

## Trevor Cook Too much control, too little talking: with corporate-speak in danger of clogging business relationships, the blog could help companies open up the channels

Corporate blogging is being heralded as the next big thing on the communications horizon, valued mostly for its potential to bring personality and authenticity to a bleak landscape of dull newsletters, breathless media releases and “brochureware” websites. Yet the culture that produces this leaden stuff may also stifle blogging before it gets off the ground in most companies.

So far it is mostly IT companies that are exploiting the new medium, including the behemoth Microsoft, which has some work to do to repair its relationships. In May, chairman Bill Gates gave corporate blogging a boost when he said blogs made it “very easy to communicate with customers, suppliers and employees”. When Bill speaks, people still listen.

Robert Scoble is probably the best known of Microsoft’s estimated 1000 bloggers, and he publishes daily about projects and software under development. Scoble, who rejoices in the job title of “product evangelist”, is currently using blogs to build conversations around the development of the next versions of .NET and Windows (code-named Longhorn).

Scoble told me that blogging builds more productive customer relationships because “people are far more likely to give great feedback if they know someone specific is listening”. The power of these feedback loops can generate big benefits: “Customers get listened to more effectively, product teams build better products and support them better. Influentials and evangelists get more information they can use to talk about the products with authority. Everyone wins.”

Buzz Bruggeman, CEO of the technology start-up ActiveWords, finds it more effective to promote his product

through bloggers than through the mainstream press. A few dozen readers downloaded his program after a write-up in a national American publication, compared with a few hundred downloads after it was featured in a popular blog. In addition, he could receive feedback from users through a blog. “You want to engage people to talk about your product,” he said.

Blogging programs are no harder to use than email, and no more expensive. In geek language, they deliver on the original “read/write” promise of the internet by removing the barrier between author and audience and creating powerful and interconnecting networks. A blog’s diary format (i.e. log) gives a sense of immediacy, and regular posting soon creates a large, searchable database of information hyperlinked to extra relevant material.

Corporate blogging, however, requires a degree of openness rare in big corporations, where communication is usually vetted and controlled down to preferred words, fonts and branding colours. As Scoble said: “Blogs are harder to do when you’re constrained by committeeism. I couldn’t

imagine doing my blog if I had to have it checked by other people before publishing. It would slow me down.”

Rigorous control over corporate communications is doing some real damage to the language. Take one example quoted by Don Watson in his recent book, *Death Sentence* (Random House): “At Optus we are paving the way for better, more enhanced ways of doing business, and these enhanced systems are designed to deliver on that commitment.” Not likely to have you seeking out the author for a chat.

Watson is right in saying that once this type of language gets into an organisation “it spreads like duckweed”. Everyone starts to do it because they see the boss doing it and they think it makes them sound more important and, well, “corporate”.

Nevertheless, anyone who thinks their audience is anything but enervated by terms like “thought leadership”, “right-sizing”, “flexibility”, “knowledge management” and the rest of it is deluding themselves. People don’t change when they arrive at work. If the words you use would make your mother’s eyes glaze over, why do you think they’ll capture the interest of your employees or your customers?

Language abuse is a symptom of a deeper problem. Over the past three decades we have seen some remarkable transformations in organisational culture. Yet the corporation’s deep psychological need for control remains, and goes on stifling the flow of ideas, weakening customer relationships and demotivating staff. So much so that many large corporations are now undertaking expensive “employee engagement” programs in a futile bid to generate a little more enthusiasm. Too often, these programs involve marketing the company to its staff, rather than creating conversations about the company and encouraging staff to participate as individuals in their own right.

Usually only one voice is heard inside a company. That voice belongs to a sort of anonymous corporate identity. Even when different people write stories for a newsletter they still come out sounding exactly the same. The use of one “de-personalised” voice means that there are no conversations, just lectures and edicts. Yet in real life we want to hear a range of distinctive personalities with different perspectives. Personality gives life to human communication; without it the “duckweed” language keeps spreading.

In these “single voice” workplaces, Scoble’s Corporate Weblog Manifesto would be read like a set of unattainable ideals. In his popular guide, he talks about posting fast on good news and bad; talking with a human voice; having a thick skin; acknowledging your mistakes; never hiding information, and so on. Corporate blogging may prove to be too hard for many organisations. Still, you can’t help thinking that the benefits on offer are large enough to convince some at least to try to relinquish a little control. ❖

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