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COMM 2310

October 9th, 2021

Facilitating Authentic Corporate Media Communications

It is difficult to turn on the news or open social media without seeing some form of business-related content. Whether it is a new tweet from Elon Musk or a LinkedIn update from a peer, corporate-related news is highly digested, reviewed, and scrutinized. Corporate communications and public relations are typically used by businesses to strengthen corporate reputation, thereby improving their competitiveness and financial success (Romenti, 2013). In particular, companies are operating in a context where communicating social, environmental, and economic issues have an increasing and strategic importance in building company brand, credibility, and trust (Montecchia et al., 2016). With the rise of media and increasing public emphasis on corporate responsibility, many companies are attempting to fashion their corporate image in a positive light. Consequently, there are a few ethical problems in the communication activities and practices by business corporations. For example, media-fueled crowdfunding or astroturfing, used to influence public opinions through falsified grassroots efforts, are relatively novel techniques with very limited legal or ethical codes or regulations (Azarova et al., 2021). Considering these business challenges, ethical, credible, and viral corporate communication propagation can be attained through the facilitation of an engaged company culture, leveraging employee-level social media use, and investing in employee trainings.

One of the most pertinent issues with many corporate communications is that, although companies may publicly list their social responsibility commitments, these commitments are not always aligned internally within the company (Montecchia et al., 2016). A report by the Korn Ferry Gay group found that 75 percent of leaders are unable to identify or articulate their company culture to a great extent. Additionally, 35 percent of these leaders believe their employees would not be able to either (Wolper, 2016). Because the people make up a company, the employee's involvement in a company's social responsibility actions are crucial for successful implementation of such actions (Venturelli, Cosma, & Leopizzi, 2018). Therefore, in order to have corporate public communications that are sincere and impactful, there is a need for strengthening the integration of social issues within the organizations' culture and identity. According to research by Kucharska and Kowalczyk (2019), one of the most important factors

influencing social responsibility practices and company performance is long-term orientation, or when a company is focused more so on future success and long-term planning. Additionally, it is important to have integrity-oriented culture, where company practices are honest, open, and sincere. In a study of various public companies, it was found that companies having a higher integrity culture tend to also exhibit better social responsibility (Wan et al., 2020). This is because a culture with integrity helps motivate and guide employees towards believing in the important of social responsibilities (Wan et al., 2020). All in all, despite many company public communications surrounding socially responsible practices, there is an inconsistency between these proposed initiatives and actual socially responsible practices. This can be mediated through the facilitation of long-term and integrity-oriented company culture.

In addition to shortcomings in company culture, many companies have a gap between their social responsibility practices and their media communications (Azarova et al., 2021). Media communications, particularly at the employee-level, are an important aspect of corporate communication propagation by providing valuable insights about a company for key audiences such as potential customers, company stakeholders, or future employees (Pekkala & Zonnen, 2021). Employees' social media contributions are able to shape company reputation, for better or worse, because perspectives published by employees lower in the organizational hierarchy of a company tend to be viewed as more trustworthy and authentic than posts from company executives or official corporate outlets (Fleck, 2014; Zielinski, 2014). When used positively, work-related social media publications can help company image building, product marketing, customer relationship management, and employee recruitment (Eurostat, 2020). However, improper work-related communications may result in company or employee reputational damage leading to termination of employment. As a result, many employees refrain from posting work-related content on social media because of the risk associated with it. Research has shown that organizations play a vital role for creating the conditions where employees feel comfortable engaging in work-related social media communications (Pekkala & Zonnen, 2021). This may include companies giving their employees clear and easy-to-understand guidelines for how to engage in work-related communications while still respecting the employees' rights (Zielinksi, 2014).

Furthermore, one of the most effective ways of boosting both employees' work-related social media confidence and engagement culture within a firm is through employee training and

development. Training and development improves service accuracy and efficiency, which thereby influence performance and engagement at work (Paradise, 2008). In other words, employee trainings help boost employee confidence and engagement which allow them to provide higher quality and more efficient services to customers (Siddiqui et al., 2019). Recent studies have shown that many knowledge-intensive organizations are adopting these trainings to help their employees successfully and positively engage in work-related social media communications (Pekkala, 2020). These trainings can be directly tailored towards certain topics or task-related skills, such as work-related social media use or environmental and sustainable practices. Moreover, research has shown that company-provided trainings provide a key avenue for firm growth, including increased sales, value, and exports (Martins, 2021).

In a landscape where corporate social responsibility and commitment are highly valued and dissected, companies are seeking to forward and shape their public communications in a positive manner. However, as media provides new outlets for communications, companies are forced to rethink and restructure their corporate values and functions. Therefore, positive and credible corporate messaging can be reached through creating engaged work-place culture, leveraging employee-level social media use, and a devotion to employee training and development.

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