is not only important to have guidelines, but people who can help and guide employees on social media every step of the way. Minimize the risk; maximize the co-brand – that should be the mantra of all corporate social media strategists.

CHANGE THE GAME

Employees are a risk in the world of social media, but you can transform them into a real asset. Imagine if each of your valued employees had 100 dedicated followers – or even 1,000 – and they shared positive attributes about your organization. Your reach would quickly increase, and your voice would grow exponentially louder through them, and their work could generate

game-changing support for your reputation, online and off.

It is disconcerting to lose some control of your brand, but social media loosens the reins regardless of whether or not your employees are involved. Helping your employees and other influencers engage strategically on social media can not only protect your organization, but help employees grow, create, and maintain their own online reputations – and yours.

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About Temin and Company

Temin and Company Incorporated creates, enhances, and saves reputations.

Temin and Company also markets by leveraging the expertise, ideas and insight of its clients to produce differentiated intellectual capital and content.

The firm helps corporations, professional services firms, and other institutions define and strengthen their public image – and their bottom line – through strategic marketing; branding; media relations; thought leadership; social media; speaker, media and leadership coaching; financial communications; and crisis and reputation management.

Strategists, coaches, writers, and social media experts are available “25/8” to assure that every crisis is addressed, and every opportunity leveraged.

Clients include the CEOs and Boards of some of the world’s largest and most well-known corporations, financial institutions, portfolio companies, pharma and biotech companies, law firms, consulting firms, publishing houses, venture capital and private equity firms, authors, politicians, and colleges and universities.